

Report on

THE MALKEVICH PROPAGANDA MACHINE

THE WAGNER-ALLIED NETWORK
IN UKRAINE

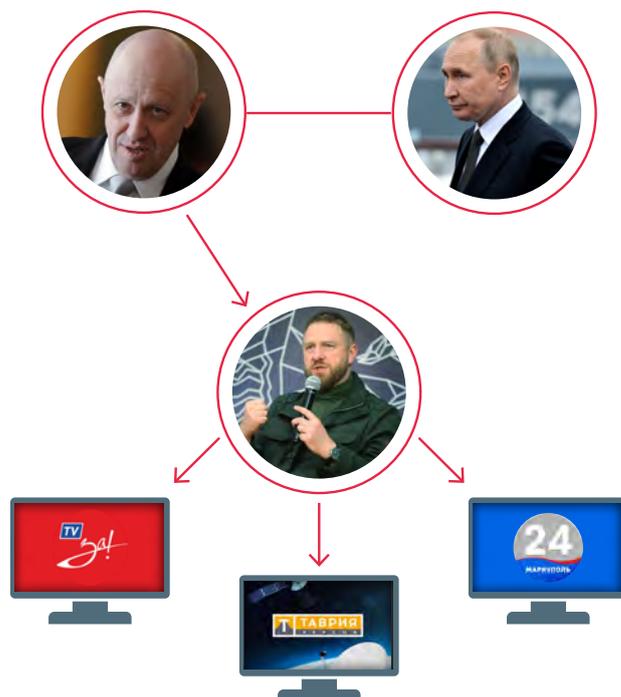


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Alexander Malkevich took over audiovisual propaganda in the occupied territories of Ukraine in July 2022. Local projects of television channels that occupation authorities had developed since the invasion in late February were suddenly abandoned in favour of this new system, centred on three media outlets.

In Melitopol, the administrative centre of the Zaporizhzhya region, Malkevich created ZaMedia, made up of a TV channel, a radio station, and several local editorial offices. In Kherson, he launched a new local chain, Tavria TV. In Mariupol, Malkevich relied on the resources of Sankt-Peterburg, a channel he runs, to support a new channel, Mariupol 24.





In the office of the 'PMC Wagner Centre', associated with the founder of the Wagner private military group (PMC) Yevgeny Prigozhin, during its official opening in Saint Petersburg, on November 4, 2022. © Olga Maltseva/AFP

A WAGNER ASSOCIATE'S MEDIA RAID

Information (or propaganda) is, by definition, a major factor in hybrid warfare. In Ukraine, Russian forces are not satisfied with simply bombing and destroying Ukrainian television towers. Beyond the weakening of communications resources, they are working tirelessly to disseminate Moscow propaganda to residents of occupied zones.

In these newly “annexed” territories in southern Ukraine, Alexander Malkevich, a man with ties to Yevgeny Prigozhin, boss of the Wagner Group’s mercenaries, has officially taken on this task. To build a new media system responsible for spreading the Kremlin’s word, this mysterious apparatchik recruits in Russia. He has drawn heavily from his contacts in Saint Petersburg, his, and President Vladimir Putin’s, hometown.

RSF has investigated Malkevich’s activities in this “New Russia” (“Novorossiya”), the name he has given to southern and eastern Ukraine, drawing on a tsarist concept that was [brought up to date](#) by Vladimir Putin. Officially a volunteer, this veteran journalist has succeeded in creating, in record time, a media group in the Zaporizhzhya region, a television channel in Mariupol and another in Kherson, whose editorial staff withdrew to Henichesk after Ukrainian forces liberated the city.

Closer to their audience than the Russian Federation channels, these local media outlets aim, by spreading their propaganda, to “perfect” the integration of Ukrainians into the Russian state.



The entrance of the PMC Wagner (Private Military Company) Tower.
©Olga Maltseva/AFP





Alexander Malkevich on the stage at the "International Media Forum" in Pskov, Russia, on 28 November 2022.
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1 / THE ARDUOUS JOURNEY OF A PROPAGANDIST APPARATCHIK WITH TIES TO THE WAGNER GROUP

"Maybe in a few years I can be a Pulitzer Prize winner", Malkevich [told](#) a journalist from *Foreign Policy*, an American publication, in 2018. At the time, he headed "USA Really. Wake up Americans", a new English-language Russian media outlet, affiliated with a press agency belonging to Yevgeny Prigozhin, the notorious boss of the Wagner Group's mercenaries (see sidebar, p. 9). On the site were posted articles with headlines [such as](#) "Man Served His Friends Tacos Made From His Severed Limb", and "A High School Teacher Was Fired After Forgot [sic] the Name of a Transgender Student".

Malkevich's biography is full of twists and turns. Like Prigozhin, known for his close ties to the Russian president, Malkevich was born in Saint Petersburg in 1975, when the city still bore its Soviet-era name of Leningrad. Early on, as the USSR was collapsing, he launched his journalistic career in several local newspapers. Clearly ambitious, at age 23, he became editor-in-chief of a youth magazine, and subsequently worked in the press office of the local government and was elected to the municipal council of his hometown.

After completing a thesis on "mass communications in the electoral process", he entered the television sector in Saint Petersburg, then in North Caucasus and in Siberia. In 2014, he launched a regional media group in Karachay-Cherkessia in just 146 days – a feat that landed him in the [Russian book of records](#). Elected in 2017 to the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation, a secondary institution that functions as a government auxiliary, he attracted attention when he urged Russian media to expand abroad. In 2018, he quit the television channel he was running in Omsk, Siberia, to join Prigozhin's USA Really media project in the United States.

“... he attracted attention when he urged Russian media to expand abroad.”

IN THE UNITED STATES' CROSSHAIRS

But Malkevich's American adventure was cut short. Soon after arriving in Washington in June, USA Really was evicted from its rented offices located just a short walk from the White House, in front of which a rally organised to mark the site's launch [flopped](#). The outlet's Facebook page was blocked, and its Twitter account restricted. After another trip to the US capital for the midterm elections of November 2018, Malkevich was briefly interrogated at the airport by the FBI, just as he was leaving. A month later, he faced sanctions by the US government [because of](#) his ties to Prigozhin, who eventually [admitted](#) to interfering in the American elections.

These Western sanctions earned Malkevich a promotion in December 2018 as head of the Civic Chamber's media committee. He stepped up his appearances on political and social programmes on federal TV channels, such as Piervy Kanal (Channel One), NTV, Rossiya 24, and Zvezda, the Defence Ministry channel. Vladimir Solovyov, the star anchor on Rossiya 1 and a denialist of Ukrainian statehood, [regularly invites him](#) as a guest on his shows.



Alexander Malkevich in front of FBI headquarters in Washington, DC in 2018.
© Instagram mceevich

Malkevich is considered one of the country's [three top experts on disinformation](#) and boasts of exposing [“fake news’ spread by the West”](#). On his Telegram channel, temporarily renamed “Media MalkeviZ”, with the “Z” marking support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the journalist has spoken of Western censorship and joked that he should get a medal for having been on at least four sanctions lists – the United States’ in 2018 and 2021, and the European Union’s and the United Kingdom’s in 2022. Among members of Prigozhin’s circle, he is the only media boss to have been hit by sanctions, according to Russian investigative site [The Insider](#). This information was confirmed by the investigative unit of the leading independent Russian media organisation, Meduza. “The expert” has held up the Wagner boss as an example and presented him as a role model, including in an interview granted to RSF in December 2022 (see sidebar, p.11).

PRIGOZHIN, A USEFUL ASSOCIATE

Once elected to the Civic Chamber, Malkevich continued his collaboration with Prigozhin, particularly in Africa. In 2019, he created the Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC, see sidebar, p.7), a think tank also sanctioned by the United States on the grounds that “it is run by Malkevich [on behalf of](#) Prigozhin”. A few months later, the foundation’s lawyer, Nikolay Stolyarchuk, became the director of Patriot, the Wagner boss’ media group. In May 2019, two other foundation associates were arrested in Libya, where Wagner forces were fighting in the civil war, for attempted interference in the country’s elections. One of them, Maxim Shugaley, even became the main protagonist of three films produced with the support of FZNC. Meant to highlight his captivity in Libya, these propaganda films sided with Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who was using the Wagner Group’s services in his war with the UN-recognised national unity government. Upon his release in 2021, Shugaley succeeded Malkevich as FZNC president.



Yevgeny Prigozhin at the offices of the Wagner Centre PMC (Private Military Company), in late November 2022.
©Telegram Prigozhin_hat

Malkevich then became director of Sankt-Peterburg, a public TV channel on which Prigozhin has sought to increase his influence, according to a source close to him [cited by News.ru](#). Malkevich accepted this role in regional TV despite it not seeming to live up to his ambitions. Winner, in 2020, of the “Leaders of Russia” contest organised by the president’s office to create a reserve of senior executives, Malkevich was [considering running for parliament](#). “He is an excellent communicator,



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THE FZNC, A VERY POLITICAL FOUNDATION

The Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC), founded in 2019 and run by Malkevich until 2021, presents itself as a “not-for-profit organisation whose work is to protect the national interests of the Russian Federation”. Thus, the foundation “engages in the promotion of national values, the organisation of international patriotic activities and initiatives, discussion platforms, and roundtables”. Among them is the African Discussion Club: The FZNC boasts of being the major think tank specialised in Africa, and displays its partnership with the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC), a “community of experts and activists for the dissemination of objective information”. These two entities were [sanctioned](#) by the United States in 2021 for being part of Prigozhin’s network in Africa and serving as a “front for his influence operations”.

Since its founding, the FZNC has stood out for its involvement in dark affairs of influence and espionage. First, the foundation ran a campaign to support Maria Butina, the Russian spy arrested in the United States in 2018, to whom the FZNC transferred 5 million rubles (nearly 60,000 euros) to help her pay her attorney fees. Released at the end of 2019, she was welcomed at [Moscow airport by Malkevich himself](#), and she then became one of [the think-tank’s “experts”](#). Later, two of the organisation’s associates, including the current fund manager, were arrested in Libya in 2019 for interfering in elections there, where Wagner mercenaries were fighting in the civil war.

he knows how to talk to people”, one of his former employers said in an [interview with Fontanka](#), an independent outlet in Saint Petersburg. “Political ambitions? I think he has them, he is superbly trained. I am sure he would be an excellent member of the State Duma. He is like a general, a professional above all. The second question is which side would he be fighting on?”

As director of the Sankt-Peterburg channel, Malkevich granted in March 2022 a major contract to a company founded by the former editor-in-chief of two publications in Prigozhin’s press group, Timofey Sharbarshin. The latter would become editor-in-chief of the pro-government *Moskovsky Komsomolets* in Saint Petersburg, acting on behalf of Prigozhin, according to a News.ru source who wished to remain anonymous. Malkevich justified the expense of 75,000 euros a month – six times higher than the previous year – by pointing to the “information war being waged against [his] country”. Intended to promote the channel’s content on social networks and in the media, the spending was necessary given the “sums spent to produce fake news about Russia... which have already exceeded 300 million dollars”, he explained to [Lenizdat.ru](#), an information portal for the Saint Petersburg media community.

Malkevich is at the forefront of [claims against independent media](#), so-called “foreign agents”. Like his mentor, Prigozhin, he put himself in the spotlight, on the ground in Ukraine, from where he denounced the “traitors” to the country. Prominent among them were artists, NGO directors, and journalists who [he said](#) should be “banned”. He urged people to publish only on Russian social media, deeming the others extremists that should be [blocked](#), which is now the case of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In August 2022, Malkevich became one of the 25 most influential Russian journalists on Telegram, according to a [ranking by TGstat](#).

“He is an excellent communicator, he knows how to talk to people”, one of his former employers said...

“Like his mentor, Prigozhin, he put himself in the spotlight, on the ground in Ukraine, ...”

| THE OPPORTUNITY OF WAR

Malkevich has enjoyed a career full of rewards. This opportunist likes to highlight all his actions and gestures taken on behalf of “Great Russia” on social media. He also attends international conferences and forums, where he keeps an eye out for chances to promote himself. “He is strange, someone without a strongly defined personality, who does not make an immediate impression”, recalled RSF Secretary-General Christophe Deloire, whom Malkevich approached during the Paris Peace Forum in 2019.

The war in Ukraine and the occupation of new territories have been an opportunity for Malkevich, which he has seized by developing local propaganda networks and by promoting a series of initiatives to support the authorities, including launching a streaming platform and a poster campaign celebrating the occupation, helping to organise referendums on annexation, and sponsoring a [recruitment campaign](#) for occupation government personnel.

Summing up his activities in 2022 during an [interview](#) with a legal press agency, he claimed he was preparing a “manual on modern Russian journalism, which will explain the specifics of working in liberated territories”. He referred to a “purge” launched on 24 February, especially in the media sphere, calling for a “complete restructuring, a new framework, for the new needs of our society”. The turning point of the “special operation”, he said, revealed to many people “the qualities of which they themselves had been unaware”.

The war and his activities in the occupied territories seem to have paid off. Malkevich had the honour of being invited to the Kremlin for the annexation ceremony. He also received [the Government Media Prize](#) from the Russian Prime Minister himself on 13 January 2023, awarded for significant professional achievements. The prime minister specified in his speech: “A major effort led to the spread of television stations in the liberated territories. The credit goes, among others, to Alexander Malkevich.”

Alexander Malkevich in a live connection from the self-proclaimed “Republic” of Donetsk with Russia’s Civic Centre for Referendum Observation during the public consultation designed to confirm the annexation of the occupied territories in September 2022.
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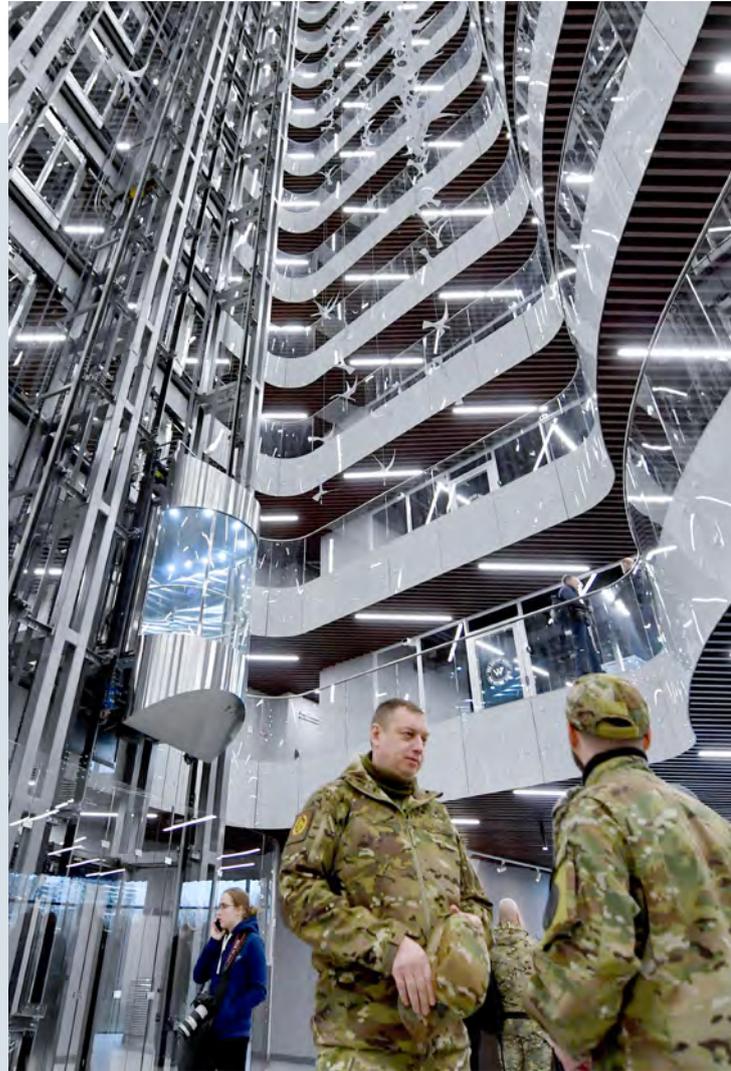


Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former thug in the Kremlin's employ

Nicknamed “Putin’s chef”, Yevgeny Prigozhin has forged a nefarious reputation in Russia and abroad as he rose from petty hoodlum in 1970s Leningrad to boss of the Wagner Group’s mercenaries and henchman of the Kremlin. After nine years in prison for banditry and theft, he converted himself in 1990 into a successful hot dog vendor, then moved on to make his fortune in catering with the Concord Group, founded in 1995. He began to develop a special relationship with Vladimir Putin, a regular customer at his luxury restaurant in Saint Petersburg, and won major public contracts.

The businessman didn’t just feed the Kremlin. He invested in propaganda, founding a troll factory called the Internet Research Agency (IRA) in 2013, then the RIA FAN news agency and, in 2019, the Patriot media group. At the same time, he never hesitated to threaten and sue independent journalists investigating its activities. He also became an instrument of Russian power and strategic interests by creating a private military company called the Wagner Group in 2014. The countries where he has so far sent his mercenaries include Ukraine’s Donbas, the Central African Republic, and Syria. Several of his companies have been subjected to European and American sanctions. Long a man in the shadows, he recently demonstrated his ambition to gain notoriety in Russia and on the international stage by admitting to having interfered in US elections and to being the Wagner Group’s founder. The former gangster even [inaugurated](#), on 4 November 2022, a Wagner Group Centre in Saint Petersburg, modelled on the Trump Tower in New York – quite the symbol.

Inside the Wagner PMC (Private Military Company) Tower. ©Olga Maltseva/AFP



2/ THE MALKEVICH PROPAGANDA MACHINE IN UKRAINE

“In Kherson, ..., Malkevich launched and imposed the brand new Tavria TV”

In June 2022, Malkevich officially began his mission in the occupied territories of southern Ukraine. He took lengthy leaves of absence from his job as director of the Sankt-Peterburg TV channel, and by getting so involved in this “volunteer” work – according to him – he managed to create, in just a few months, a regional broadcasting mini-empire to benefit the Kremlin. Launching a media group and two television stations a month before annexation “referendums” required the urgent mobilisation of significant human and material resources – a real challenge in cities that were often devastated, looted, and emptied of much of their population.

THE BIG GUNS

“I want this project entered in the country’s book of records, because the holding company was set up in 15 days, and the regional channel launched from scratch in 10 days”, Malkevich boasted in a 23 September 2022 [interview](#) with Business Online, an online economic publication based in Tatarstan. He was talking about the creation of the ZaMedia group in Melitopol, the administrative centre of the Zaporizhzhya region. The holding company has allowed a new television channel to establish itself as the main propaganda media outlet, to the detriment of MTV+, which belonged to the head of the local occupation administration. Under the name ZaTV, the channel began broadcasting on 1 August, from a studio adjacent to a TV tower [seized](#) by the Russian armed forces.



Tavria TV communications director Serafim Ivanov appears on his TV channel in a T-shirt with the letter Z, which has been the symbol of support for the Russian armed forces since the start of the war in Ukraine.
©Telegram alexandr_malkevich

In Kherson, until his arrival, the occupation authorities relied on an existing channel to spread their propaganda, but Malkevich launched and imposed the brand new Tavria TV. Taking over studios from Suspilne, a Ukrainian public media group, which had been [looted](#) by Russian forces, the channel began broadcasting on 15 August. After Ukrainian forces liberated the city of Kherson three months later, the Tavria TV newsroom retreated to Henichesk, a small town in the west of the Kherson oblast, which had become the administrative centre of the still-occupied zone of this region.

In devastated Mariupol, where many residents lacked electricity, Malkevich acquired for his Mariupol 24 channel a relatively well-preserved and well-placed building with the necessary infrastructure for his project. According to accounts gathered by RSF, it was repaired in record time by Russian workers specially dispatched to the site. In October, Malkevich even announced a donation of [new windows](#) for the studio – a real luxury in this heavily bombed and looted city. Once again, Malkevich’s arrival stopped a decision to launch another channel, Novy Mariupol, which was apparently ready to start broadcasting.

To launch his media outlets, Malkevich relied on the resources of local administrations, as well as on a [fund](#) with obscure donors that he created in 2017, renamed the “Fund for the Development of New Media” in October 2022. Another source was

Alexander Malkevich poses with Vadim Kucher, director of ZaMedia (to his left), and Vadim Ivanov, first director of the ZaTV channel (on his right), at the launch of the ZaMedia company, in Melitopol in August 2022.
© Telegram alexandr_malkevich



INTERVIEW

Alexander Malkevich and the concept of “media volunteering”

Though targeted by sanctions due to his ties to Prigozhin, Malkevich has always denied working for the Wagner Group founder. During an interview with RSF, he held fast to his position:

“How can you think, when I ran the main media resource of Smolny [Saint Petersburg governor Alexander Beglov’s residence] for two years, that I am in any way linked to the chairman of the board of the Patriot media group [Prigozhin]? The answer is obvious – they are irreconcilable enemies.” He failed to mention that his appointment as director of the Sankt-Peterburg TV channel occurred before relations between the two men [broke down](#).

Malkevich confirmed that he has launched new media outlets in southern Ukraine, but he was vague about his official role: “I simply help colleagues with advice. I lead master classes. I actively participated in the creation of the Kherson and Melitopol TV channels. It is common knowledge that I have created and run many TV channels in different parts of the Russian Federation, so I have some experience that I have generously shared with colleagues.”

In his view, his involvement in southern Ukraine comes down to voluntary mentoring: “I am a member of Russia’s Civic Chamber, and in our country, humanitarian and volunteer work are welcomed and encouraged. What I do in the new territories is media volunteering[...] I work as a producer on several media projects. I am also able, in my free time, to implement humanitarian actions.” This does not explain in what capacity he signed an agreement on 4 August 2022 creating the Mariupol 24 channel. He concluded: “The overwhelming majority of Russians greatly admire what Mr. Prigozhin is doing on the frontlines.”

the Sankt-Peterburg channel that he runs. For example, on behalf of his channel, he signed a [cooperation agreement](#) with a TV channel from the Donetsk region to launch Mariupol 24, on 4 August, the contents of which remain secret. Above all, this public media executive grants himself such long leaves of absence for his volunteer work that he rarely returns to Saint Petersburg. Malkevich spends much of his time putting himself in the spotlight almost every day, in an [online diary](#) and on social media, wearing a t-shirt with the Z logo in support of the war, as he wanders around the newly occupied territories. His absence from the job did not prevent his reappointment as chief executive on 30 January 2023.

However, Malkevich's high-speed operation faces a scarcity of human resources. Few of the Ukrainian journalists who stayed behind in the occupied territories were willing to collaborate with propaganda media, despite attractive remuneration given the local context – 30,000 rubles (about 350 euros) a month, for example, in the devastated city of Mariupol, according to our sources. To remedy this, he drew from the Russian talent pool, in particular that of his hometown of Saint Petersburg, betting on attractive salaries.

In a private telephone message obtained by RSF, a Saint Petersburg recruiter, on behalf of Malkevich, offered a Russian journalist “a job under the aegis of the presidential apparatus and Prigozhin's men” in the new territories. The recruiter invited the journalist to set his own salary and to bring his team with him, colleagues who would be paid at least 200,000 rubles a month net (about 2,300 euros), plus living expenses – or about four times the average salary in Russia, according to the most recent official statistics from [Rosstat](#). The recruiter even promised 150,000 rubles (about 1,700 euros) for new trainees. “They don't know how to work professionally”, said the journalist who was approached, asking to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals. “This is why...they always need easily exploited people to do everything for them.”

Leadership of these new local channels is entrusted to Russian journalists known for their loyalty to the Kremlin or to members of the Saint Petersburg branch of the Battle Brotherhood, a group that supports patriotic education and Russian fighters, a recruitment pool for the Wagner Group. Its role came to light in 2017 after

the [execution in Syria](#) of one of its members who had joined the mercenary force. Serafim Ivanov, a leading member of the Brotherhood in Saint Petersburg, was hired as director of the communications department of Tavria TV in Kherson; Malkevich [described](#) him as his “assistant”. Ivanov also runs the local branch of Yunarmiya, a Russian military-patriotic youth movement.

Another Battle Brotherhood member, [Vadim Kucher](#), a Saint Petersburg politician, took over as head of ZaMedia in Melitopol. Malkevich entrusted the top role in ZaTV to a Russian journalist who had long worked for state television, [Vadim Ivanov](#), before transferring it to [Yulia Shamal](#). She is known for launching a TV show hosted by notorious [Russian spy](#) Anna Chapman, who was returned to Russia by the United States in a prisoner swap

“Leadership of these new local channels is entrusted to Russian journalists known for their loyalty to the Kremlin...”

Vlada Andreyeva and Myroslava Butenko, two minors recruited by Alexander Malkevich as presenters, in the studios of Zvezda, the Russian defence ministry's TV channel, on 8 December 2022.
©Telegram alexandr_malkevich



in 2010. Less prominent journalists recruited in Russia work in the shadows, such as [Oleg Klokov](#), a former employee of RT (formerly Russia Today) who was killed in an artillery strike during the Russian army's evacuation of Kherson.

Malkevich has also recruited civil servants and propaganda media managers who have worked for the self-proclaimed “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DNR) in eastern Ukraine. This group includes, [among others](#), Alexander Bernatovich, a journalist [with the Information Ministry](#) of the DNR, who became head of Mariupol 24.

However, reinforcements from Russia and Donetsk have not sufficed to make up for the scarcity of local journalists, so Malkevich embarked on an urgent local recruitment campaign. On 10 August, he opened a journalism school in Kherson sponsored by RT director general [Aleksey Nikolov](#), not to train staff, but to recruit them. On 3 September, Malkevich signed an [agreement](#) between Mariupol 24 and the University of Mariupol to teach “journalism”. Vladislava Andreyeva (also known as Lugovskaya), a 16-year-old high school student from Kherson, with no degree or professional experience in journalism, became Tavria’s “star” presenter. She was awarded the [Kremlin Medal for Courage](#) on 8 March, International Women’s Day.

The new recruits sometimes take internships in Saint Petersburg, such as another young “star” of Mariupol 24, [Ksenia Misyurevich](#). These trips were [jointly financed](#) by Malkevich’s Fund for Development of New Media and the Sankt-Peterburg channel. Miroslava Butenko, a [student and model](#) recruited as a journalist at the age of 15 by ZaTV in Melitopol, [explained](#) her motivation in these words: “I do it for the good of the people. I present the image of happy people who live in an advanced country, of young people who assure its development.”

“Malkevich has also recruited civil servants and propaganda media managers who have worked for the self-proclaimed “Donetsk People’s Republic” (DNR) in eastern Ukraine.”

SOVIET-STYLE PROPAGANDA

The statements made by these new media aim, in fact, to make local populations support the Kremlin’s vision of the world and accept the integration of the occupied territories into Russia. “A very important challenge”, Malkevich said. “We have to tell the inhabitants of the new regions about the big and beautiful country they belong to”, said this champion of “New Russia” ([Novorossiya](#)), which historically takes in the territories of eastern and southern Ukraine, as Malkevich noted in an [interview](#) with the RAPSI agency in late December 2022.

Even though, as soon as towns were occupied by Russian forces, residents were flooded with programming from federal state television, the local media have played an essential role in giving credibility to the propaganda rhetoric. Their agenda is essentially positive, like *Pravda* (“Truth”), the official newspaper of the Communist Party under the USSR. Numerous reports overstate the achievements of the occupation administration – including [roads, fuel prices](#), repair works – citing statistics, presentations of annual plans, and officials’ statements. No dissonant voices are transmitted and interviewees follow the pro-Kremlin line. Journalists at these channels provide abundant coverage of humanitarian actions by the “liberators”, above all where [children](#) and the distribution of gifts are concerned.



Vladimir Medinsky, former culture minister of the Russian Federation on TavriaTV.
©Screenshot Tavria TV



Headlines of lead stories on the ZaTV Telegram channel on 26 March 2023:

"- Under good protection. Today marks the 23rd anniversary of Vladimir Putin's election as president of Russia.
- Cultural Enrichment. The Zaporizhzhya region will be able to have its own theaters."
Screenshot ©Telegram ZaTV_Media

“More or less direct threats are the key to securing compliance. The new channels have reported in detail on the fight against “traitors”, deterring any hint of rebellion.”

A second axis of this propaganda has focused on erasing Ukraine's past. The channels hammer home the message that a return to the past is impossible. Extensive coverage of [visits by Russian officials](#) is generally accompanied by interviews about integration, such as [one in January 2023](#) by Sergey Kiriyenko, the first deputy chief of staff of the Russian presidency, who was [appointed](#) to administer the occupied territories. The pseudo-referendums on annexation in September 2022 were [presented](#) as a free choice in favour of Russia. Bureaucratic procedures of the new regime guided the delivery of practical information to residents on matters such as [travel passes](#), taxes and related issues. Reports cover [events](#) organised to promote Russian culture and [explain](#) it to the people. Tavria TV broadcasts, for example, lectures on history by former Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, who leads the Russian delegation for negotiations with Ukraine, and is a notorious [historical revisionist](#).

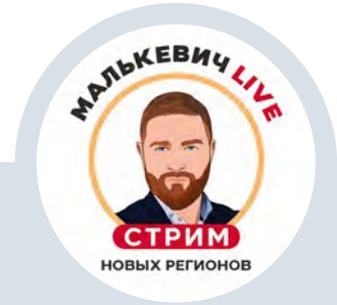
More or less direct threats are the key to securing compliance. The new channels have reported in detail on the fight against “traitors”, deterring any hint of rebellion. However, the rhetoric is adapted to the Ukrainian audience, so as not to antagonise the local population. “Security forces call on former employees of the region’s educational institutions, deceived by Kyiv propaganda, to voluntarily turn over the documents they have stolen. Otherwise, they could be held liable under the relevant provisions of the Russian penal code”, ZaTV [announced](#), for example, in mid-January 2023. Every new law to punish “domestic enemies” is reported. Meanwhile, the alleged mistreatment of civilians by the Ukrainian army is played up, and the actions of Russian forces are highly valued, along the lines of a [report](#) on displaced residents of Bakhmut: “All thanked the Wagner fighters for having saved them.”

THE WAGNER GROUP'S SHADOW

The propaganda machine set up by Malkevich in the occupied territories of southern Ukraine is part of Prigozhin's strategy to strengthen his media influence in Russia. Until last fall, the Patriot media group and Wagner Group boss denied having formed the private military company, even [suing](#) journalists who established a connection. Today, he shows up on the frontlines in the company of his “soldiers” and confirms his ambition to take control of information in the ongoing war.

Malkevich is not the Wagner Group's only media pawn in Ukraine. The media entrepreneur announced a plan to work in the occupied territories with Alexander Ionov, his [“fellow fighter”](#). Together, they worked to free Russian spy Maria Butina, imprisoned in the United States. Indicted in the United States for interference in the American elections, and [sanctioned](#) for having spread Russian propaganda under Prigozhin's aegis, Ionov has also [written letters to Russian authorities](#) to condemn independent media, such as [Meduza](#), accusing them of being “foreign agents”.

This “anti-globalist” activist businessman heads the charitable foundation of the Readovka news site, which seems to be controlled by Prigozhin. The outlet's editorial line has significantly changed with the arrival of many former employees of “Putin's chef”, reported, in March 2022, the independent Saint Petersburg outlet [Rotonda](#). Readovka's articles, which openly support the “special operation” in Ukraine, focus especially on the Wagner Group's exploits.



A very committed influencer

On 22 August 2022, Malkevich launched his [own daily online talk show](#), entitled "[Malkevich Live. Streaming from the New Territories](#)". The show, which runs for about an hour, with three or four guests, is streamed live on social media. The aim is to report on the "[peaceful life](#)" (Malkevich's term) in the occupied territories. Deputies from the Duma rub shoulders with local collaborators, Russian cultural figures, and second-rate political experts. Together, they spread Kremlin propaganda. The shows are regularly supplemented by "documentaries" with titles as evocative as "[Biological Laboratories in Ukraine](#)", or "[Maidan, the Point of No Return](#)" – which evoke the alleged "horrors and suffering that the inhuman Ukronazi regime inflicted in Donbas", to use the words of Malkevich.

Entire concerts of patriotic songs are also broadcast. The programme's Telegram channel regularly runs playlists and clips, along the lines of "[Stand Up, Russia](#)". This video by Russian artist Yan Osin evokes, over the course of four minutes, "holy Russia", the USSR, the Nazis, "Europe gone crazy", the Olympic Games and Russian ballet, the American Satan and Daria Dugina, the Russian ultra-nationalist activist who was assassinated on 20 August 2022. She was also the daughter of an ideologist said to be close to Putin. All this against a backdrop of images of Russian military manoeuvres, Soviet archival content and crude photo montages. The clip, [said Malkevich](#), is so "dynamic and inspiring" that he feels "the imminent victory of [his] great Russia".

Initially launched on Rutube, the Russian video hosting service, the show has also been, since January 2023, broadcast by Sankt-Peterburg, the television channel that Malkevich runs, and by ZaTV, the station he created in Melitopol. This talk show, "broadcast live from territories liberated from the Nazis" is co-anchored by Konstantin Pridybailo, who is also linked to Prigozhin. This RT journalist is a regular commentator on Ria FAN, the main media property of "Putin's chef". Barely one month after the invasion began in a public meeting followed and covered by Ria FAN, he [promoted](#) an initiative to support the war effort of [Cyber Front Z](#), a Saint Petersburg-based troll factory that employs several and hundred people and is said by Russian media to be linked to the Wagner Group boss. Cyber Front Z recently made headlines news worldwide, following the [assassination](#) of ultra-nationalist blogger Vladlen Tatarsky, who was killed in a café owned by Prigozhin when he was set to speak at a conference of this organisation on 2 April 2023 in Saint Petersburg.



Yevgeny Prigozhin during a meeting of Cyber Front Z activists at his Saint Petersburg café, which was just targeted in an attack that took the life of military blogger Vladlen Tatarsky on 2 April 2023.
Screenshot ©Telegram concordgroup_official



Screenshot. Alexander Ionov, director of the charitable fund of Readovka and founder of the Anti-Globalist Movement, as a guest on the Malkevich Live talk show, 18 January 2023.
©Telegram alexandr_malkevich

“Prigozhin uses his Telegram channels and media company to directly short-circuit the army’s public communications, though they are the only legally admissible source of news on the ‘special operation’...”

Prigozhin uses his Telegram channels and media company to directly short-circuit the army’s public communications, though they are the only legally admissible source of news on the “special operation” – at the risk of criminal proceedings. He also champions his singular concept of journalism, and is gaining influence as he seeks to increase his authority. A letter that the Wagner Group boss wrote to the Duma, the lower chamber of the Russian parliament, led to lawmakers [adopting amendments](#) decreeing penalties of up to 15 years in prison for any journalist who dares to cite his mercenaries’ criminal records. The former hoodlum had himself spent years behind bars and, in fact, recruited from Russian prisons, as shown in a [video that went viral](#), promising prisoners their freedom in exchange for six months on the Ukrainian front.

The efforts made by Malkevitch and his Russian network are headed in one direction: officially, the objective is to contribute to building a vast pan-Russian media space at the service of the “new Russia”, which includes the occupied territories. This experiment, carried out by a Prigozhin co-conspirator, could just be the first step in a stranglehold on the Russian audiovisual sector by Wagner’s boss – within which the “good little soldier” Malkevich would find a place worthy of his ambitions. In the wake of the troll factories on online media, this development would mark a new stage in the hybrid war waged in the Kremlin’s name against the West.



Port city of Russian-occupied Mariupol, on the Azov Sea, in southeastern Ukraine on April 8 2023. ©AFP

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