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KREMLIN WATCH PROGRAM
Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Think-Tank which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

Author
Veronika Špalková, Member of the Kremlin Watch Program

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SUMMARY

- Before Brexit, Russia Today and Sputnik released more anti-EU articles than the official Vote Leave website and Leave.EU website.
- The British version of Sputnik has an annual budget of £1.8 million from the Russian government.
- Kremlin-owned channels potentially influenced 134 million impressions during the Brexit campaign.
- A total of 5,029,877 messages connected to the Catalan crisis on Twitter, Facebook and other social networks were analysed.
- 50% of RT’s most shared posts were pro-Catalan independence.
- 84 of the 100 most active pro-Catalan independence accounts cannot be assigned to any human being.
- Over 36,000 automated accounts and 1.4 million election-related tweets linked to Russia on Twitter during the US presidential campaign.
- 18 YouTube channels that featured 1100 videos targeted against the US.
- 80,000 pieces of divisive content connected to the 2016 US presidential election and millions of views on Facebook.
- 120,000 pieces of Kremlin-linked content on Instagram.
- 172 reports on Italy’s parliamentary election were monitored and analysed.
- 178 problematic pieces of content identified ten weeks before the Italian parliamentary elections.
- 2.5 fake stories a day exposed to Italian voters.
- 42% of accounts active in Russian were predominantly automated.
- 81,000 posts discussing NATO only in Russian.
- 73,000 posts mentioning NATO on the Russian social network VKontakte.
INTRODUCTION

To some extent politics has always been connected with the media. Political parties and their campaign strategies evolved in line with how the media developed. Long before the age of the Internet came to dominate our national psyche, political candidates operated their campaigns with the conviction that what the media says about them will affect the voter’s decision. Television and newspapers are largely passive media, where viewers and readers receive information without being actively involved. The Internet, on the other hand, is an active medium that allows people to use emails, forums, or even entire websites to comment, edit, propagate, or even create information themselves. The emergence of social media such as Twitter and Facebook has created a space in which spreading information is easier than ever before.

Simple acts of liking and sharing content can result in viral dissemination of information of all kinds. Liking and sharing itself would not be a problem if all the information were verified and fact-checked. The real problem, however, lies in the dissemination of manipulated, incomplete or utterly false information. In 1993, Larry M. Bartels wrote an article highlighting the poor state of research on the effects of mass media. In the article he cites Doris Graber, who explains the issue of measuring the influence of media on individuals as follows: “People who are exposed to the mass media already possess a fund of knowledge and attitudes which they bring to bear on new information. Since we do not know precisely what this information is, nor the rules by which it is combined with incoming information, we cannot pinpoint the exact contribution which mass media make to the individual’s cognition, feelings, and actions”. From this point of view, the expansion of social media is advantageous for researchers. Through public opinion polls, with the accuracy of a standard statistical error, it is possible to determine how many people use social media as “news servers,” how many of them verify the information they consume there or how trustworthy many real news servers (such as BBC or CNN) are perceived, etc. Moreover, thanks to the number of likes, shares/retweets and comments under the post, it is possible to quantify the popularity and spread of the post. By “tracking” a specific post it is possible to determine its “lifetime”, and what kind of users the post is attractive for. This has greatly expanded the possibilities for researchers who deal with the media and its impact on individuals. In conjunction with specific political events, it is possible to trace how much the activity of concrete users, servers and websites increased or decreased, allowing us to monitor the activity of Kremlin, or obviously pro-Kremlin users before political events and to measure their impact on these events.

The following chapters will describe examples of research on the impact of Kremlin influence and disinformation operations on particular political events or public opinion in general, such as the operations related to Brexit, the Catalan referendum, the US presidential election, the 2018 Italian elections, or the efforts to shape public opinion regarding NATO.
PUTIN’S BREXIT?

Russia Today (RT) and the British version of Sputnik greatly increased their activity before Brexit. Studies have been carried out to follow the articles related to Brexit released by these media platforms. Researchers also monitored the “lifespan” of these articles and posts on social media. It was shown that anti-European content produced by RT and Sputnik, in support of Brexit, outweighed pro-European content and that their social reach was enormous. Russian efforts to undermine British democracy and certain quarters of the British political system that are vulnerable were mapped in detail in a report prepared by the US Senate. Among other things, the report argues that the Kremlin has long questioned European integration and seeks to break up the European Union. Thus, the referendum on the European Union that took place in Great Britain was the ideal target of a Kremlin influence operation. Today, we have at least two independent studies (a US Senate report and a study of the digital and communications agency 89up) that provide a detailed breakdown of the Kremlin campaign to support Brexit in the UK. The conclusions reached, however, are not based upon likely “intentions”, “possibilities” or “assumptions”, but rather hard data and practically irrefutable evidence.

Method: The data that was used by 89up was derived from the Twitter Search API, Buzzsumo, the Facebook API and other scraping methods. In the timeframe from January 2016 to the day of the British referendum, analysts identified and analysed 261 of the most shared and popular articles that were clearly anti-European. The two main media outlets were RT and Sputnik.

Costs: The total value of Kremlin media for the Leave campaign in the six months before the EU referendum was £1,353,000. The PR value for the Leave campaign, based on the 261 heavily pro-Leave articles published by RT and Sputnik, is estimated at nearly £1,500,000 based on figures from a leading media monitoring tool. This excludes the significant social media value of these news articles. Estimated value of Russian media Facebook impressions is around $102,000 and the estimated value of Russian media’s potential impressions on Twitter is between $47,000 - $100,000.

Content: The analysis also shows that the overwhelming majority of articles published by RT and Sputnik (131 of the 200 most shared) were clearly for Leave; 59 articles were Neutral and only 10 were set to Remain. When the neutral articles are filtered out, numbers show that the negative articles of RT/Sputnik, together, elicited nearly the same number of engagements as the official Vote Leave website.

Number of engagements connected to the clearly anti-EU articles

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<tr>
<th>Vote Leave</th>
<th>RT/Sputnik</th>
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<td>287 000</td>
<td>263 000</td>
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Social reach: The report shows the social reach of these anti-EU articles published by the Kremlin-owned channels was 134 million potential impressions, in comparison with a total social reach of just 33 million and 11 million potential impressions for all content shared from the Vote Leave website and Leave.EU website respectively.

The problem with media such as Sputnik and RT is that their influence is not regulated. The British version of Sputnik is not subjected to any self-regulation nor regulation by law (as is the case with domestic British media). British media (TV stations, newspapers and online news platforms) are in the vast majority of cases paid commercially – they sell advertising space, have subscribers or sell printed versions. Subsidies from governments are negligible. This method is limiting for these media platforms financially as well as legally. The British version of Sputnik has an annual budget of £1.8 million from the Russian government. Russian media platform RT, which has an international reach, has an astronomical annual budget of £250 million, which comes from Russian government as well.
CATALAN CRISIS

RT and the Spanish version of Sputnik increased their activity significantly in the context of the Catalan crisis. A quantitative study was conducted, demonstrating that the overwhelming majority of the content published by these media platforms served to support Catalan independence. Additionally, a large amount of artificial accounts were discovered on social networks (the so-called trolls), which were created solely for the purpose of distributing this content.

The Catalan crisis, which took place in Spain in the second half of 2017, became another easy target for Russia. Director of the radio station *Echo of Moscow* Alexei Venedikt said: “Putin understands that by supporting far-right movements, nationalists and separatists, as in Catalonia for example, it weakens and destroys the unity of Europe, which is what maintains the sanctions against Russia.” Romanian Euro-deputy Victor Bostinaru opines that Catalonia is another case of malicious interference and that he is not the only one who thinks so. Euro-deputies and experts from more than 20 countries have signed the *Prague Declaration*, which calls on EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini to take more forceful action in cases like that of Catalonia. In November 2017, Spanish government spokesperson Íñigo Méndez de Vigo and Defense Minister María Dolores de Cospedal also confirmed that Russian hackers were interfering in the ongoing crisis in Catalonia. Now, how can they be so sure?

**Method:** Javier Lesaca, journalist, communications expert and visiting researcher at the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University, drew up a detailed study mapping Russian interventions in the Catalan Independence Referendum. He analysed a total of 5,029,877 messages across Twitter, Facebook and other social networks that used the terms Cataluña, Catalunya and Catalonia between September 29 and October 5.

Naturally, the Spanish media was the most active in terms of the number of published articles as well as the amount of online sharing. According to the author, the most significant finding of his analysis is the fact that RT and Sputnik took fourth place here. The exact numbers in comparison offer the following graphs.

**Content:** Lesaca’s study included a qualitative analysis of the top most shared posts from both RT and Sputnik. In this instance, content from RT was found to be a little

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number of shared posts</th>
<th>Number of reachable readers and viewers (in million)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spanish Eldiario.es</td>
<td>72,488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British BBC</td>
<td>70,457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish El País</td>
<td>52,042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian RT/Sputnik</td>
<td>47,964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Eldiario.es</td>
<td>136,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British BBC</td>
<td>218,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish El País</td>
<td>208,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian RT/Sputnik</td>
<td>125,9</td>
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less radical, with 20% of contributions offering a neutral approach to the referendum. Another 20% highlighted how much Catalan independence would have damaged the Spanish economy, while 10% criticized Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. The remaining 50% of RT’s most shared posts were focused on the activities of the Spanish police; which involved sharing photos and videos of people injured during clashes with the police. Sputnik, on the other hand, was far more radical in the sense that all of its most shared stories favoured the Catalan Independence Groups’ narrative.

*Trolls:* Lesaca also focused on the accounts which spread the “news” published by RT and Sputnik the most. He found that only 9 out of the 100 most active accounts can be almost certainly classified as real accounts used by real people. A further 7 were official RT and Sputnik accounts on social networks. The remaining 84 most active accounts, however, cannot be assigned to any human being because they do not contain any original posts and show no signs of being used other than to promote RT and Sputnik and spread their posts. Some of them post the same content at the same time, and others post an average of 1425 messages per day.

Deputy director of Spanish newspaper El País, David Aladente, wrote: “The main conclusion of the study is that traditional political leaders and institutions have lost their ability to influence public opinion, which is difficult to follow and monitor, given that they do not subscribe to the political and media environment of just one country. In the case of the Catalan secessionist drive, narrative of pro-constitution parties in government and opposition was limited by a complex network of messages originating in pro-Russian media.”
The most active accounts cannot be assigned to any human being because they do not contain any original posts and show no signs of being used other than to promote RT and Sputnik. Some of them post the same content at the same time, and others post an average of 1425 messages per day.
U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The US presidential election provides a perfect case study of how to use social networks in order to manipulate public opinion. The targeted social networks themselves have been involved in the investigation of the Russian interference. Facebook, Twitter, and Google have all discovered significant pro-Kremlin activity on their platforms, either in the form of spreading fear through false news, or trying to divide the American society constantly by discussing perennial societal issues that are traditionally very controversial in America.

In the case of the US presidential election, it was not "only" about the use of social platforms and paid advertising to influence citizens' decisions. Rather, all the means offered by the hybrid war, including those illegal, such as Hillary Clinton's email hacking, were used. The aim of Kremlin interference in the US was to divide the American society and discredit Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton to such an extent that she would not be elected.

Method: On January 6, 2017, the Intelligence Community Assessment - Assessing Russian activities and intentions in recent US Elections, was published. This is a report composed by three major American intelligence and security agencies: the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA). It covers the motivation and scope of the Kremlin's intentions for the US election and the Kremlin's use of cyber tools and media campaigns to influence US public opinion. The assessment relies on a body of reports from multiple sources, insights into Kremlin efforts, where Russian views of key US players were derived from multiple corroborating sources. Social networks themselves (Facebook, Twitter, and Google) have been involved in the investigation and made a statement quantifying the issue.

Content: In the case of US elections, we cannot clearly state whether the contents of Kremlin-linked posts were negative, neutral or positive, as in previous cases. It was a democratic election and it is not our responsibility to judge whether the winner is negative, neutral or positive as a president for America. What can be observed is that the content and character of Kremlin-linked posts differed in America from those used in Europe. The aim was to divide society and generate as much fear as possible, but unlike in Europe, in the US there are no national tendencies of a region or state to secede from its federation. Thus, the Kremlin playmakers had to come up with innovative strategy for America. The propagated advertisements and posts were therefore focused on topics that traditionally divide American society, such as gay rights, gun control (and school shooting attacks in general), or the perennially debated issue of racism. There have even been cases where clear groups were targeted in order to fuel fear and xenophobia among American citizens. For example, when in 2015 several army wives received a message on Facebook with the following: "We know everything about you, your husband and your children," and the message continued, claiming that the hackers, operating under the flag of Islamic State militants, had penetrated their computers and phones: "We're much closer than you can even imagine." However, an investigation revealed that the message was not sent by ISIS, but by Russian hackers. Facebook's Vice President for US, Joel Kaplan, said: "The ads and accounts we found appeared to amplify divisive political issues across the political spectrum."
Costs: Facebook has found that a shadow Russian company has bought over 3,000 ads worth more than $100,000. Advertisements were not directly related to politics, but were set up to challenge topics that traditionally divide American society, such as gay rights or gun rights. At the same time, Facebook said it is investigating another 2200 ads suspected of having links with Russia. Google also found that $4,700 worth of ads were purchased by the Internet Research Agency (IRA, an official Russian company based in St. Petersburg).

Facebook: Facebook said that a shadowy Russian company linked to the Kremlin posted roughly 80,000 pieces of divisive content that was exposed to about 29 million people between January 2015 and August 2017. Those posts were subsequently liked, shared and followed by others, spreading the messages to tens of millions more people (approximately 129 million users). Facebook also stated that it had found and deleted more than 170 accounts on its photo-sharing app Instagram; those accounts had posted about 120,000 pieces of Kremlin-linked content.

Twitter: Twitter stated it had discovered more than 2,700 accounts on its service that were linked to the IRA between September 2016 and November 2016. Those accounts, which Twitter has suspended, posted roughly 131,000 tweets over that period. Outside the activity of the IRA, Twitter identified more than 36,000 automated Russian-linked accounts that posted 1.4 million election-related tweets over that three-month period. The tweets received approximately 288 million views, according to the company’s remarks.

Google: Google also said it found signs that the IRA bought ads and created YouTube channels that featured political videos targeted against the US. There were 18 channels that featured 1100 videos, totalling to 43 hours of content from 2015 through to the summer of 2017. The social reach in this case was not as remarkable, the most watched video had about 309,000 views.

When it comes to America, the Kremlin employs all possible tactics, strategies and tools to manipulate public opinion. Some of these operations are on the edge of the law, while others clearly violate it. However, Kremlin influence operations in America did not end with the election of Donald Trump as President, and official institutions must continue to deal with the threat. Currently, one of the most discussed topics is social media security. Facebook and Twitter are trying to implement measures to prevent massive abuse of their platforms for targeted manipulation of citizens.
The aim of Kremlin interference in the US was to divide the American society and Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton to such an extent that she would not be elected.
ITALIAN ELECTIONS 2018

In March 2018, parliamentary elections took place in Italy. Due to the strong anti-European rhetoric of some of the candidates (for example, Five Star Movement), after experiencing Russian interference in the elections of other countries, it was necessary to monitor this phenomenon in Italy as well. EU Group DizinfoLab created a study in which it presents its analysis of Russian interference in the 2018 Italian parliamentary elections.

**Method:** EU group DizinfoLab created a method to determine whether the Kremlin is seeking to influence elections in a foreign country. First, they collected a series of accounts representing the ecosystem they wished to identify. In this case, they selected four accounts supporting pro-Russian narratives in Italy. They then identified recurring accounts in their audience. After that they analysed how these accounts were following each other to identify which Twitter accounts were most followed by other individuals in the same ecosystem; the triangulation was then performed on the 25 most followed accounts. The second step was to monitor these accounts during a period of ten weeks between December 15th, 2017 and March 4th, 2018. Researchers then applied their Social Network Analysis (SNA) framework, analysing interactions on social platforms to understand the source of disinformation and how narratives evolved online. Their analysis focused on the emergence of disinformation pieces and the accounts that contributed its propagation.

**Content:** DizinfoLab monitored 172 reports that underwent analysis. Some came from standard Italian media outlets like La Repubblica, La Stampa, while some came from strongly anti-European and pro-Kremlin sites such as the Riscatto Nazionale, the Primato Nazionale and others. Out of the 172 news stories tracked, 54 were identified as fake, misleading or manipulated in order to push a specific message, propagating Eurosceptic, anti-European, or anti-migrant discourse. That said, most of the remaining reports were either real, meaning that the news was reported as accurate and neutral (100), or an expression of personal views on political, economic or European affairs (18). The topics changed over the course of the ten monitored weeks, depending on what was happening in the country. From the outset, they targeted the economically and politically unstable situation in Italy. Strongly racist and anti-immigrant content started to emerge from February due to the so-called "Macerata incident" - the death of Pamela Mastropietro, and a young girl from the Marche region, who was supposedly killed by a Nigerian man. Anti-immigrant rhetoric was held until the election.

**Twitter:** Owing to the well-developed network of experienced journalists, experts and fact-checkers who supported this project, it was possible to capture all major pieces of fake news appearing on Twitter. Together, they identified 178 problematic pieces of content within ten weeks, which amounts to 2.5 fake stories a day.

Filippo Trevisan, who has long studied the influence of the media and social networks on the political behaviour of Italian citizens, claims that Italy is currently extremely vulnerable. Across Italy, trust in the mainstream media is very low, and more and more people are turning to alternative sites for information. Already in 2013, he participated in a study that demonstrated a positive correlation between whether an Italian citizen votes for populist/far-right movements and whether he or she reads alternative media. According to Trevisan, "without ambitious set of measures, online misinformation and propaganda are unlikely to go out of fashion anytime soon."
ROBOTROLLING

The case of robotrolling is not directly related to a political event (as all previous cases). It is a relatively new method of disrupting NATO’s integrity by spreading negative news about the Alliance in areas with a strong Russian diaspora. Quantitative studies have determined how active the Kremlin is on Twitter and the Russian communication platform VKontakte (VK) in connection with NATO - the results are more than alarming.

The Baltic republics - Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania - and partly Poland have been the victims of the Kremlin’s extreme disinformation campaigns. These are countries with a very strong Russian minority, which makes them ideal targets for fake news and pro-Kremlin propaganda. Through this minority it then spreads further to Europe. Due to the growing number of fake news reports, NATO has moved to develop a study that deals with the phenomena of Robotrolling (Twitter users who write in Russian and English about NATO presence in Eastern Europe that are “bot” accounts rather than human users). These are accounts that are only used for the purpose of spreading disinformation, do not contain any original content, and share pro-Kremlin posts even several thousand times a day.

Method: From January 1, 2017 to January 31, 2018, all Twitter messages that included NATO originating from some of the countries listed above were analysed. The nature of these posts and whether they were in Russian or English were examined. In order to better understand the nature and development of this issue, the analysis also included posts on the Russian social network VK.

Twitter: In the period 1 November 2017 to 31 January 2018, Russian-language bots created roughly 55% of all Russian-language messages about NATO in the Baltic States and Poland. Overall, 42% of accounts active in Russian were predominantly automated. Initial research examined 5,500 posts (of which 30% are in Russian) and 3,400 active users. The new dataset introduced by the NATO study examines 81,000 Russian-language posts mentioning NATO between 1 September 2017 and 31 January 2018. The study monitored the number of posts, and determined that when it comes to Twitter, bot activity has been decreasing.

VKontakte: The second new dataset also collected 73,000 posts mentioning NATO on the Russian social network VK. There is no reduction in activity here.

Findings: In 2017, bot activity regularly accounted for the bulk of the Russian-language Twitter conversations about NATO. Additionally, since June 2017 there has been a steady and general decline in Russian bot activity mentioning NATO on Twitter. No such reduction is visible for VK, suggesting that the reduction on Twitter is better explained by changing dynamics on the Twitter platform than by the news cycle. The decline in Twitter bot activity suggests that Twitter is beginning to tackle the bot-problem also in non-English-language spaces.

NATO was originally established as an organization to defend its members against the Soviet Union and though the USSR collapsed in 1991, NATO remains the most persistent focal point of Western-Russian strife. The emergence of social networks has opened up a unique opportunity for the Kremlin to slowly but surely shake the integrity of NATO by spreading false information and manipulating messages of alliance activities.
CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ways in which the Kremlin leads the hybrid war on a global scale are increasingly sophisticated. The development of social networks has greatly expanded the range of tools that can be used in hybrid warfare without the user violating the law. Spreading disinformation and the manipulation of public opinion has never been easier. That is the bad news. On the other hand, the ways in which we can defend ourselves against these operations continue to improve. Decreasing Twitter contributions on NATO in Russian (Robotrolling Chapter) can serve as evidence that the fight against the abuse of social networks is successful. Due to the real existence of bot accounts and troll accounts, we have evidence that the Kremlin’s influence operations are real, and the Kremlin cannot deny it. Moreover, by tracking the amount of likes and shares / retweets, we are able to determine how successful these operations are. And that’s the good news.