

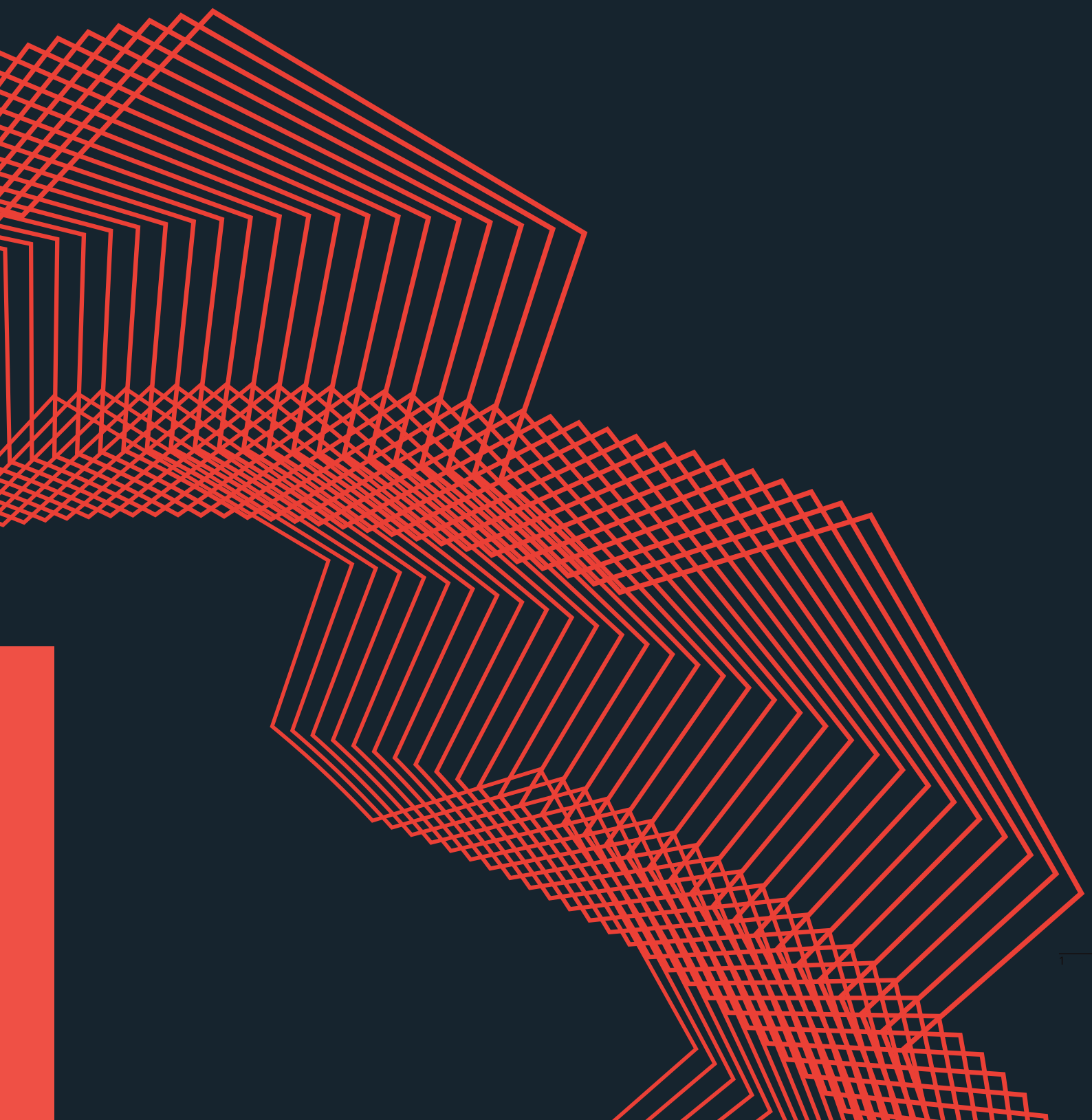
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# THE INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY IN EUROPE 2014-2016

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MAY 2019

Cardiff University Crime & Security Research Institute





Crime and Security  
Research Institute

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Sefydliad Ymchwil  
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# Summary & Key Findings



IN EUROPE 2014-2016

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This report analyses Russian information influence operations targeted at European elections and democratic events, conducted by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) between 2014-2016. The value of the evidence and insights are that, whilst considerable attention has focused upon documenting and describing IRA activities relating to the 2016 US Presidential election, their presence and impact in Europe during this period has remained relatively under-researched. Key findings include:

- ◆ An account identified by Twitter as an “IRA-linked account” appears to have been engaging in reconnaissance activities of European Parliamentary election processes in Greece in 2014. Messages sent by the operator of this account include: photographs of polling stations; images from inside polling stations of ballot boxes and pictures of ballot papers; as well as written accounts of interactions with election officials.
- ◆ During 2014 most IRA accounts were concerned with the conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea at this point in time. This appears to have been a key period in the expansion of the scale and intensity of IRA activity.
- ◆ By 2016 the number of confirmed accounts being operated by the IRA had increased significantly. Evidence of them messaging extensively in Bulgarian, Estonian, French, German, Italian, Romanian and Spanish is presented.
- ◆ Collectively, these IRA Twitter accounts were displaying high levels of interest in the American elections, but there were also significant levels of interest in a series of elections and democratic events across Europe in 2016.
- ◆ Based upon the maxim that the best guide to future behaviour is past conduct, the evidence presented suggests a strong potential for similar kinds of activities to be directed towards the 2019 European Parliamentary elections.

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# Background

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Several official U.S. Government sources have documented that the 2016 Presidential Election was the subject of an intense and sustained information influence operation conducted by the St. Petersburg based Internet Research Agency, utilising multiple tactics.<sup>1</sup> Far less is known about the IRA's interests and activities in Europe around this time. This report sets out to redress this gap in our knowledge, by providing a detailed analysis of the messaging activity of confirmed IRA Twitter accounts between 2014-16. All the data reported in this document derives from what Twitter have publicly defined as "IRA-linked accounts"<sup>2</sup>. The data associated with these accounts was made publicly available by Twitter and the United States House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence in 2018.

The analysis is framed by an understanding that, especially towards the start of this period, IRA activity in this area was relatively new and their practice was still developing. To enable a detailed dissection of the messaging techniques and tactics deployed by the IRA operatives, the discussion pivots around two principal themes:

The 2014 European Parliamentary Elections, set against a backdrop where IRA interests were gravitating around the conflict in the Ukraine and Crimea.

A series of European country-level elections and democratic events, including the Brexit Referendum, that took place in 2016.

Figure 1 presents a summary timeline of the key events and developments pertinent to the analysis presented, that are discussed in subsequent sections of this report.

This temporal sequencing clarifies how the IRA's strategy really started to take shape in the latter months of 2011 and across 2012. For these early periods, available data about IRA digital behaviours remains relatively sparse, but gets 'richer' and more comprehensive as time passes.

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<sup>1</sup> Senate Intelligence Committee Reports 2017, Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections, United States of America v. Internet Research Agency.  
<sup>2</sup> [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html)

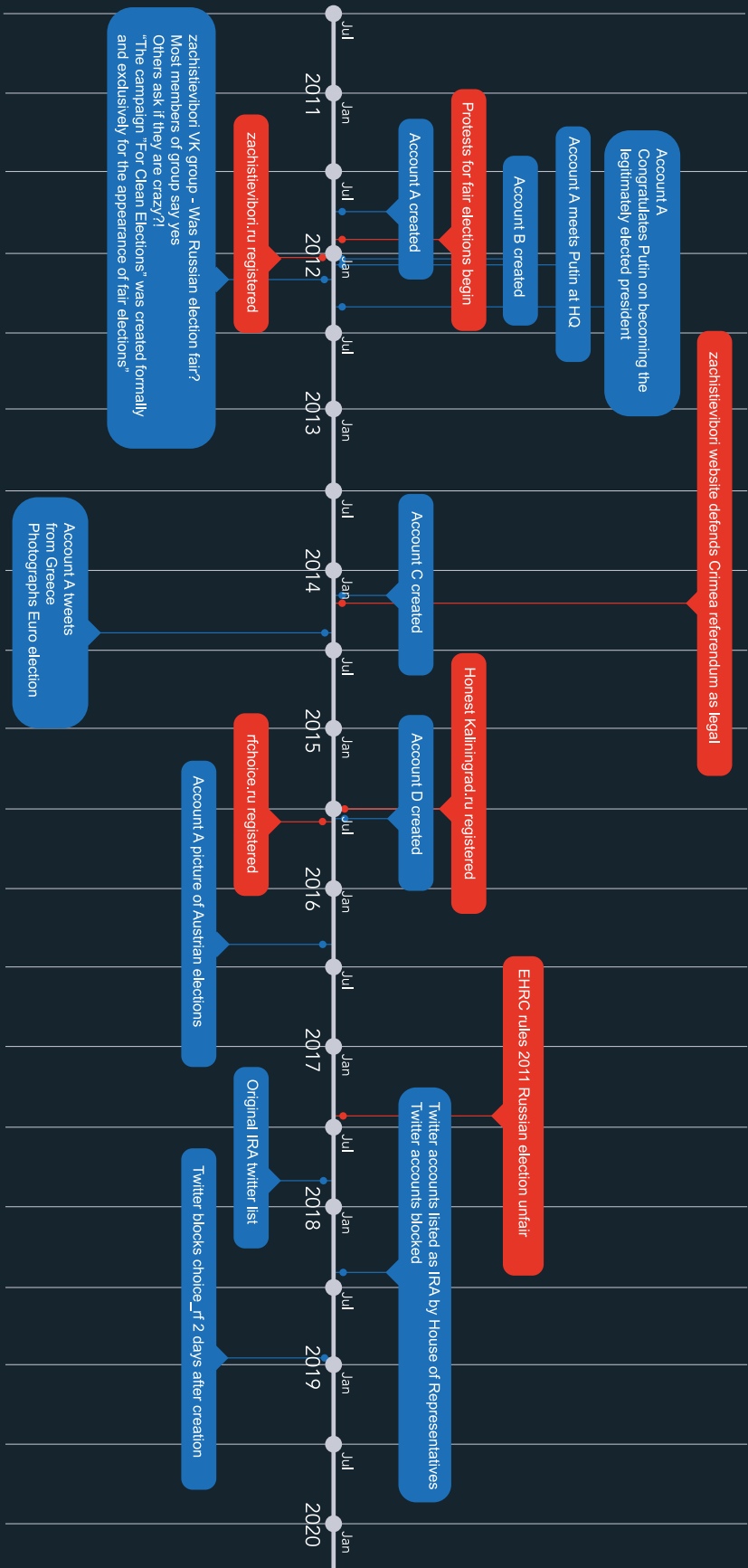


Figure 1: A timeline of key events discussed in this report

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# The 2014 European Parliamentary Elections & Ukraine

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The 2014 European Parliamentary elections were conducted between 22nd and 25th May. In an effort to identify whether there was any Russian interest in this event, the anonymised dataset of IRA accounts issued by Twitter was used to extract a corpus of 5032 tweets from 202 accounts that messaged between 21st and 26th May 2014. Nearly all these tweets contained Cyrillic, so ‘Google Translate’ was used and each tweet checked for an overt reference to the European elections. Utilising this method, 5 confirmed IRA accounts were identified as messaging about the elections, tweeting around 30 times between them. In addition to which, there was also a small number of France-facing accounts tweeting specifically around Marine Le Pen and Le Front National.

This relatively low level of interest, at least when compared with the intensity of activity reported in the US in 2016, is explained by two factors. First, 2014 was relatively early in the operationalisation of the IRA, especially in terms of non-Russian audience activities. As an organisation, the IRA was initially focused, after all, upon helping to manage public opinion in support of President Putin’s re-election bid, buttressing his power and providing internal stability. Second, for those accounts that were in existence, the clear propaganda priority in 2014 was Ukraine.

Over 20% (1022) of the tweets in our corpus contained clear references to the situation in Ukraine, often referring to Ukrainians being ‘fascists’ led by a ‘murderous junta’. These tweets were sent by 57% of the accounts examined. The IRA accounts were especially interested in the Ukrainian elections that took place on the 25th May, with 41% of the tweets mentioning ‘Ukraine’ also referencing the elections in some way. A recurring theme was that the electoral process was corrupt with candidates purchasing votes. The leading candidate Poroshenko was a particular target, with multiple messages alleging that he was a ‘stooge’ put in place by western intelligence agencies:

“

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“Corrupt elections” in Ukraine. Sell your vote now!

“

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Tired of the war all! Transnistria wants to participate in the presidential elections in Ukraine.

“

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Poroshenko doesn’t have to worry. I think he will have enough money to buy the votes of the people, if he pay the soldiers 1000 hryvnia...

“

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Petro Poroshenko promised to pay suicide volunteers, who are ready to participate in fratricide in the South-East, 1000 UAH per day.

These messages and others associated with them were part of an especially intriguing pattern of behaviour detected in 2014, pivoting around the IRA's information-influence campaign in Ukraine. This involved large numbers of new accounts being set up in a short period of time, and overall looks to have been a moment where the IRA operation expanded in scale and intensity. In particular, where previously they had been primarily focused upon Russian domestic public opinion, they were becoming increasingly externally focused. Figure 2 provides a representation of the numbers of new IRA accounts that were being established over time, together with key geo-political events of interest, as well as the volume of messages relating to specific incidents occurring in Ukraine. This captures how both the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 and the military action in Crimea were significant for the development of the Internet Research Agency.

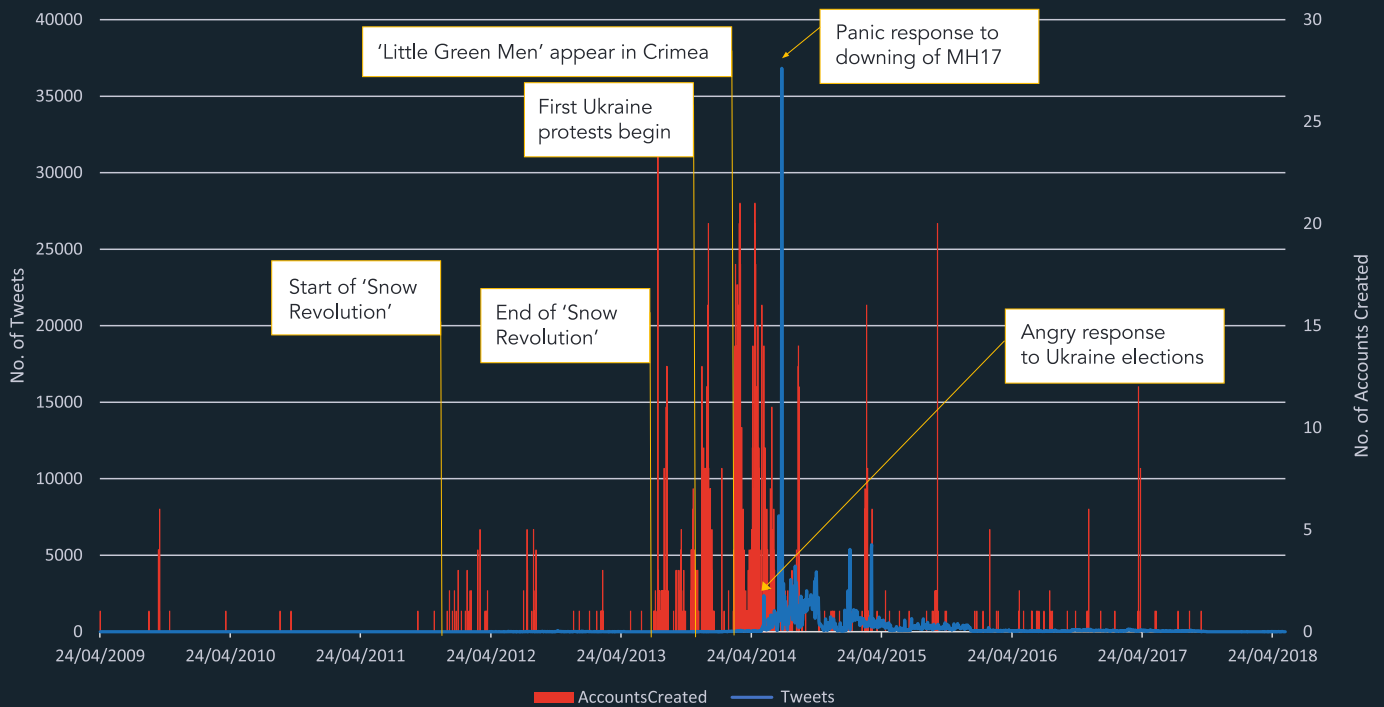


Figure 2: Graph of tweets regarding Ukraine over time

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The graph on the previous page shows the number of IRA-linked accounts created per day in orange, overlaid with the number of tweets referencing Ukraine in blue. It appears that the events in Ukraine and Crimea were foreshadowed by an expansion of the IRA's capacity and capability to operate on Twitter.

In addition to these overtly political messages and activities clearly supporting Russia's strategic interests, the IRA trolls were also engaged more subtly to try and leverage economic support for the Crimean region. For example, reflecting how the annexation process had negatively impacted Crimea's economy, the IRA accounts were messaging to persuade Russian families to holiday in Crimea. In this mode, they were accenting fantastic natural scenery and wildlife, the musical culture and the various festivals. Allied to which, they were also promoting specific Russian government policies, such as subsidised air and rail travel to Crimea, in an attempt to mitigate the sharp reduction in the number of tourists.<sup>3</sup> Examples of this and their interest in Marine Le Pen are reproduced below:

“

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Why don't you take the plane? By the way, now, everyone can afford it.) Everything that belongs to Crimea...

“

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Here you are exactly right. In general, I cannot get enough of the fact that we now have the Crimea. After all, it's just heavenly ...

“

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EU 2014. EU NEWS. Marine LE PEN calls “to be friends” with Russia!

“

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I hope Jean-Marie will become president of France, a woman should already take all these little fools under her heel))

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/25/world/europe/for-crimea-its-russian-troops-in-tourists-out.html>



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# A Case Study of Election Reconnaissance in Greece

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Amongst the 202 accounts active in 2014 that Twitter defined as “IRA-linked” that are the focus of this study, one was identified as especially interesting (Account A). During 2014, it displayed a particular interest in the European Parliamentary Election process in Greece. Taken together, the messages sent by this account suggest the operator was physically present in Greece at the time and was engaging in reconnaissance-type behaviour, sharing very detailed accounts of what they were observing with others based in Russia. This included a number of pictures inside and outside of polling stations, photographs of ballot papers and voter identification lists, as well as detailed written descriptions of the weaknesses they had discerned.



Figure 3: Pictures of Greek election buildings tweeted by Account A

*Figure 3 reproduces two pictures that the operator of this account sent of the outside of a Greek polling station and an information station where ballot papers could be obtained in 2014.*



Figure 4: Pictures tweeted by Account A

*Figure 4 provides a selection of pictures (there were others also) apparently taken inside a polling station of the ballot boxes and election papers.*

In terms of explaining this pattern of activity, it is relevant that during 2014 Greece was still in economic turmoil, and the European Parliamentary Elections were perceived by some as a referendum on whether ordinary citizens believed the governing coalition were fixing the economy. In the lead up to the vote, opinion polling was suggesting that the opposition 'Coalition of the Radical Left' had a slight lead over the ruling centre-right 'New Democracy'. In actuality, the final vote involved a 21% swing to the radical left, which in turn, eventually led to snap national elections at the start of 2015 and Syriza assuming control of the Hellenic Parliament. Accompanying the images reproduced above, were messages where the author clearly acknowledged that they should not be taking pictures, but had done so anyway. They mocked the lax security and lack of interest displayed by the Greek election observers:

“

“Observers at the polling stations did not see at all:) #Greece #elections #EuropeanParliament”

Taken together, the individual communications can be composited to construct a detailed understanding of the voting process and its potential security weak points, including how voters receive a stack of papers for different parties, and then put one in the envelope and throw the rest away. The author states that there does not appear to be a list of registered voters, instead the voter comes and shows their ID, and their data is recorded by hand. They message their followers that there is no need to sign anything.

In response to some of these messages, a second Twitter account (not classified as IRA directed and controlled by Twitter) interacts with the original author asking 'how officials protect against double voting? Do they use indelible ink?' (in some countries a voter's finger is marked with ink that cannot be removed in order to prevent them from voting again). The IRA-linked account replied that all the individuals who enter the voting station are recorded manually and no

one signs off on receiving ballots. Developing this theme, they also noted that there was no protection on the ballots/papers, and ballots can be taken anywhere. A picture was then sent by the account of this to prove the point. The operator noting that this makes these elections vulnerable to 'ballot stuffing', whereby a voter can vote multiple times simply by putting more than one ballot in the box.

In further discussion with this second Twitter account, the IRA Account Author assessed that everything was much less organised at this election when compared to Russian elections. They described it as "a complete mess", suggesting the election officials were very relaxed, they could take pictures freely (even though it is prohibited), and officials were not interested in their status or documentation at all. Two hours later Account A then tweeted:

“

“To clarify all the details went to another polling station #elections #EuropeanParliament #Greece”

This message was accompanied by a picture of a second polling station. They again took pictures from inside, showing voter information and even the lists of voter ID numbers.

Having identified that the account operator had engaged in a series of 'suspicious behaviours' a more detailed review of the account history was conducted. This revealed Account A also appears to have travelled to multiple other countries, including the US, Italy, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Israel, Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt, Hong Kong and Austria. In the latter, it tweeted three pictures of election ads for (now president) Alexander Van der Bellen.

At first glance, this behaviour appears unusual given what is thought to be known about IRA operatives and their methods, who typically do not post photographs that cannot already be found on the internet. However, it is not unprecedented. As part of his indictment of the Internet Research

Agency and 13 associated individuals, Special Counsel Mueller alleged that "certain Defendants travelled to the United States under false pretences for the purpose of collecting intelligence to inform Defendants' operations."<sup>4</sup> In 2010, the FBI revealed the presence of a Russian intelligence 'illegals' programme, a network of sleeper agents of whom the most famous was 'Anna Chapman'. She is documented as having lived in Britain before moving to the US. Another member of the ring 'Cynthia Murphy' allegedly secured employment with a 'personal friend and fundraiser' for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, before being arrested and deported.<sup>5</sup>

Relatedly, the Russian foreign agent Maria Butina started travelling to the US in 2011 under the guise of promoting her gun rights organisation 'Right to Bear Arms', later pleading guilty to conspiracy to act as an illegal foreign agent.<sup>6</sup> According to a USA Today article, Butina's tactics were different from those employed by intelligence officers. She adopted a high profile and took overt opportunities to connect Russia with policy makers in the US. She used Twitter, Facebook and Instagram in Russian and was quoted in several news publications and magazines. She appeared to be a 'spotter' who's job was to make connections with influential people and then leverage those connections at the direction of her Russian intelligence handler. These cases are salient as they suggest that having operatives 'on the ground' was a well-established element of the Russian state's modus operandi during this period.

In an attempt to better understand how this IRA-linked account operated, its interactions with other known IRA accounts in the dataset were mapped. In Figure 5 below, the account of interest (labelled A) is shown to have retweet relationships with accounts B, C and to a lesser extent account D. Account A is the linchpin in this group with only 1 retweet occurring between accounts B, C and D.

4 <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>

5 <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/356630-fbi-watched-then-acted-as-russian-spy-moved-closer-to-hillary>

6 <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2018/12/11/there-many-russian-spy-tactics-notoriety-made-butina-different/2275741002/>

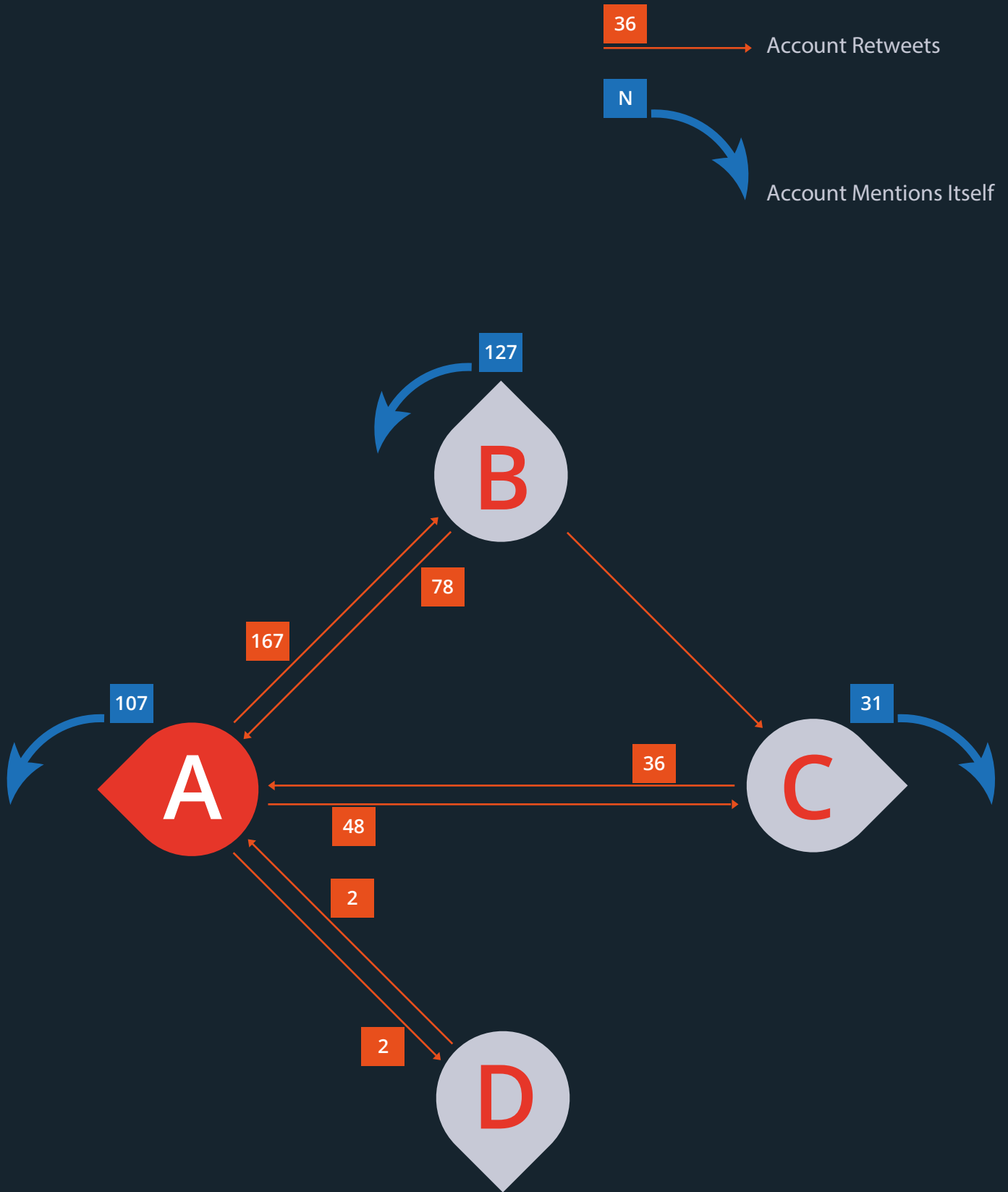


Figure 5: Showing IRA accounts that interacted with IRA account of primary interest highlighted in red

Having mapped these interactions, Account A's metadata were then examined. The account was created in October 2011, with the identity of a female lawyer, and tweeted in Cyrillic about their legal work, football and news. At the start of 2012 the account switched to become very interested in elections and tweeted that it has created a site: 'zachistyevybory.rf'. Account B utilised the display name of 'zachistievibori' and was created in January 2012. Thus, an inference can be drawn that Account A and B were both controlled by the same person. Two days later, Account A tweeted:

“

“Wow! Putin might offer us to become observers of it)))))”

This was accompanied by a link to a news article. Four days later the tweets indicate that the operator of Account A met with President Putin, enthusiastically reporting that they are set to become an 'election observer' for his party.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of interpreting this sequence of events, it is salient that in the winter of 2011 Vladimir Putin was challenged by the first major protests to his rule. Up to 100,000 people participated in a campaign calling for fair elections in the country using the slogan 'За честные выборы' (for fair elections). The website and twitter account for Account B translates to 'За чистые выборы' (for clean elections). The protests were reportedly triggered by Putin's decision to run again for President in 2012, against a backdrop where voter turnout rates had been dropping.

Seemingly posing a risk to the legitimacy of his Presidency, Putin decided to make a show of installing a new head of the Election Commission. He also stipulated an ambitious target of 65% voter turnout.

Framed in this way, it is intriguing when, just 3 weeks after these protests started, a Twitter account with a similar message (Account B) is set up by a Putin supporter (Account A) with an Account Biography reading:

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“Lawyers have joined together to protect the electoral rights of citizens in the Observer Corps #CleanElection.”

This account gathered over 5400 followers before it was banned by Twitter.

Account C also appears to have been closely associated with Account A, however with a much later creation date of March 2016. Account A was also a co-creator of 'RFchoice' a website where citizens can report election violations, or sign up to become observers. Account C is the Twitter profile of RFchoice and had over 16,000 followers before it was banned. Examining the DNS history of the RFchoice website shows that the same IP was used to host 1 other website. This was called 'Honest Kaliningrad', which was an election observer project in the 2015 Kaliningrad local elections. Account D appears to be the social media account for this website.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2011/2012/01/28\\_a\\_3977797.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/elections2011/2012/01/28_a_3977797.shtml)



In sum, what has been described is a pattern of activity that possesses the hallmarks of a reconnaissance operation devised to collect ‘intelligence’ about European Parliamentary election processes in Greece. It is pertinent that Twitter classified multiple accounts as IRA-linked, all of which are assessed as being under the direction and control of the same individual. These accounts are linked to “NGO’s” who appear to be unbiased organisations set-up to monitor elections at a national level, which provides the people working for these groups with a certain amount of credibility and authority, when in actuality they have links to Putin’s government.

That there appears to have been only limited IRA engagement with Greece and the elections to the European Parliament in 2014 is explicable by the fact that the clear strategic priority for the Russian state at this time was the situation in Ukraine. Moving into 2015 however, there was a large volume of messaging activity targeting Greece. There were in excess of 9600 tweets from IRA-linked accounts, with the main topics being the disagreements between Greece and the EU over its bailout. Multiple IRA-linked accounts pushed the narrative that Greece should turn its back on Europe and embrace Russia instead:

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RT @RT\_russian: Paul Craig Roberts:  
Cooperation with Russia will save Greece  
from the “capture” of the West

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# European Democratic Events in 2016

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**Based upon the material contained within Twitter’s classification of IRA linked accounts, by 2016 there were 1380 accounts that tweeted over 1.5million messages during that year.**

Coherent with aspects of the preceding analysis, when compared with levels of activity prior to 2014 this represents a significant growth in scale and the intensity of operations. Included in the Twitter data is a field that indicates the language that Twitter’s algorithm believes the tweet was composed in. Although this data is not entirely accurate, it does provide an indicator of shifts in IRA strategy.

In 2014 the IRA sent nearly 2 million tweets in Russian, but by 2016 this number had fallen to less than half a million. Figure 6 shows how English had become the predominant language used by 2016, with the IRA also exploring the use of German and Arabic, among other languages.

Table 1 opposite presents these data in a different format, just to evidence the range of both European and non-European languages the IRA-linked accounts were working in. This range implies an interest in a diverse array of political events occurring across a number of European Union and non-European countries.

TWEETS BY KEY LANGUAGES OVER TIME			
Language	2014	2015	2016
Arabic	33	23445	11179
Bulgarian	28393	17092	3483
English	368636	1056750	834305
Estonian	485	3590	991
French	686	4293	4068
German	418	4396	14648
Italian	569	1431	952
Romanian/Moldovan	313	45675	611
Russian	1813975	1847880	473123
Spanish/Castilian	1724	5204	2589
Ukrainian	38850	27968	6914

Table 1: Tweets by key languages over time

Looking at when and how the accounts were set-up allows for inferences to be drawn with regards to the motives for their creation. As has already been discussed, the ‘Snow Revolution’<sup>8</sup> was taking place in Russia between December 2011 and July 2013, and this event is believed to have been a catalyst for the IRA’s popularity with the Russian government. In the middle of 2013, when the protests were waning, the IRA started to create large numbers of English language accounts - over 400 in August alone. This is interpreted as an indicator of their strategic shift towards foreign issues and interests.

However, at the end of 2013 protests broke out in Ukraine. Events escalated quickly with: (1) ‘little green men’ (soldiers) appearing in Crimea; (2) its annexation in an illegal referendum; (3) the shooting down of flight MH17; (4) and the war in the Donbass, all occurring within six months. Figure 7 shows that over 800 new Russian speaking accounts were set up in those six months, whereas the number of English language accounts created was only half that.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011%E2%80%932013\\_Russian\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011%E2%80%932013_Russian_protests)

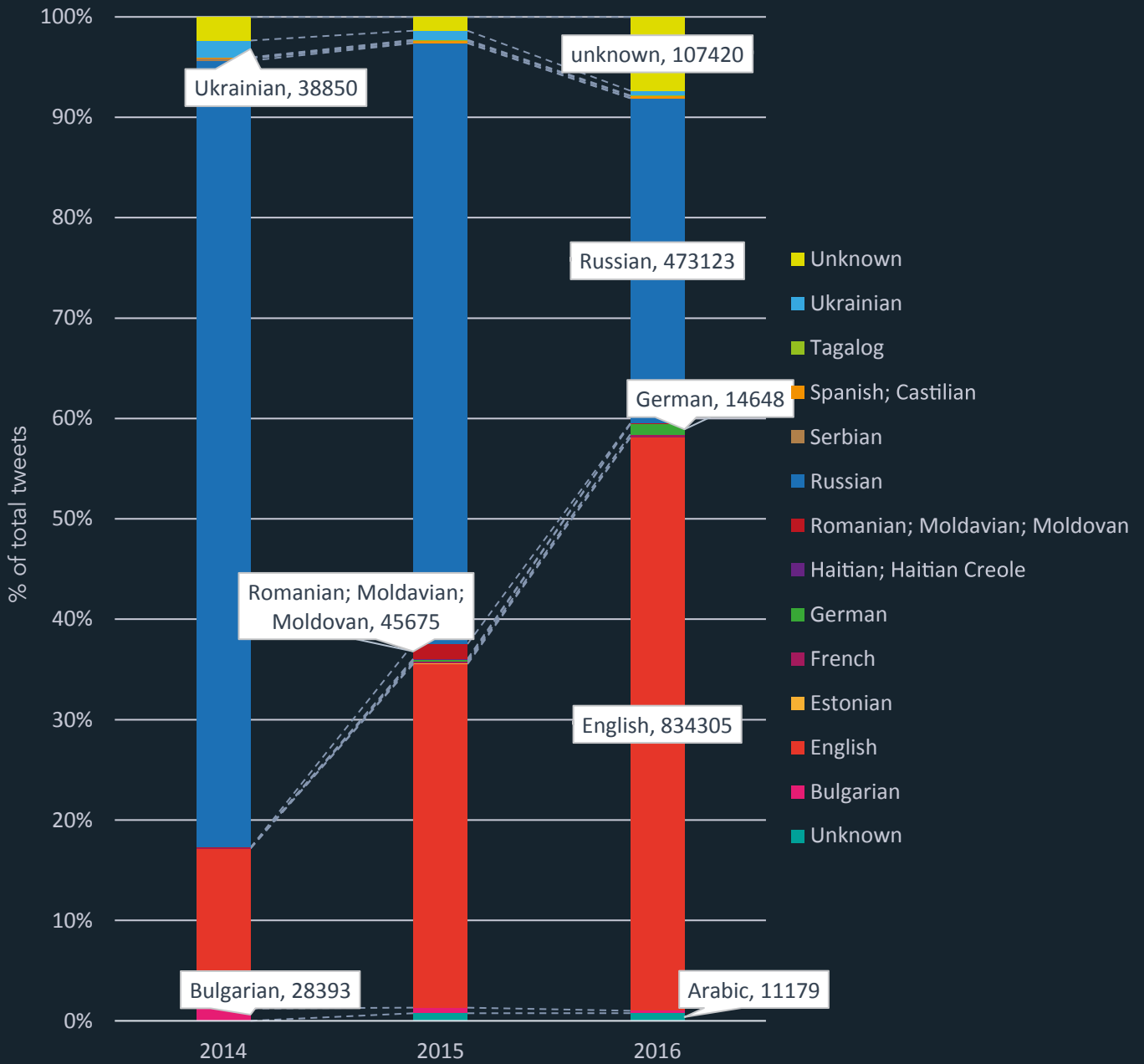


Figure 6: Tweets by language over time, shown as a percentage of all tweets

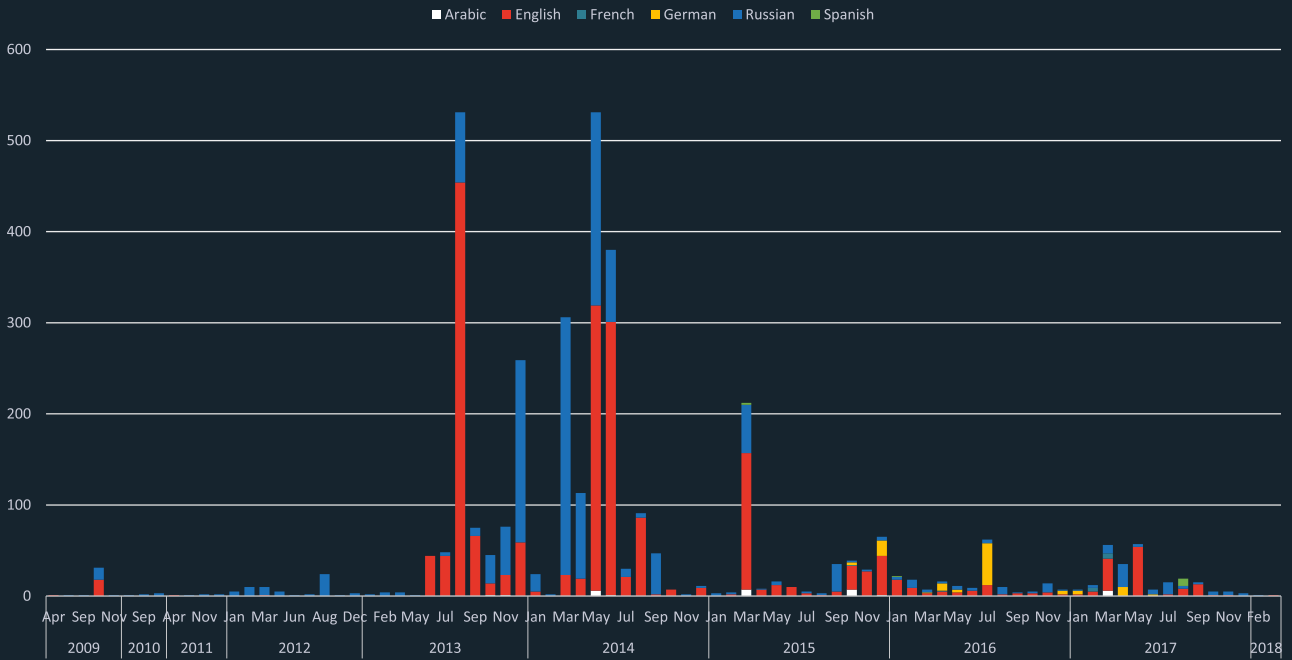


Figure 7: IRA accounts created per month

It is our assessment that such data suggest that the IRA strategy at this time had been planning to expand their focus upon manipulating Western political opinion. However, events in Ukraine during 2014 induced a need for a reactive pivot, that temporarily inhibited pursuit of this strategy. By 2016, the events in the Russian sphere of influence had stabilised sufficiently to allow the IRA to focus externally again. This shift is documented by the number of accounts that the IRA created in 2016, as displayed in Figure 8.

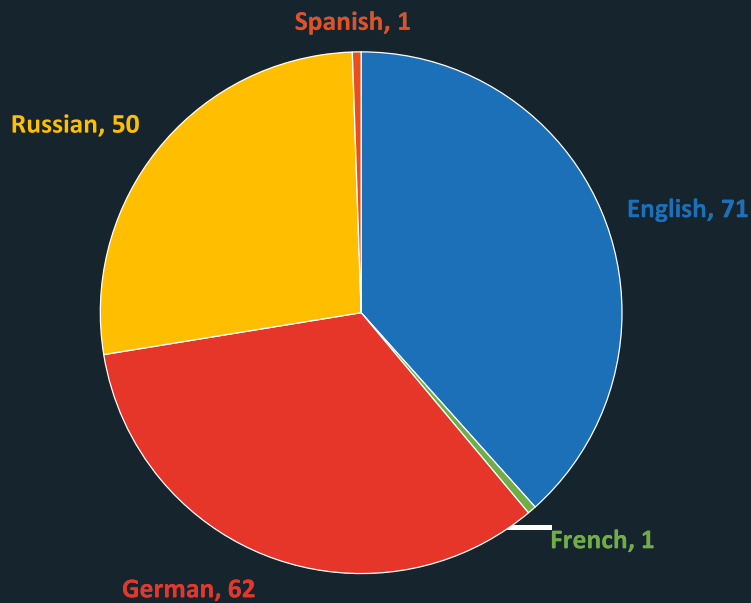


Figure 8: IRA Accounts created in 2016



A third of these new 2016 accounts were created specifically to message in German and thus influence German public perceptions. The dataset was searched for the names of leading politicians running in German elections in 2016 and tweets referencing Henkel, Müller, Meuthen, Kretschmann, Lederer and SELLER were all detected.

There were multiple key narratives being spread by the IRA accounts to influence German opinion, some of which were contradictory and designed to sow chaos. For example, IRA accounts were on both sides of the very high profile debates around Syrian Refugees and Merkel's policy stance relating to this. One narrative the IRA trolls were united around was their hatred of President Erdogan and Turkey in general, with accounts making jokes about Erdogan, accusing him of planning the refugee crises and spreading fear around Turkey joining the EU and the movement of people afterwards:

“

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As I see the #Islam .. Yes, #Merkel, does everything right to destroy #Germany and #EU # Refugees #vine #ISIS #Kretschmann

Similar narratives were detected when the dataset was searched for the names of Austrian leaders, with many tweets highlighting crimes committed by immigrants and blaming the electorate for choosing 'more murders, rapes, etc' by electing Van Der Bellen. The narratives for Italy were slightly different, with more focus on its relationship with Ukraine / Crimea and its support for blocking

sanctions against Russia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was evidence of support for the '5 Star Movement' and Salvini. Although national elections were not held in Italy that year, there was IRA support for the referendum vote, using the hashtag '#bastaunSi!'. The IRA-linked accounts also repeatedly messaged that Italy should leave the EU, scrap the Euro and quit NATO, in order to recover their sovereignty.

In sum, multiple previous studies and reports have demonstrated that the IRA were highly active in 2016 sowing discord in US politics. The evidence reported herein shows that IRA operators were also performing information influence operations designed to advance Russian interests in the European theatre.

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## Implications

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**If the best predictor of likely future conduct is past behaviour, then this analysis has documented a sustained and wide-ranging interest in European political elections and democratic events on the part of social media accounts covertly run on behalf of the Kremlin. In the run up to the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, the analysis has presented evidence on the nature of the risks and threats presented to the integrity of the democratic process.**

The 2014 case study implies an attempt to collect and share information about a range of weaknesses identified with the security and integrity of election procedures in one country. In the hands of actors with malign intent, it is clear how this could be used to subvert and interfere with the voting process. This has been supplemented and augmented by evidence of growing interest in European democratic institutions and practices amongst Russian backed social media accounts.

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