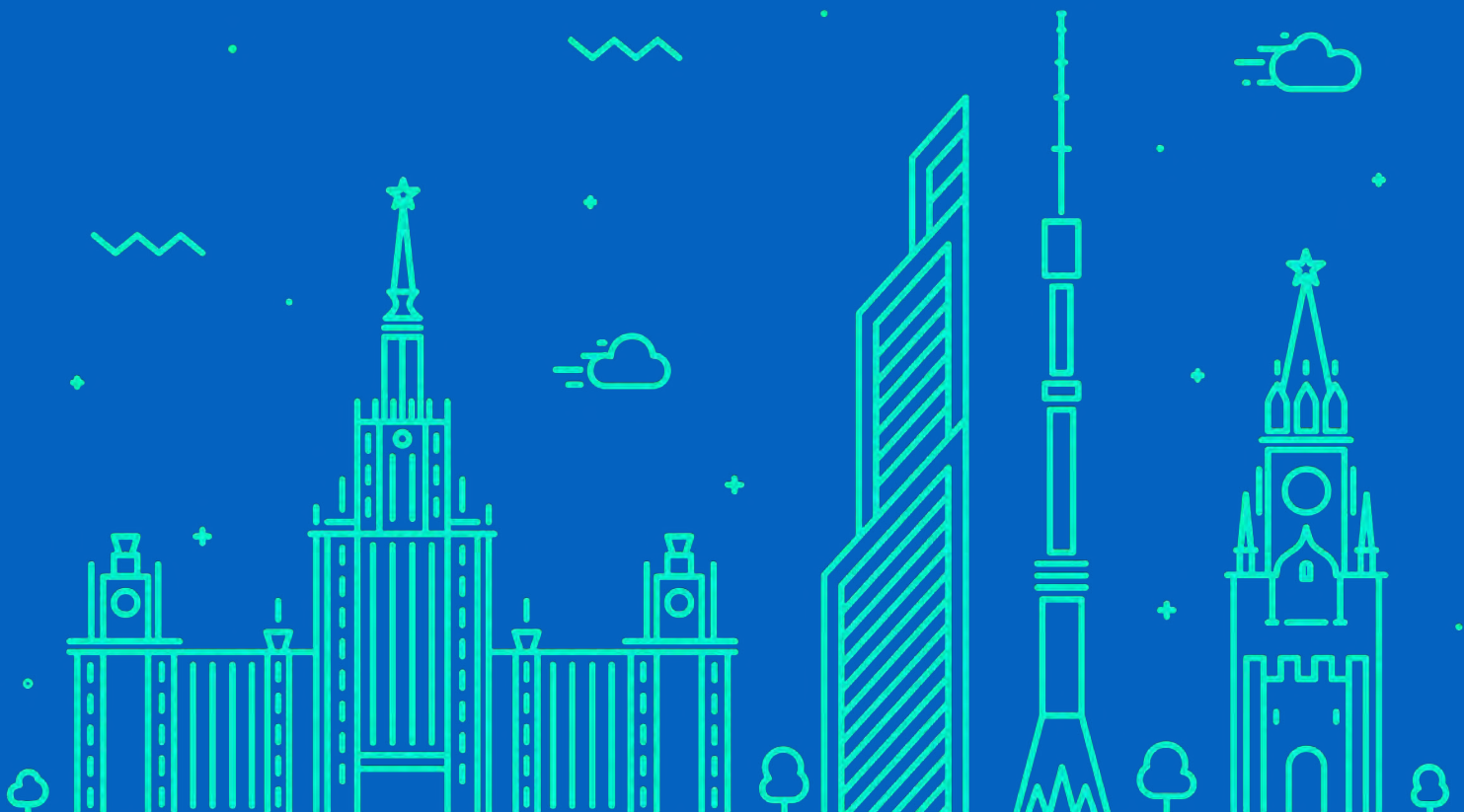# How a Kremlin-Linked Influence Operation is Systematically Manipulating Western Media to Construct & Communicate Disinformation

PART 1

DETECTION REPORT

September 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the process of researching mounting tensions between Ukraine and Russia in April 2021, OSCAR researchers detected signals and traces of a **major influence operation**. The multi-dimensional methodology for this operation appears designed to deliver **pro-Kremlin ideas and positions into the media** in response to stories connected to Russia's geopolitical interests. These are then remediated in Russian media to present a deliberately distorted picture of Western public opinion. Developing the initial data, our analysis and assessment is:

● There has been **systematic and wide-ranging infiltration** of a large number of high-profile **Western media sources** by pro-Kremlin trolling (PKT). Accounts are using the 'reader comments' function on the media outlets' websites to **post provocative pro-Russian / anti-Western statements** in reaction to stories of relevance to Russia. Often these are placed early in the conversational thread to 'frame and prime' the subsequent interactions on a story.

● Elements of the influence operation methodology have been detected in relation to more than: **32 media outlets; located in 16 countries**; engaging with 242 mainstream media stories published between February and mid-April 2021. Publications repeatedly targeted by this influence operation are: UK sources, the **Daily Mail; Daily Express and The Times**; America's **Fox News and Washington Post**; **Le Figaro** in France; **Der Spiegel and Die Welt** in Germany; and Italy's **La Stampa**.

● There is a history of Russian trolls targeting Western media outlets, but there are several indicators that this activity may have been 'stepped up' from 2018-19 onwards. It is **the international scale of a single operation**, using the same defined methodology, that marks the ongoing 'live' campaign as especially significant.

● The PKT operators obfuscate their activity by easily switching between personas and identities on the comment pages, which is something the technology enables. Penetration testing of the sign-up processes associated with these reader comment pages across multiple media outlets in different countries, revealed a **lack of security measures to prevent, deter or detect** foreign state operators from seeking to act in the ways outlined.

● Significant amplification of the PKT comments is achieved through a **'full-spectrum' media** approach engaging: Russian state-owned media outlets, such as Ria Novosti; multiple non-state Kremlin aligned propaganda and disinformation media outlets associated with the **Patriot Media Group, owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin**; additional similar disinformation fringe media websites, including **FSB-linked News Front**; and social media accounts and pages across all the principal platforms.

● A central role is performed by the web media aggregator service **inoSMI.ru**, which **systematically distorts and misrepresents Western public opinion 'at scale'** around key media narratives of interest. This is accomplished by constructing 'reader comments stories' pivoting around the PKT comments posted on the websites of Western media outlets.

● Targeted at **Russian language audiences**, these stories over-claim dissent and dissensus in Western public opinion by very selectively highlighting a small minority of comments to suggest support for Russia or Putin, and/or disagreement with Western governments' positions amongst their citizens. These stories are then disseminated in Russia, but also circulate amongst Russian speaking audience segments in **Central and Eastern Europe.** We note **Bulgaria** features especially prominently.

- Using headlines such as "*Readers of Der Spiegel Mail think...*" and "*Daily Mail readers say...*" the influence operation methodology 'hi-jacks' the **Western media brands' reputations to present them as credible messengers** for the sentiments and positions that are being communicated as mainstream public opinion. Without co-opting the Western media outlets' reputations in this manner, the stories would appear far less plausible.

- Limited evidence of a '**feedback loop**' effect has also been found, whereby the stories are also **targeted towards Western audiences**, using fringe media and websites specializing in propaganda and disinformation.

- The analysis reported herein centres on the recent tensions around Crimea and Donbas, but there is clear evidence that this methodology has been used on other topics.

We label the methodology underpinning this influence effort a '**Triple Influence Vector Operation' (TIVO)**, reflecting how it is organized around three main influence vectors (IV), as shown below:

IV 1

Pro-Kremlin Trolling (PKTs

Targeted at the comment pages of Western mainstream media publications. Pro-Russian trolls post multiple provocative comments in reaction to stories on the media organisation's website. Typically, these denigrate Western countries and institutions, and/or promote Russia's position.

IV 2

Publication

Of stories based upon the trolling comments in mainstream Russian press outlets, directed towards Russian language speakers. These stories 'spin' the overall tenor and tone of reactions to suggest dissent and disagreement in Western public opinion. For example, the stories will have headlines following a formula such as: "Readers of the Daily Mail think x" or "Italians are worried about y", thereby casting the media outlets as credible messengers. A key role is played here by the web aggregator service 'inoSMI.-ru', which is directly connected to the Russia Today network, specifically Ria Novosti.

IV 3

Amplification

Through cross-platform social media assets and a network of 'fringe' websites specializing in propaganda and disinformation. This likely serves to increase awareness of the stories being published by Russian press associated with IV2, but also channels the narratives to wider audience segments who engage less with mainstream media.

Analysis of these three blended, overlapping and interacting influence vectors has a 'prismatic' quality. To understand their functions in the influence process, each is partially separated out and subjected to detailed high-resolution investigation.

The figure below shows a sample of inoSMI headlines published in March - April 2021 designed to promote Russia and undermine Western responses to the military tensions in Ukraine.
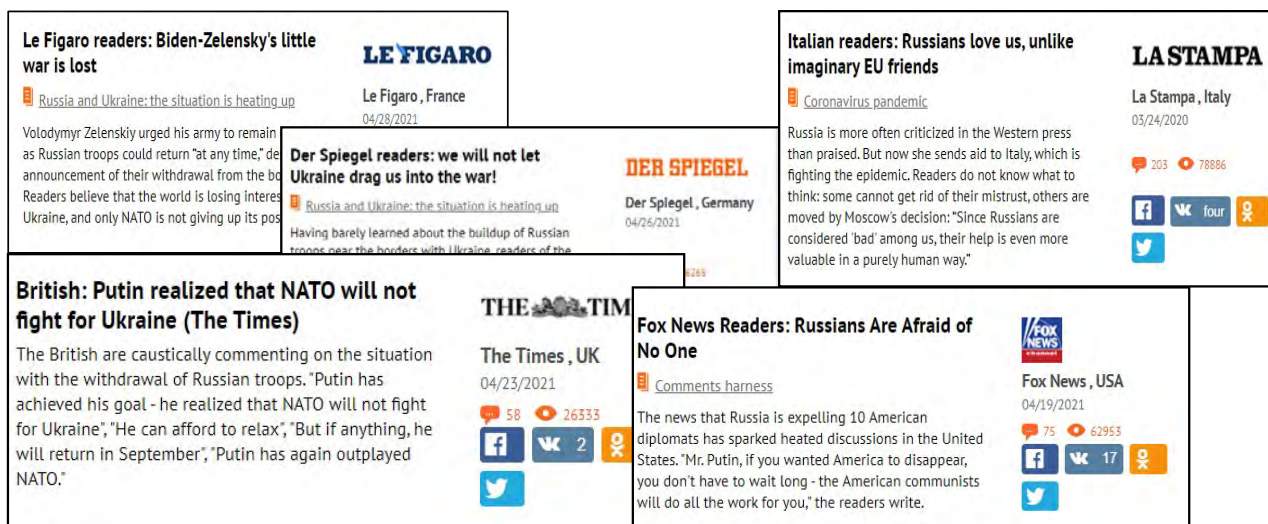
A key question concerns the authenticity of the trolls posting the original provocative comments and the extent to which their activity is organic, or deliberately manufactured by employees with links to the Russian state. One of the **strengths of the operational methodology is that any such attribution is very hard** on the basis of publicly available open source information. We do not know if there is material in the 'back-end' of the media organisations' websites that would allow for reliable identification of inauthentic co-ordinated activity targeting them by actors, potentially using VPNs, who are 'surveillance aware'.

Accordingly, the available evidence is interpreted as indicative of a **Russian state operation** rather than something that can be fully confirmed. Applying **data science pattern recognition and detection technique**s to the commenting data illuminated a series of unusual behaviours associated with the accounts posting the pro-Kremlin content. These **multiple inauthenticity and co-ordination signals**, although individually relatively 'weak', when aggregated together, suggest that the commenting activity may be orchestrated:

● Having posted provocative pro-Kremlin content, on a number of occasions accounts were challenged and 'called out' by other users for being 'Russian trolls'. In **17 out of 20 cases** sampled where this occurred on the Daily Mail website, the allegation was totally ignored, and **no response** provided. Not reacting in this way ensured the visibility of the allegation was not inflated and the accounts concerned simply carried on with their previous pattern of activity.

● Some of the commenting platforms allow other users to vote on posts. Pro-Kremlin comments repeatedly received an **unusually high number and proportion of 'up-votes'** when compared with typical messages by 'normal' users (see Figure below), and more than might be expected given how the comments do not align with the views and values of the readership of the media outlet on whose website they were posted. Were 'up-voting' to be manipulated by Kremlin-aligned accounts, the visibility and apparent popularity of the sentiments expressed becomes more prominent on the media website. We strongly suspect an element of co-ordination and orchestration, not least because

inoSMI had a bias towards selecting the most voted on PKT comments into its articles on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

● Detailed forensic behavioural analysis of account profiles posting pro-Kremlin comments identifies that some of these users are **repeatedly changing their personas and locations**; one PKT account of interest had 69 location changes and 549 changes of name since its creation in June last year.

● Accounts posting pro-Kremlin content were, on average, found to engage in slightly less replying and interacting behaviour than 'normal' users.

Data illustrative of the point made above about artificial inflation of the numbers of 'up-votes' is visualized in the Figure below. Based upon a Daily Mail article the votes received by three different sets of commenting accounts are depicted: grey are the 'normal user' accounts who posted on the story; red are those subsequently included in the inoSMI version of the story, posting on topics related to Russia and/or Ukraine / and/or anti-West themes; the blue datapoints also commented about these topics, but did not feature in subsequent inoSMI reportage.

Daily Mail: Article 2
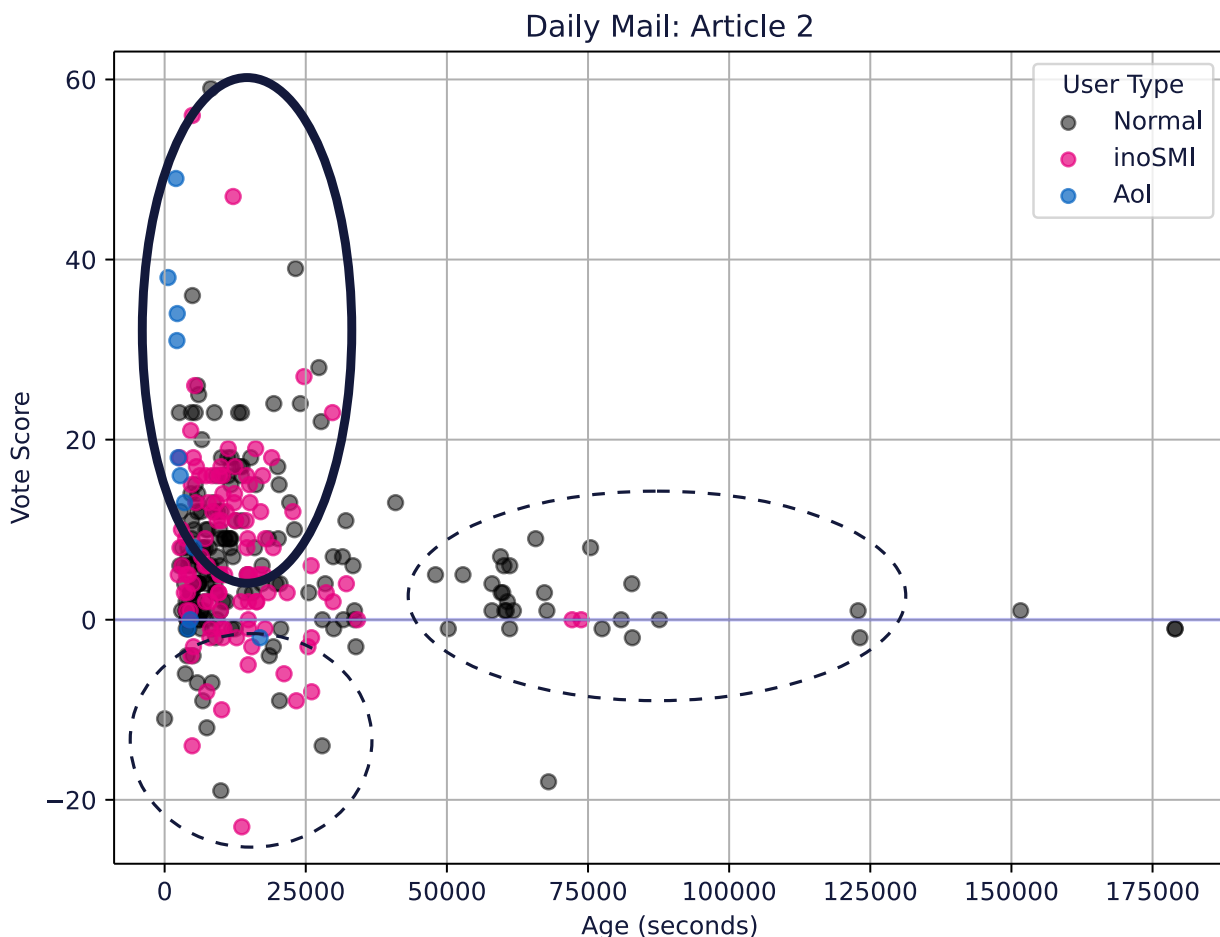
Several insights can be distilled from displaying these data in this way. First those accounts below the 0 line are comments receiving 'down votes', which is what might be expected for posts on these themes in a right-of-centre publication. There are a mix of inoSMI and cited and normal users here. Also evident, distributed across to the right-hand side of the graph, is a 'long tail' of normal user accounts. This can be read as suggesting that 'normal users' typically need a longer period of time to acquire votes than do those that are the focal interest of the present analysis. Finally, it is clear that the accounts posting comments about Russia, Ukraine and anti-Western themes are over-represented towards the top of the graph, indicating they have been recipients of more 'up votes.' It is an overall pattern of distribution that can be interpreted as suggesting co-ordination is present.

There are stronger signals of co-ordination and Russian state involvement in how these trolling comments are systematically monitored and used 'downstream' in the influence process, when being remediated by other media outlets at IV 2 and 3. There is:

- **Co-ordination between Russian state-owned media and outlets linked to the non-state Patriot Media Group**. They are all observing and drawing upon the reader comments posted on Western websites to provide cross-platform reactions to the same stories by expressing similar interpretations and sentiments.

- There are also traces of coordination across Patriot Media Group outlets. In one instance, four of its websites published almost identical responses to a story appearing in Der Spiegel, within fifty minutes of each other.

Informed by the available evidence, it is assessed that some of the pro-Kremlin / anti-West comments are organic, and others are planted as part of a deliberate influence operation. There are particular advantages to using organic comments 'downstream' in the remediation process.

At present it is difficult to make a meaningful assessment about any impacts that may be attributed to this operation. A significant proportion of it is directed towards influencing public opinion amongst sizeable Russian language speaking audiences. InoSMI alone had 16M visits to its website in the last six months, this figure is 127M for Ria Novosti. However, at this time we confine ourselves to commenting that co-opting multiple international media assets in this way clearly has potential for **extensive audience reach and engagement**. Our focus in this report is to outline how the influence operation is organized, and to map its scope and scale – which are significant.

The complete analysis is organized in two parts:

- This Part 1 'Detection Report' describes how the operation was detected and its principal operating components.

- The Part 2 'Development Report' extends and elaborates the analysis, providing more detailed accounts of specific cases and episodes, and will be published in due course.
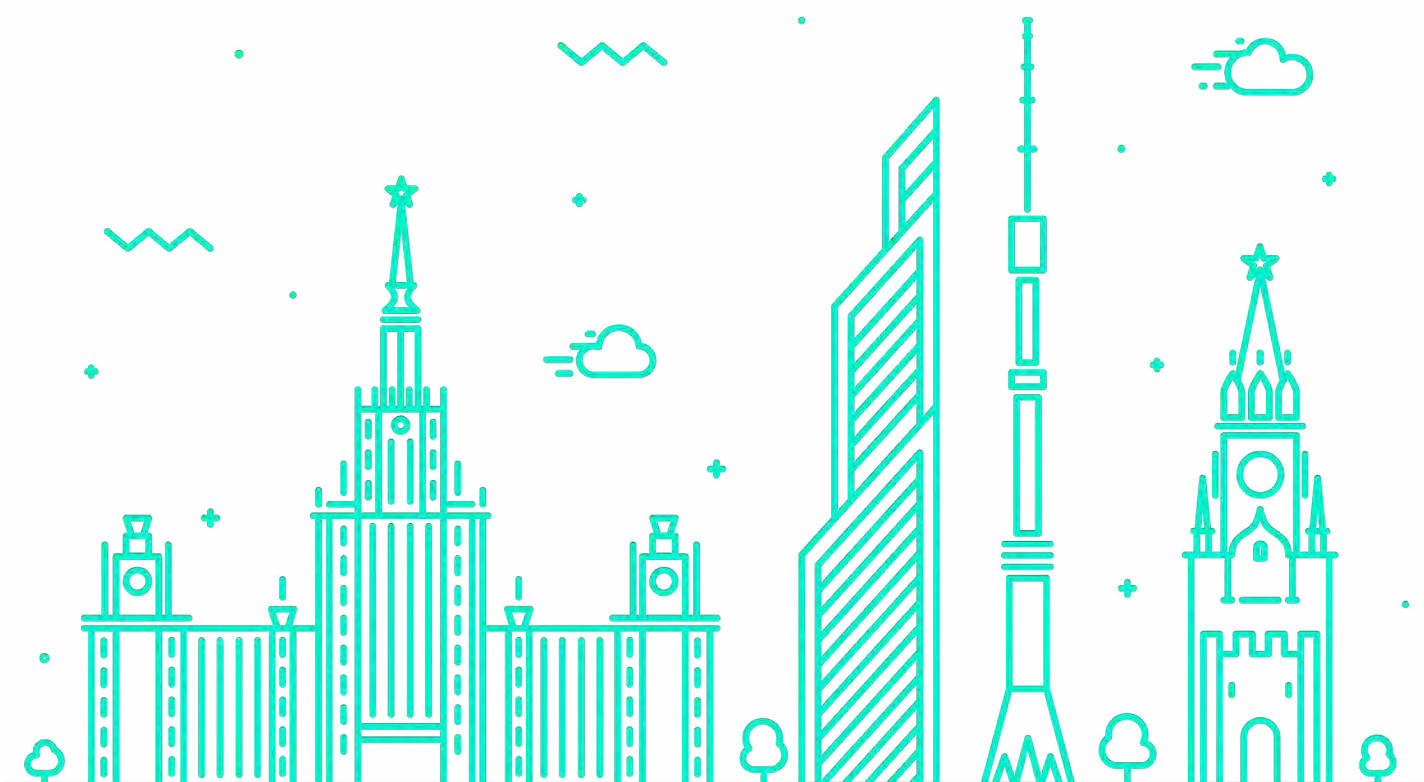
INTRODUCTION

This report uses publicly available 'open source' data to document an innovative and extensive Russian state linked influence operation, that disseminates disinformation and propaganda by manipulating the functions of Western media outlets, and then amplifying these messages via multiple media and social media assets. Much of the analysis centres upon how this influence operation has been deployed in respect of the recent military tensions between Russia and Ukraine. The situation in Eastern Ukraine in April 2021 saw an increase in disinformation and propaganda messaging that rendered the component parts of the influencing methodology more visible, and thus detectable. However, there is evidence that it pre-dates this confrontation, and has been deployed across a much wider range of issues and topics. In the subsequent 'Part 2' companion report, the initial themes set out here are developed through additional more detailed empirical analyses, focusing upon further cases and episodes associated with the influence operation methodology.

At the outset and to frame subsequent elements of the discussion, the following features are highlighted as especially important:

- Analysis of comments made on the targeted media articles published by Western outlets suggests systematic infiltration, manipulation and surveillance of the functionality of the websites of a large number of high-profile Western media outlets.

- Amongst the sites where this pattern of activity has been detected are the Daily Mail, Daily Express, Fox News, the Times, Washington Post, Der Spiegel and Le Figaro.

- The web interfaces enable pro-Kremlin trolling (PKT) accounts to quickly and easily establish fake personas on these sites, posting provocative and highly partisan reader comments in reaction to stories related to Russia's geopolitical interests.

- Often these comments are placed early in the conversational thread to 'frame and prime' the subsequent sequence of interactions. There is some suggestion of co-ordinated activity to boost the apparent popularity of these comments on the sites.

- The PKT accounts are able to partially obfuscate their activity by easily switching between personas and identities on the comment pages, which again is something the technology serving these online media enables. There are no apparent security measures in place to prevent, deter or detect foreign state operators from seeking to manipulate the Western media outlets in the ways outlined.

- The comments are used as source material for stories published in Russian state-owned media such as Ria Novosti. The stories are presented to variously suggest support for Putin and Russia in Western populations, and/or tensions and a lack of consensus between Western nations. A key role in this remediation process is performed by the aggregator service inoSMI.ru.

- Significant amplification of the PKT comments is achieved through a 'full-spectrum' media approach that involves: Russian state-owned media outlets, such as Ria Novosti; multiple non-state but Kremlin linked propaganda and disinformation media outlets associated with the Patriot Media Group owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin; additional similar disinformation fringe media websites that have been connected to the Russian FSB, including News Front; social media accounts and pages across all the principal platforms.

- In terms of scope and reach, this represents a major, multi-dimensional influence operations. Although unlikely to be a complete list we have linked the methodology to at least 32 media outlets, in 16 countries, but fully expect it to be more widespread in its use than this.

The remainder of the report is organized as follows:

Section 1 – defines some key terms that structure and inform the analysis and assessment, and using a case study, provides an outline of how the influence operation methodology works as a process.

Section 2 – provides a 'high resolution' account of the trolling activity, focusing upon the patterns of behaviour that suggest this is not an organic activity, but following a playbook.

Section 3 – focuses upon the role of inoSMI in translating the troll comments into material that can be remediated by outlets such as Ria Novosti, to influence the perceptions and opinions of a much larger Russian language audience.

Section 4 – examines the amplification activity performed by the Patriot Media Group and a range of other web and social media assets. Importantly, it is identified that the fringe media outlets are both boosting the content from inoSMI, but also doing their own similar version of the methodology. This aspect of the analysis also evidences limited instances of a 'feedback loop', with the content being directed at English and other Western language audiences via outlets such as News Front and TheDuran.com.

Section 5 – summarizes the key themes and implications.

SECTION 1: THE INFLUENCE PROCESS & DEFINITION OF TERMS

Following the discovery of the St Petersburg based Internet Research Agency's (IRA) attempts to influence the 2016 US Presidential election using a network of fake social media accounts, there has been a significant investment of analytic effort into understanding how social media can be manipulated to communicate distorting and deceptive political messages.[1] However, it is important to remember that such attempts to construct and communicate disinforming messages are not confined to social media. Evidence documents that as well as developing their social media activities, IRA operators were also posting comments on websites and blogs to influence public perceptions and political decision-making, from at least 2014 onwards. Also pertinent to what follows is that, prior to the 2014 conflict in Crimea, the mission of the IRA was oriented to domestic public opinion 'management'.

That year, editors for The Guardian newspaper in the UK noted a large quantity of pro-Kremlin trolling on their Ukraine coverage appearing in the comments section of its news site.[2] Their former Moscow correspondent observed how the trolls were using "talking points" and repeated certain phrases and tropes. Moderators believed this was part of an orchestrated campaign, but conceded there was no

1   See for example: Benkler, Y., Faris, R., and Roberts, H. (2018) Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics. New York: Oxford University Press; Dawson, A. and Innes, M. (2019) "How Russia's Internet Research Agency built its disinformation campaign", Political Quarterly, 90/2: 245-56; Jamieson, K. (2018) Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President. New York: Oxford University Press.

2   Elliot, C. (2014, May 04) The readers' editor on... pro-Russia trolling below the line on Ukraine stories

conclusive evidence about who was behind the trolling, despite looking at the start date of these user accounts and the timing of their posts. Other UK outlets named as targets at this time were The Independent and the Evening Standard. Relatedly, a NATO Strategic Communications (StratCom) Centre of Excellence (COE) study of trolling behaviour systematically examined the comments sections of thousands of articles relating to the crises in Crimea and Ukraine between April and December 2014.[3] The analysis found the trolls used a three-step process of: luring; taking the bait; and hauling in. One troll would post a controversial, topical comment to capture readers' attention, trying to provoke them to respond. The trolls would then wait for someone to oppose them, sometimes having to engage with the original post by clumsy opposition or exaggerated agreement to provoke the involvement of a non-troll. At this point, the trolls moved to the third phase of the operation and "haul in," deviating from the content of the article and instead commenting on selected statements to make the discussion antagonistic, and creating the impression of a discussion, expressing 'differing' views on the Ukrainian–Russian conflict.

This is an important backdrop to the influence operation methodology outlined below. It is our hypothesis that following events in 2016 and especially the mass de-platforming interventions undertaken by the major social media platforms against IRA linked accounts, and their increased effectiveness in detecting co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour, disinformation authors and amplifiers have been seeking other vulnerabilities and weak points in the media ecosystem to exploit. The evidence reported herein suggests they have found just such a weak point on websites where media organizations encourage readers to react to and comment on the stories they publish. To put it another way, as the opportunity costs for operating on major social media for the Kremlin linked trolls has increased, they have invested more of their attention and activities towards websites. This represents a clever and effective adaptation, because the strength of such strategies and tactics is that website-based activities are hard to attribute and can easily be replicated across country contexts. Moreover, because of how the reader comments function on the media websites are designed, there are few security measures to inhibit them. Additionally, all users are easily able to switch their identities and personas before posting a comment, meaning a single user could author large numbers of comments, all appearing to come from different users.

At this juncture, it is important to clarify some key terms. We define the activities as an influence operation on the grounds that it appears designed to shape public perceptions and opinions. In so doing, the analysis accents two striking innovations. First, it operates across the full spectrum of media including mainstream press and broadcast outlets, more 'fringe' websites with a reputation for disinforming and propagandistic content, as well as cross-platform amplification by harnessing multiple social media assets. Second, the methodology is designed to target multiple audiences simultaneously, including Western and Russian language speakers.

Because of the challenges with attribution highlighted above, throughout this report we use the phrase 'pro-Kremlin trolling' (PKT) to describe the behaviour and content centred by the analysis. This captures how the accounts concerned are engaging in trolling type behaviour and posting content that is clearly 'pro-Kremlin' and aligned with Russian state interests. What we are not able to do, based upon the purely 'open source' data available, is to confidently claim that these activities are under the direction and control of the Kremlin.

Equally however, the PKT behaviour does not appear to be purely 'organic'. There are multiple signals in the data suggesting patterns of behaviour that would not be expected amongst 'normal users.' Some of these patterns can be discerned by looking at the behaviour over time of individual users, or on a single platform. Others can be discerned only by looking across multiple international platforms, where recurring sequences of activity can be observed that would be remarkable if they were occurring purely by chance and in an uncoordinated way. Further suspicions are raised by how these comments are being systematically picked up and boosted as 'raw material' for stories published by a range of Russian state and non-state media outlets. That said, some of the pro-Kremlin posts in reaction to media stories are probably authentic and represent the viewpoints of genuine users. Consequently, in all likelihood, there is a blend of authentic and inauthentic activity occurring.

3   Schwed, R. (2016) Framing of the Ukraine–Russia Conflict in Online and Social Media. NATO StratCom.

In terms of how the attempt to leverage influence over public perceptions and opinions is organised and operationalised, there are three principal components to the methodology. These can be summarised as follows:

- **IV1: Trolling** targeted at the comment pages of specific Western mainstream media publications. Pro-Russian trolls post multiple provocative comments in reaction to stories on the media organisation's website. Typically, these denigrate Western countries and institutions, and/or promote Russian equivalents. The objective appears to be to influence the conversation on the article or social issue concerned.

- **IV2: Publication** of stories based upon the trolling comments in mainstream Russian press outlets, directed towards Russian language speakers. For example, the stories will have headlines following a formula such as: "Readers of the Daily Mail think x" or "The UK public is worried about y". A key role is played here by the web aggregator service 'inoSMI.ru', which is directly connected to the Russia Today network, specifically Ria Novosti.

- **IV3: Amplification** through cross-platform social media assets and a network of 'fringe' websites specializing in propaganda and disinformation. This likely serves to increase awareness of the stories being published by Russian press associated with IV2, but also channels the narratives to wider audience segments who engage less with mainstream media. The analysis highlights the role being played by the Patriot Media Group and News Front.

The nature and functions of each of these components can be briefly illustrated by reference to some of the empirical data collected.

- On 01/04/21 the Daily Mail published a story with the headline: '*US declares its 'unwavering' support for Ukraine with Russia flooding Crimea with trains full of tanks amid escalating tensions*'[4]. In the first 48 hours following publication it generated 897 comments from readers. Most of these were aligned with the stance adopted in the story and the general positions one would expect to see from the readers of a right-of-centre newspaper. However, several comments stood out because they clearly adopted a contrarian position:

These three comments were subsequently included in a story published on inoSMI.ru on 02/04/21 headlined: "*Readers of the Daily Mail about the "unshakable" support of the United States of Ukraine: what is the United States stirring up in Ukraine that we do not know?*"[5]. This deliberately distorts the general tenor and tone of the reader comments to the original Daily Mail story, by selectively focusing upon a minority of them. Next day, Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti ran the story "*Daily Mail readers ridiculed US willingness to support Ukraine*"[6], that rapidly achieved over 33K views. The same three quotes were emphasised, providing for consistency of messaging together with a fourth: "Joe will start a war with the Russians to divert attention from the crisis on the border in 3…2…1 concludes [C.A]."

4   https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9427633/US-declares-unwavering-support-Ukraine-amid-Russian-escalations.html
5   https://inosmi.ru/politic/20210402/249479225.html
6   https://ria.ru/20210403/podderzhka-1604057537.html

This story derived from the Daily Mail, featured on the Yandex news aggregator site, with versions of it identified on at least 17 other news outlets including Radio Sputnik, Tsargrad TV and REN TV. Featured outlets had in common majority readership in the Russian Federation and whilst most were written in Russian, Sputnik portals in Lithuania and Vietnam remediated the article in these languages.

Subsequent investigation has revealed this is a recurring pattern across a large number of Western media outlets, in a number of countries. When a high profile story is published in media outlets that is contrary to the Russian state's geopolitical interests and positions, it will attract comments purporting to be from 'readers' of the publication, who either attack the story's basis, seek to denigrate Western institutions more generally, or promote support for President Putin and/or Russian state institutions. Such reader comments are somewhat anomalous because expressing strong support for Putin and/or the Kremlin is often not the position that would be expected for readers of that publication.

In and of itself, this pattern would be interesting, albeit not entirely unexpected. These media websites are systematically vulnerable to being manipulated in this way because there are no apparent security measures to deter, prevent or detect such behaviour by foreign state operatives. However, this is not the end of the influence process. A sizeable proportion of these pro-Russia / pro-Putin/ anti-West comments are being picked up and used as the basis for stories in the Russian language, published by Russian state-owned media outlets such as Ria Novosti. Significant in this step is how the comments are selectively used and highlighted to 'distort' the appearance of the overall tenor and tone of Western public opinion. Typically, these stories seek to convey that public opinion does not necessarily support the government's official position, or that there are fractures and fissures in opinion often between the citizens of different countries.

The ways that these stories are being 'spun' is illuminated by briefly reviewing a sample of the April headlines from UK stories published by inoSMI about the tensions in Eastern Ukraine. They all pivot around readers comments posted in response to stories originally appearing in the Daily Mail to represent British public opinion.

Readers of the Daily Mail about the "unshakable" support of Ukraine to the United States: what is the United States stirring up in Ukraine that we do not know?

Putin is the most powerful man on the planet, China is the most powerful country. And Biden... just Biden.

British comments: I would prefer not to fight with Russia over Ukraine ...

Ukraine will drag the West into a new world war.

British readers: teasing a Russian bear is not the best policy

All this will end badly for the Ukrainians. The Crimean side will do everything in its power to provoke clashes and incite confrontation with Russia. Ukraine should not count on empty promises and senseless Western sanctions. Ukrainians need to find a way to reduce tensions and work with Russia.

Daily Mail (Great Britain): the crisis in Ukraine is "one step away from war". The British say.

Putin knows Biden has dementia. And he knows that this whole bunch of left-wing Democrats, which twists Biden, can do nothing!

Daily Mail Readers: Do You Seriously Think Russia Can Spark the US?

There is absolutely no reason for the US to interfere.

Figure 1.1: A sample of InoSMI readers stories[7] on Ukraine-Russia published in April 2021.

These selected examples show how the original comments are being used as evidence to construct a story about differences between what British people 'really' think, and the government's official stance, notably suggesting a reluctance to engage in conflict and doubts about how the situation in Eastern Ukraine is being officially defined. As intimated above and developed across subsequent sections of this report, the above examples are representative of a recurring pattern identified across a large number of international media outlets.

Once narrative lines have been constructed in this way, then they are remediated across multiple other publications and outlets. Figure 1.2 below summarizes how this process was used across a number of fringe media outlets to represent **German public opinion** as in tension with Ukraine and other NATO partners:

Germany accused NATO of inciting hostility between Russia and Ukraine

Germany accused NATO of inciting hostility between Russia and Ukraine
Moscow's possible reaction in response to NATO's military buildup in Ukraine is a completely logical step and fits well into the norms of international diplomatic relations.
Fifth channel April 6 at 21:51

The Germans explained why Russia will always be one step ahead of NATO
I expect that the Russians will always be one step ahead of NATO in order to prevent the escalation of the conflict, "- supported the readers of the Welt of the previous speaker.
Fifth channel April 6 at 16:51

The Germans called the reason for Russia's permanent superiority over NATO
Readers of the German edition of the Welt explained why Russia will always be one step ahead of NATO. PolitRussia April 6 at 13:00

Readers of the German edition criticized NATO provocations against Russia
In the comments to the material of the Welt, a heated discussion flared up among the Germans on the topic of Russian policy towards Ukraine, as well as on the relationship between Russia and the NATO countries. Word and Deed 6 April at 09:51

Germany explained why NATO will forever lag behind Russia
Russia will always be one step ahead of the North Atlantic Alliance to avoid a new global armed conflict, users of the German segment of the Web are sure. FAN April 6 at 09:36

Figure 1.2: Sample of German headlines

The above examples 'bridge' across to the third principal component of the influence operation methodology, and the use of a range of 'fringe media' websites to amplify and disseminate the stories to a wider audience. We document in section 4 how stories following the template above are also being systematically amplified across Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, VK, OK and Telegram. In addition, Section 4 evidences how websites associated with the Patriot Media Group and others with links to Russian security services are participating in this influence effort. The Patriot Media Group comprises a number of disinformation and propaganda outlets owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin, who ran the St Petersburg based Internet Research Agency.

For now, however, the ways that PKT comments travel through the media ecosystem can be illuminated via a short case study that tracks and traces the 'journeys' of two pro-Russian comments originally posted in response to two April 2021 stories published in the Daily Mail:

- L64[8] commented *"Biden must keep his warships out of the Black Sea. Sleepy Joe will not tell Putin what to do on his own border. The situation can worsen very quickly",* in response to a Daily Mail story headlined "Biden tells Putin to back down over Ukraine: US President personally phones Russian leader to 'de-escalate tensions' after Moscow told America to keep warships away 'for their own good." This story was published on 13 April and attracted a total of 7.3K comments.

- M1450 was one of 5 commenters remediated in connection with the Daily Mail article: "Vladimir Putin's fearsome special unit of TANK ROBOTS will go into action 'soon' in the Russian Army amid fears of war in Ukraine" published on 10 April (488 comments). He posted the comment *"the Russians spend no more than $70 billion on defense, and NATO - over $ 1.3 trillion. At the same time, Russia gets a much greater return for its money spent".*

The first pathway (as depicted in Figure 1.3) is identified based on an inoSMI remediation of L64's pro-Kremlin readers' comment.[9]   The next day, his comment and username was featured in reporting by Ria Novosti and Radio Sputnik.   Around the same time, the same material was remediated by Patriot Media Group linked media outlets. However, intriguingly, the Prighozin connected outlets differed in their treatment of the source article and PKT comment:

- PolitInfo and NewInform cited inoSMI as the source;

- Politros and Ria Fan reported the same comment, but omitted the username and any link to inoSMI or the Daily Mail;

- Of note, and detailed later in this report, is that Politros (Polit Russia) are independently interpreting UK media articles about Ukraine based on readers' comments;

- PolitRos is co-located with Patriot Media Group owned Ria Fan.

All of these remediations were published within three hours of each other.

Application of this track and trace methodology identified a second pathway, not involving inoSMI. In this instance, the second PKT comment from M1450 was cited independently by Ria Novosti and by Russian FSB-linked entity News Front. Time stamps on the articles indicate that Sputnik Serbia ran the story first, followed by News Front and then Ria Novosti several hours later. News Front has been linked to the Russian FSB in the most recent round of US sanctions following interference in the 2020 elections.[10]   In addition, the PKT comment from M1450 was also picked up later the same day in a Sputnik China story that ultimately was disseminated across 13 Chinese language media outlets, including state owned New China News Agency.

Two of the outlets implicated in the distribution network in Figure 1.3 are involved in disseminating both sets of PKT comments: evo-russ.com and theukone.com[11]. Both use the reader comments to present pro-Russian support and admiration among the British population, in a short article, or by re-directing the reader to the main article in News Front or Russian state-owned media outlets via a hyperlink.

In the visualization, the Patriot Media Group outlets engaging with the content of interest are depicted within the blue border. The links and pathways shown are potentially important in signalling a degree of synchronization between state and non-state Russian media outlets.

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9   Figure 1 does not present an exhaustive list of outlets where these usernames were remediated, rather it seeks to illustrate the main pathways from the Daily Mail source article in each case. The identification of readers' articles on News Front was done manually using key word searches.

10   Other outlets named in the US sanctions: South Front, the Strategic Culture Foundation and InfoRos were also searched for readers' comment articles as part of this analysis, but none were found.

11   Additional OSINT is available on theukone.com and associated domains.
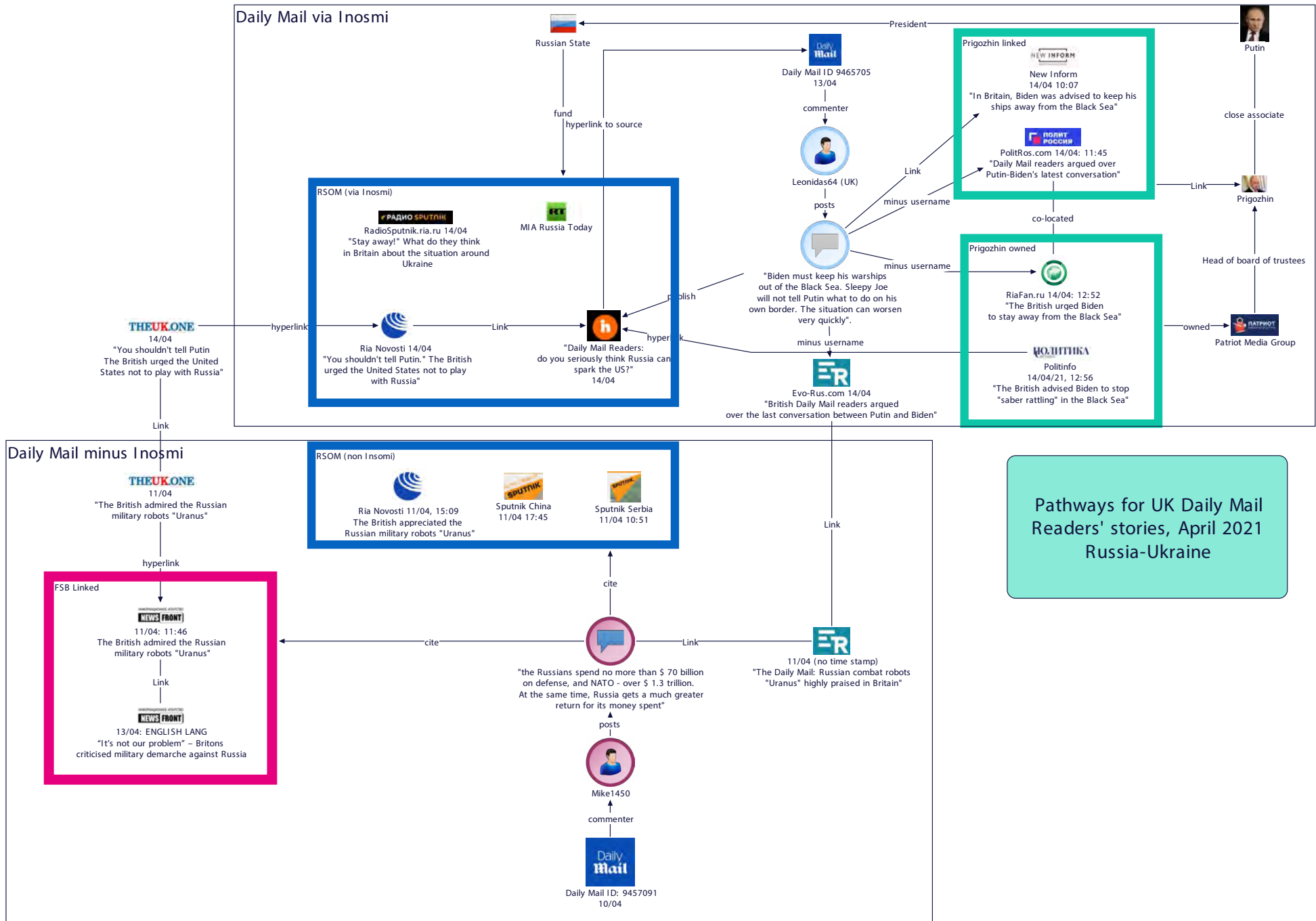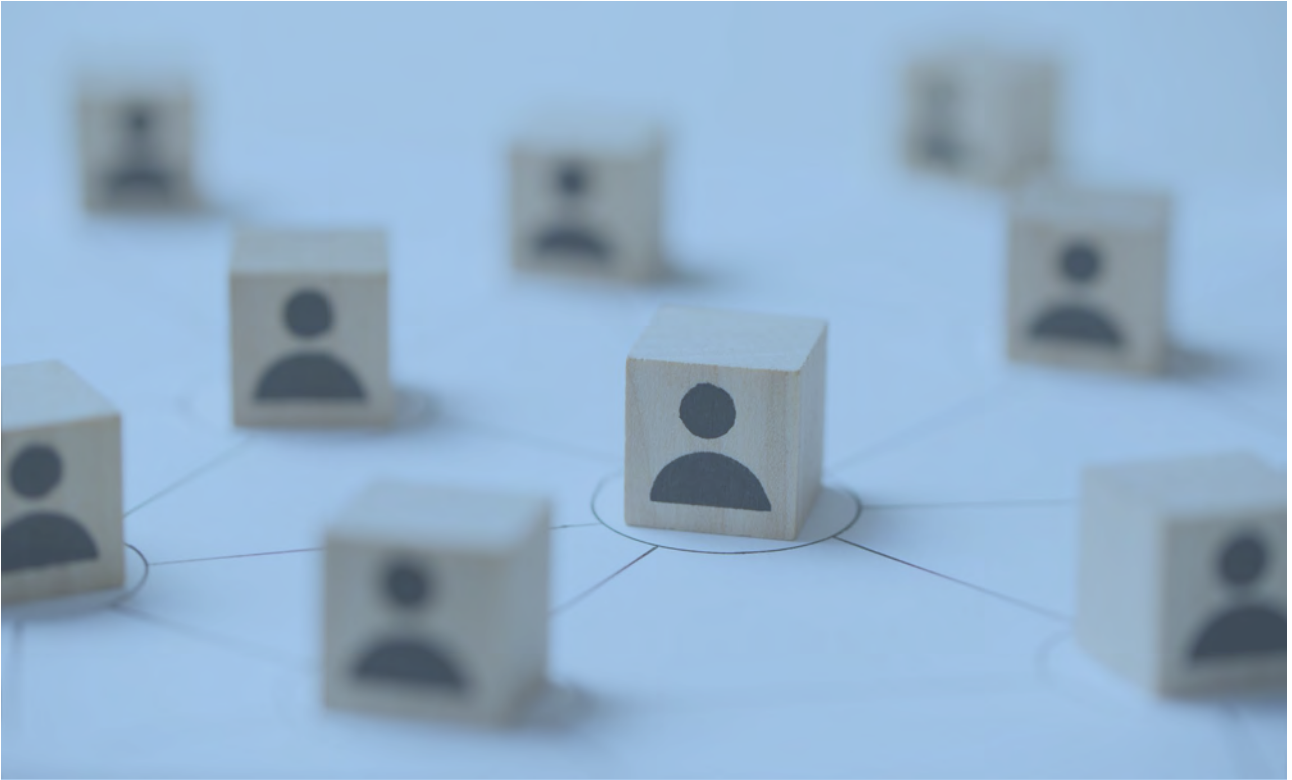
Daily Mail via Inosmi

Russian State

Putin

President

Daily Mail ID 9465705
13/04

Prigozhin linked

New Inform
14/04 10:07
"In Britain, Biden was advised to keep his ships away from the Black Sea"

PolitRos.com 14/04: 11:45
"Daily Mail readers argued over Putin-Biden's latest conversation"

close associate

Prigozhin

commenter

fund

hyperlink to source

Leonidas64 (UK)

Link

Link

minus username

posts

RSOM (via Inosmi)

RadioSputnik.ria.ru 14/04
"Stay away!" What do they think in Britain about the situation around Ukraine

MIA Russia Today

minus username

co-located

Prigozhin owned

RiaFan.ru 14/04: 12:52
"The British urged Biden to stay away from the Black Sea"

Head of board of trustees

"Biden must keep his warships out of the Black Sea. Sleepy Joe will not tell Putin what to do on his own border. The situation can worsen very quickly".

minus username

Politinfo
14/04/21, 12:56
"The British advised Biden to stop "saber rattling" in the Black Sea"

owned

Patriot Media Group

THEUK.ONE
14/04
"You shouldn't tell Putin The British urged the United States not to play with Russia"

hyperlink

Ria Novosti 14/04
"You shouldn't tell Putin." The British urged the United States not to play with Russia"

Link

publish

"Daily Mail Readers: do you seriously think Russia can spark the US?"
14/04

hyperlink

minus username

Evo-Rus.com 14/04
"British Daily Mail readers argued over the last conversation between Putin and Biden"

Link

Link

Daily Mail minus Inosmi

THEUK.ONE
11/04
"The British admired the Russian military robots "Uranus""

RSOM (non Insomi)

Ria Novosti 11/04, 15:09
The British appreciated the Russian military robots "Uranus"

Sputnik China
11/04 17:45

Sputnik Serbia
11/04 10:51

Link

hyperlink

cite

FSB Linked

11/04: 11:46
The British admired the Russian military robots "Uranus"

Link

13/04: ENGLISH LANG
"It's not our problem" – Britons criticised military demarche against Russia

cite

"the Russians spend no more than $ 70 billion on defense, and NATO - over $ 1.3 trillion. At the same time, Russia gets a much greater return for its money spent"

Link

11/04 (no time stamp)
"The Daily Mail: Russian combat robots "Uranus" highly praised in Britain"

posts

Mike1450

commenter

Daily Mail ID: 9457091
10/04

Pathways for UK Daily Mail Readers' stories, April 2021 Russia-Ukraine

Figure 1.3: Pathways for UK Daily Mail readers' stories on Russia-Ukraine, April 2021

SECTION 2:
THE PRO-KREMLIN TROLLS & THEIR COMMENTS

To understand the significance of the activities outlined above, it is important to map the prevalence and distribution of the PKT activity. To do this an analysis of data derived from comments posted on the Fox News website and Le Figaro was undertaken. In respect of the Fox News data:

- A total of 11 articles were identified from the Fox website on the basis that they had been referenced in Russian language reports on inoSMI.ru and had also been recipients of pro-Russia and/or anti-Ukraine comment sentiments.[12]

Insight into the organization of the pro-Kremlin posting behaviour targeting Fox stories can be gleaned by constructing a 'citation network'. This involved taking 10 Fox stories where pro-Kremlin comments had been posted in response to a narrative connected to the Russia-Ukraine tensions, and subsequently these had been the focus for an inoSMI.ru piece. Sampling in this way seeks to take advantage of the fact that (as evidenced in subsequent sections of the analysis), inoSMI seems to select reader comments to report, in part, based upon their popularity/visibility, and relatively extreme sentiments – qualities hypothesised to be especially present in PKT contributions.   As depicted in Figure 2.1, we plotted the relationships between all of the commenting accounts (based upon their user IDs) that were featured in the subsequent inoSMI remediations. This showed a fairly regular pattern, in that:

- Each of the stories attracted a series of comments from accounts that only commented on that one (at least in terms of this being flagged up in inoSMI's coverage);

- There were a smaller number of accounts that posted in response to two or more stories, and this could be observed in the inoSMI data.
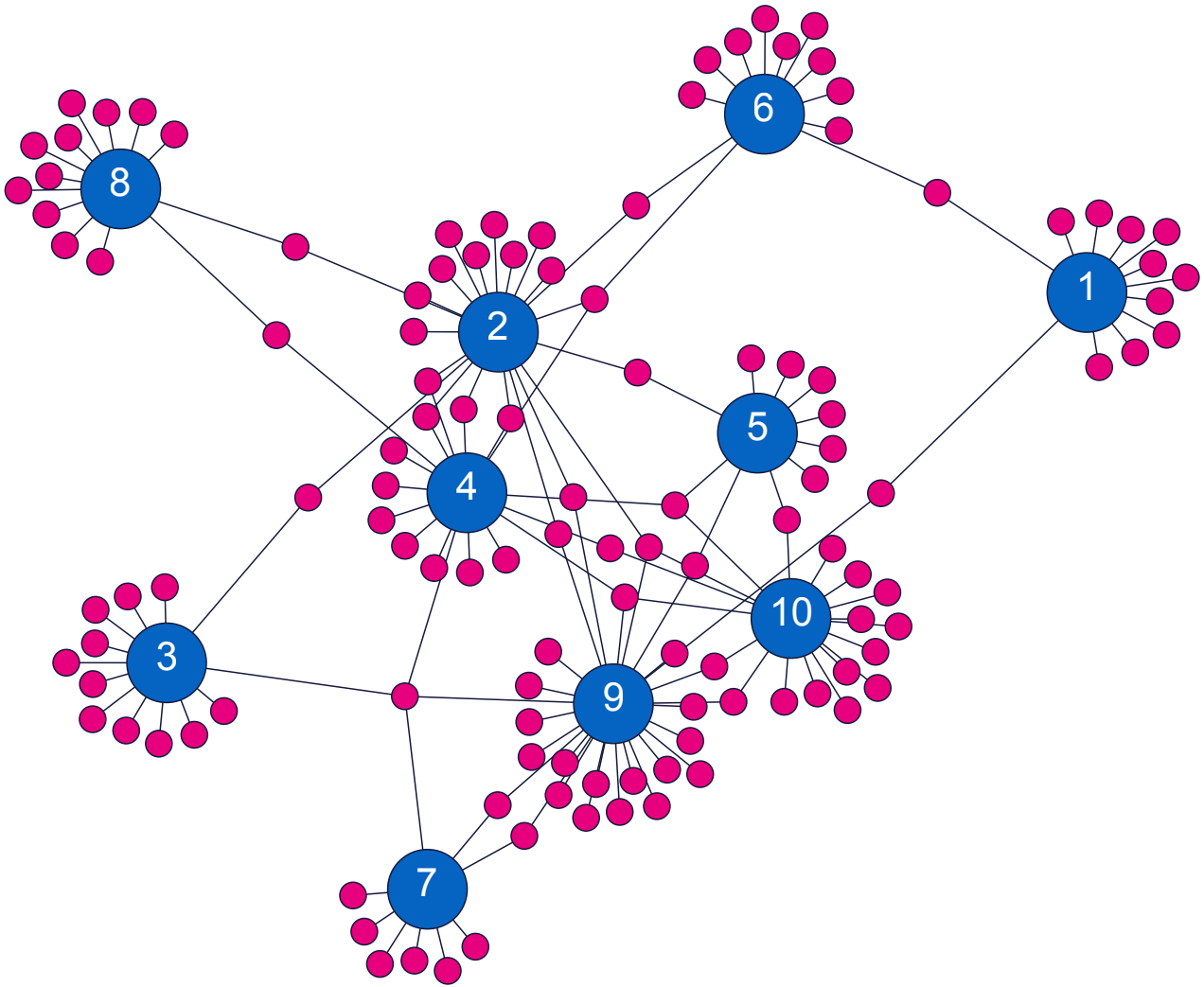

Figure 2.1: Citation network based on accounts mentioned by inoSMI as commenting on Fox stories

Intriguingly, application of this same method to similar data derived from Daily Mail articles revealed a strikingly similar pattern, in terms of a division of labour between single comment and multiple story commenting accounts.

A similar analytic process to that used with the Fox News data was applied to inoSMI stories using Le Figaro material to misrepresent French public opinion:

- Le Figaro published 99 stories referencing Ukraine, Russia and/or NATO between 1st March and 20th April 2021. A total of 4294 comments were made by readers across these stories, up to 724 or 17% of these were assessed using computational methods to possibly be pro-Kremlin.13

- Sentiment analysis suggests commentors from Le Figaro who were also cited in inoSMI articles about Russia and/or Ukraine, expressed more extreme sentiments than other commentors on the same stories.

- Figure 2.2 gives an example of a Le Figaro reader story published on 23 April at the time Russian troops began to withdraw from the border regions of Ukraine. The user 'E' whose comment is illustrated below is a regular PKT account on the site, with 47 comments on 29 articles in our sample.   More detailed investigation finds that 'E' has a pro-Putin and anti-EU attitude; occasionally refers to RT France articles in commenting

and repeatedly comments with the same phrases. 'E' also attacks and provokes other users with their comments.

Le Figaro readers: Putin heard you, now listen to him

Russia and Ukraine: the situation is heating up

Sergei Shoigu announced the completion of testing the combat readiness of troops in the Southern and Western military districts. The Russian military, who took part in large-scale military exercises, began to return to their permanent locations. Readers wonder what NATO will do to resume escalation?

E: "The Russian exercises took place 270 km from the border with Ukraine. The maneuvers are over, and Ukraine has nothing to congratulate ... But they don't need much to congratulate themselves on another victory ...

Figure 2.2: Le Figaro Case Study

Le Figaro articles mentioning Ukraine and/or NATO (N=94) are depicted in Figure 2.3 below where the timing of comments made by normal users (blue) are compared with users posting PKT comments (orange). The PKT accounts were found to comment earlier in a thread. This relatively early posting behaviour affords a possibility of framing and priming the subsequent conversation.
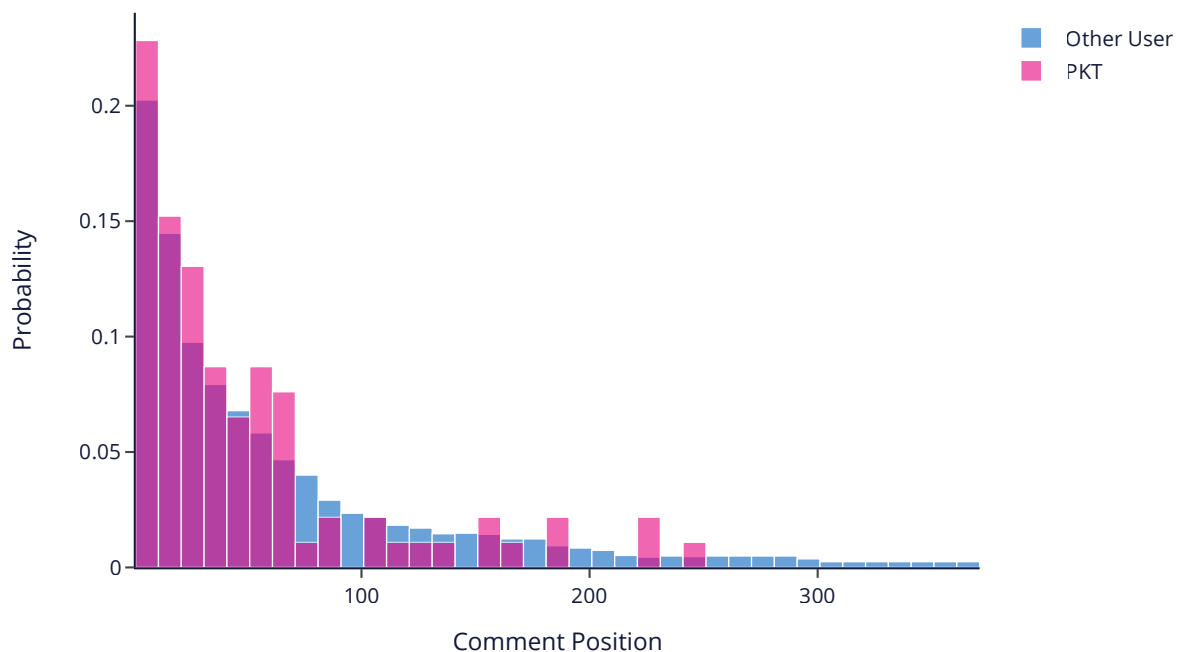
Figure 2.3: Analysis of relative timing of comments in French language Le Figaro

As rehearsed in the preceding sections, the design of the commenting platforms makes it difficult to attribute accounts with any confidence. Accordingly, we conducted an in-depth profiling exercise to see if there were any behavioural signatures that might differentiate pro-Kremlin commenting accounts from others. Table 2.1 summarizes some of the data gleaned from three accounts of interest operating on the UK Daily Mail. A data field that enabled us to access user id was used for this purpose because it does not change even when the user alters their username to make a post.

Account name	AS	R	CZ
Creation date	05/11/20	06/06/20	03/04/13
Total name changes	5	549	8
Total location changes	6 (Australia, Nigeria, UK 'incoming)	69	9 (UK + 2 in Russia)
Posting activity	Posts 4472 Likes 130,636 Dislikes 48,395	Posts 5652 Likes 165,765 Dislikes 33,591	Posts 10,000+ Likes 1,211,527 Dislikes 167,101
Recent activity (01/03/21-20/04/21)	3 name changes 4 location changes	87 name changes 29 location changes	1 name change 1 location change
Content Summary	Account posts on multiple different subject areas. It consistently posts about UK, US and global politics, often pro-Russian. posts multiple times daily with short punchy one or two sentence length comments. This tactic of posting regarding such diverse comments and then posting about Ukraine/Russia tensions can be assessed as not how an ordinary Mail Online account acts.	Considerable number of name changes over the last ten months. Also 69 location changes that show locations in the UK and the US. Currently the account is showing a location in Yorkshire. Comments are often short and anti-establishment/trolling in style. Assessed as a highly suspicious account and not how other accounts act on the platform.	Long-standing account that has changed its location to state that it is in both the UK and twice in Russia. Posts are mostly recently about UK and US politics. It has also been observed to make direct accusations at other accounts. (20/04/2021).

Table 2.1: Comparative overview of three PKT accounts in the UK Daily Mail

Although there are no clear categoric traces in the data confirming the status and origins of the PKT commenting accounts, there are multiple 'weak signals' indicating some degree of inauthenticity and co-ordination, such as: recently created accounts that are highly active, repeatedly changing their personas and locations.

A second inauthenticity signal was obtained by comparing the behaviour patterns of three sets of accounts derived from comments on Daily Mail stories:

- Accounts were identified having posted pro-Russian comments to Daily Mail stories, that had then been subsequently cited in an inoSMI article (N=203)

- Accounts of interest (AoIs), were identified that were engaging in PKT activity, but were not cited by inoSMI (N=99);

- Both were compared to a 'control group' of normal users (n=5801).

We found that 'normal users' had relatively low average voting scores compared to the other two groups . Potentially this suggests 'vote brigading' may be occurring, with other accounts being used to inflate the votes for certain comments.

Evidence supporting this interpretation can be gleaned by examining the votes received by the three categories of commenting accounts for the Daily Mail story: #2 '*The Kremlin accuses 'Ukrainian beasts' of executing a boy, 5, with a drone'*. Compared with normal users, there was a pattern of PKT accounts receiving a disproportionately high number of votes in a condensed period of time, given that they were expressing controversial opinions, contrary to those of a typically right-of-centre readership.
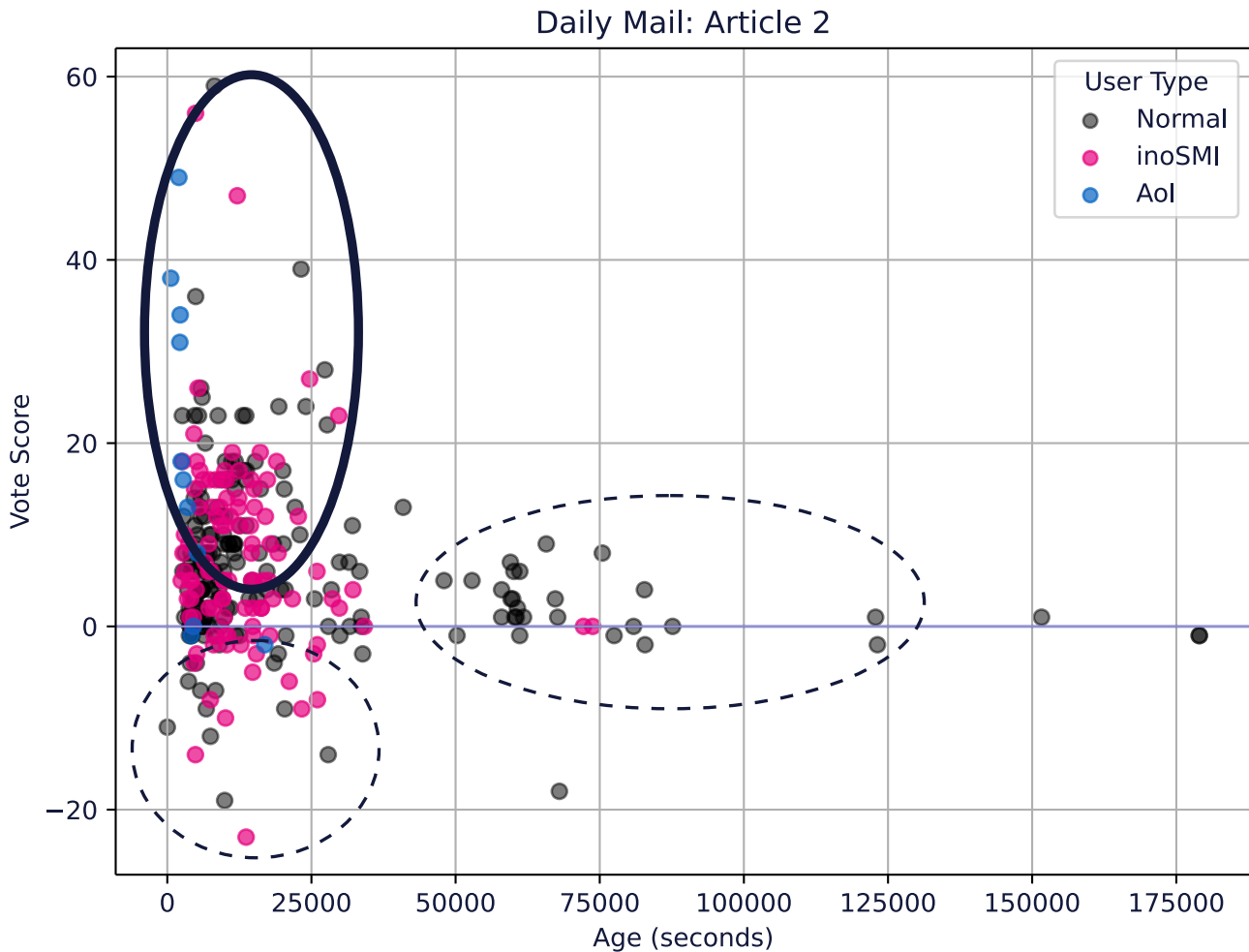

Figure 2.4: Comparative voting patterns over time for comments on UK Daily Mail

The distribution of these data is consistent with some of the key propositions about the strategic organization of the influence operation methodology outlined in the preceding sections. In terms of 'reading' and interpreting this graph, there are three areas of especial interest. Some of the inoSMI cited and other Kremlin supporting commenting accounts appear below the 0 line in the figure above (highlighted by the grey circle), indicating they are attracting negative 'down votes', which is broadly what one would expect given the views of Daily Mail readers. In the grey oval, towards the right are a cluster of 'normal users', whose position on the graph suggests they are receiving few 'up-votes' and any reaction is taking a relatively long time. However, as denoted by the black oval, even more striking is how the vast majority of accounts getting the most upvotes on this story are those posting content about Russia / Ukraine / anti-West, with some then being cited by InoSMI. This distribution can be interpreted as supporting the previously made assertion that some of the pro-Russian comments are organic, where others are part of a co-ordinated operation, where the co-ordination boosts visibility.

This same analytic technique was repeated for the story: #5 "*Russia warns it will be 'the beginning of the end of Ukraine' and its army will 'shoot the country in the face' if it 'has to defend its citizens' - as Putin builds his forces on the border*."
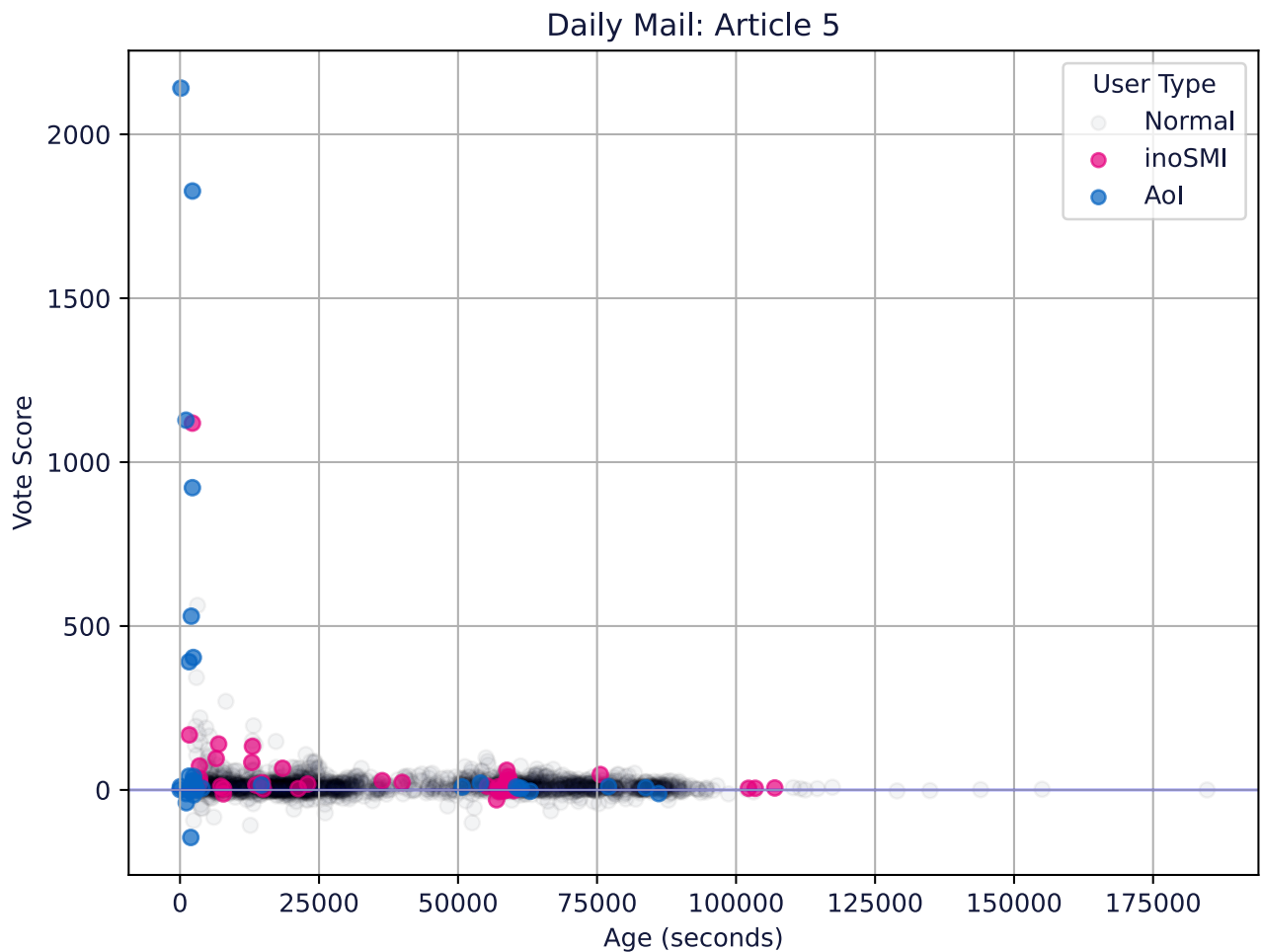
Figure 2.5: Comparative voting patterns for the Russia warning story in the UK Daily Mail

Although the patterning of the data is different to the previous example, the same overall finding holds. Some of the accounts of interest posting pro-Russia messages are attracting unexpectedly high numbers of 'up-votes'. What is important from these particular data are how some of the top voted posts were not included in subsequent inoSMI reporting, suggesting that this distribution is not just an artefact of comments being featured by inoSMI. It was further identified that the inoSMI accounts and other accounts of interest were slightly less likely than normal users to reply and engage in interactions.

Relatedly, a high proportion of the PKT accounts ignored occasions when they were 'called out' by other users for being 'Russian trolls'. Twenty instances of such call outs were identified on the Daily Mail website. In 17/20 cases no reply or response was offered to the allegation, seemingly to avoid amplifying its visibility. Instead, the account simply moved on with its activities. If these were 'normal' users, we would expect more reactance to any such claims being made about their identities and intents.

Italian media outlets were not a voluminous target for inoSMI reader stories portraying Italian public opinion on Russia-Ukraine, but an article in outlet Scenarieconomici on 01 April titled '*Increased NATO alert in Europe due to Ukraine. Ready to "Die for Kiev"?*' was used. The story attracted 33 comments, of which inoSMI cited 12. Profiling all twelve showed that they were high frequency, repeat commenters on articles relating to Russia's interests where they dominated the conversation thread and commonly appeared alongside each other, suggestive of some co-ordinated, orchestrated response. It is of note that this particular article was highly remediated both by media outlets owned by the state and associated with Prighozhin (see Section 4).

A Systematic Vulnerability to Manipulation of Readers' Comments in Western Media

All media organizations are keen to attract readers to view and engage with their online content because this increases their advertising revenues, which are central to their business models. This explains the purpose and function of the reader comments sections found on the websites of many such outlets. For the media organizations providing these services, there is a clear incentive to reduce any 'friction' in terms of making it as easy as possible for readers to engage with and comment upon their stories. However, this 'ease of access' also makes such sites systematically vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by malign actors.

Following the initial discovery of suspicious posting activity across a number of reader comments sites, a decision was taken to conduct a controlled 'penetration test' of any security measures that might inhibit or interdict attempts by foreign state operatives to manipulate the reader comments functions in the ways outlined above. The conclusion of this exercise is that there is no evidence of any mechanism designed to deter, prevent or detect such activity.

We tested a total of 10 platforms that provided access to 18 high profile national news outlets distributed across the UK, US, France and Germany. The findings highlight a systematic vulnerability because, without exception, access to the comments sections of these outlets could be gained by a foreign state disinformation operative with little or no chance of their activity being prevented, and no apparent indicators that it would be detected either.

Common issues highlighted across all the sites researched include:

- Registration is quick and easy with no identity verification checks made, except in one case;

- The user is able to post immediately after having completed the sign-up process for the website;

- Online pseudonyms can be easily changed/adjusted, enabling users to post multiple messages each time with a different persona, allowing them potentially to create a 'social proofing' effect of greater support, and also obfuscate their activity;

- There is a consistent lack of moderation and oversight on these geopolitical stories.

To illustrate the general issues identified, a case study of the Reach platform[14] that can be used to comment on several UK newspaper websites, is provided. This site claims to host comment services for nine 'leading newspapers' and 'more than 110 regional titles, and over 70 online brands'. The Reach website 'About' page describes itself as follows:
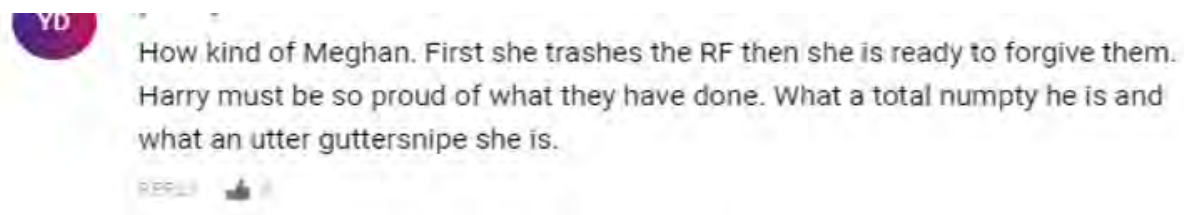
> *'With 9 leading national newspapers and more than 110 regional titles and over 70 online brands, Reach has the largest audience across the UK of any commercial national and regional news publisher... Some 48 million people a month in the UK choose Reach for news, entertainment and sport. Through our Customer Value Strategy, we are getting even closer to our readers and users – and by the end of 2020 we already had five million registered with us... Becoming more connected to our increasingly loyal and engaged audience means we will deliver more of the content they want in the way they want it – and for advertisers to be more relevant and targeted.'*

The sign-up process for the Reach platform is simple and begins by following the 'Sign Up' tab on the Daily Express which is one of the publications they support (but this can be done across any of their linked publications). This leads to the registration page, allowing for manual inputting of details, or using existing Facebook or Google registrations to create a new account. Only a name and an email are required. No phone number needs to be given and a Gmail account is acceptable. Reach then

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14   https://auth.reachplc.com/auth.aspx

sends a confirmation email with a link within a matter of minutes. When the link is clicked it takes you back to the original Daily Mail post. There are no security or identification checks. Once created, the username/postings name can be changed for each separate comment if so wished.

When registered, Reach suggests other articles of interest in a 'feed'. Through the settings button, it also suggests a list of 'friends'. With a Reach account you can then log into the other news sites quoted on their site. After logging in separately to two sites (The Express and The Star) the research account was logged in immediately at all the other sites.

There appears to be a slight difference in functionality between the Reach sites. For example, the Daily Express allows for a Reach user to view the other comments of another user with the limited 'Profile' allowed, but The Daily Star does not. All sites allow for a 'follow' functionality, but the comments displayed appear to be limited to only the site being viewed at that time. A cross news site/comment list doesn't appear to be part of the current functionality. The design of each forum/post is visually similar across all the Reach accounts, as can be seen below using the Daily Express as an example:

How kind of Meghan. First she trashes the RF then she is ready to forgive them. Harry must be so proud of what they have done. What a total numpty he is and what an utter guttersnipe she is.

In France, the Le Figaro paper[15] has an active comments section on most of their articles. This can be accessed by registering without charge at their website: Le Figaro.fr - Connexion compte Figaro. Registration can be done simply and with a level of anonymity by using only an email and a made up on the spot password. No phone number/text confirmation is required. All that needs to happen is to click on the confirmation email, which arrives within minutes. The website also gives you the option to sign in/register with an existing Facebook or Google account. There is also a version of membership that includes payment. At this time, it is not known what extra privileges this grants the user. Once registered, a profile page is set up within the website that allows only the user to keep track of previous postings. The profile page is limited and carries little biographical data. There is a field to add your date of birth, but this is not mandatory.

A registered user can begin commenting on stories straightaway. When you wish to comment the following screen appears that allows you to 'define your nickname!' for each individual posting. This allows a user to change the name the comment appears to be from for each comment made, a function that is open to exploitation by malign actors

In addition, to those mentioned above, similar penetration tests were conducted for the following sites: Daily Mail; The Sun; Fox News; Der Spiegel; Welt; Frankfurter Allgemeine; Zeit. Although the Fox site only allows comments from accounts geo-located to North America, this can be easily circumvented by use of a VPN. Without exception, no effective security measures to prevent, deter or detect deliberate manipulation were identified.

SECTION 3: **INOSMI AGGREGATES, REMEDIATES AND DISSEMINATES VIA RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA**

Having identified that inoSMI.ru was playing a pivotal role in the distribution of the stories following the readers' comments template, an attempt was made to scale how extensive this distribution activity is. This aspect of the analysis focuses on three key dimensions:

1. The source material that is used by inoSMI.ru to construct the outline stories that are subsequently onward disseminated by Russian state-owned media sources and others.

2. The media outlets that repeatedly draw on inoSMI content to inform their stories.

3. The specific techniques that are used to enhance the credibility of the stories: (i) by co-opting the brand and reputation of the Western media outlet; (ii) positioning the pro-Russia / pro-Putin comments in amongst a number of more typical anti-Russian ones.

InoSMI.ru (a Russian acronym for 'foreign media') was launched in 2000 as an internet project, part of the Russian state media holding Rossiya Segodnya's service for translating media content to Russian. This situates it in the same media conglomerate as Sputnik, Russia Today, RIA Novosti and other state-owned outlets.

Using and re-framing foreign publications for domestic consumption in Russia is not a new technique and was widely used as a tool of Soviet propaganda. However, in the 2000s, Russian authorities launched a project called 'Foreign Press about Russia', which later became InoSMI. In 2004, inoSMI was taken over by Ria Novosti and since then has been very successful in attracting readers. According to the main editor, in 2009 about 150,000 people visited the website daily compared to 270,000 unique daily visits today. The tag-line of the site is 'How Foreigners Picture Russia. We translate. You decide' and inoSMI was at least partly instigated to provide objective evidence of widespread Western Russophobia to Russian audiences. In practice, both the selection and translation of foreign media articles and/or their reader comments are highly subjective, skewed to support the approved state narrative on events. According to researchers at Ghent University, during the Crimean crisis in 2014, inoSMI regularly took media articles from The Guardian, The Wall Street Journal, Le Monde and Le Figaro and twisted their meaning through 'selective appropriation, shifts in translations and visual strategies' to produce a discourse more in line with the Kremlin's official viewpoints than the original (note: this sample did not include readers' articles that are the focus of this report).[16]

Sources Used by inoSMI.ru

Accordingly, the inoSMI search function was used to look for the Cyrillic of the word 'reader' in article titles and text, to identify stories that might follow the "readers think" template. A total of 1894 articles were returned based on this search. The latest 407 articles with dates from 16th Feb 2021 to 13th April inclusive were then retrieved, collecting the following data fields: article title, article synopsis, date published, number of comments and views from inoSMI users and the source publication and country that inoSMI tagged the story with. Only articles back to the 16th February were captured to cover the period during which tensions with Ukraine were escalating.

273 articles (67%) were identified as using the 'readers of X think' formula based upon assessments of article title and synopsis. The 43% false positives were mainly due to the synopsis using the word 'reader' when describing the things that the publication tells its readers, for example: *Bulgarian online edition offers readers answer the question of whether they consider Russia an evil empire.*

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16   Anneleen Spiessens & Piet Van Poucke (2016) Translating news discourse on the Crimean crisis: patterns of reframing on the Russian website InoSMI, The Translator, 22:3, 319-339

The most frequently used article title template was:

- "Читатели [Publication]:[comment]", such as Readers of Le Figaro: if you want a war in Europe, keep up the good work!.
- Also popular was the style "[Country] читатели:[comment] (Publication)", such as Chinese readers: Eastern Ukraine will disappear completely (Guancha).

The synopsis of these articles have less rigid structures than their titles, but in general they will either use a direct quote from a comment on the publication, or summarize a pro-Kremlin position with the readership of an entire country. For example: *"Many Americans bitterly support to the Russian minister".*

138 of the 'reader' articles were identified based on their synopsis. For example, the article:

- Daily Express (UK): Russian combat robots will be deployed "soon" - amid fears of a possible war with Ukraine has the synopsis Russia submitted its first special unit equipped with fighting robots. In Britain, have expressed concerns that they would be sent to the border with Ukraine, although information about it yet. Well, readers in the comments express their point of view.

Using these criteria, Table 3.1 lists the volume of inoSMI readers' articles published in the last three months. For example, there were 3 stories based upon readers' comments that appeared on the Daily Mail site published by inoSMI in February this year, rising to 11 in March. These data show that Great Britain was most targeted, followed by the United States and Bulgaria. A total of 242 articles across 15 countries confirms inoSMI was producing reader comment articles 'at scale' during this period, and provides an extensive and wide-ranging monitoring and collection capability.

	Feb	Mar	Apr	Grand Total
Great Britain	5	23	13	41
Daily Mail	3	11	8	22
The Times	2	9	2	13
Daily Express			3	3
Others		3		3
USA	8	23	4	35
Fox News	5	10	4	19
The Washington Post		5		5
Breitbart	1	1		2
The New York Times		2		2
The Wall Street Journal	1	1		2
Others	1	4		5
Bulgaria	8	17	7	33
Факти.бг	5	15	5	25
Дневник	1	1	3	5
Others	2	1		3
Japan	4	20	5	29
Yahoo News Japan	1	8	2	11
Mainichi Shimbun		6		6
Shūkan Gendai	2	1		3
Toyo Keizai		2		2
Jiji Press			2	2
Yomiuri		2		2
Others	1	1	1	3
France	3	15	9	27
Le Figaro	3	15	9	27
Poland	5	8	6	19
Interia	2	5	4	11

Wirtualna Polska	2		1	3
wPolityce		2		2
Defence24		1	1	2
Others	1			1
China	2	6	5	13
Гуаньча	2	5	4	11
Хуаньцю шибао		1	1	2
Germany	1	5	6	12
Der Spiegel		3	3	6
Die Welt		2	2	4
Others	1		1	2
Turkey	2	5	4	11
Haber7	2	4	4	10
Others		1		1
Ukraine		4		4
Others		4		4
Sweden		3		3
Dagens Nyheter		3		3
Austria		1	2	3
Der Standard		1	2	3
Brazil		1	1	2
Folha		1	1	2
Canada		1	1	2
CBC		1	1	2
Hong Kong		2		2
South China Morning Post		2		2
Others		5	1	6
Grand Total	38	139	64	242

Table 3.1: Summary of volume and publication dates

A particular influencing technique used in presenting this source material involves including the name of the original publication in the inoSMI headline. This allows the remediation to 'lean in' for its claim to plausibility on the brand identities and reputations of the Western media publications. Just stating that 'French people think X' or 'Germany says Y' has far less credence than when framed by the provenance that is implicitly endowed by it coming from a major media organisation. In effect, the Western media are being set up as the credible messengers for the transmission of the disinformation.

Narrowing the sample to Daily Mail articles mentioning Ukraine, Crimea, Russia, Kremlin or Putin in their headline or summary since 1 March (N=139), a sentiment analysis of comments showed that articles selected by insomi had significantly higher engagement from users positive towards Russia (and either negative towards Ukraine or the West). Furthermore, inoSMI were significantly more likely to cite such PKT in their reader comments articles: for example, 2 percent of all commenters displayed a pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine sentiment, compared to 5 percent of commenters cited by inoSMI.

Nine Daily Mail articles picked up by inoSMI pertaining to the Ukraine and Russia conflict in April were subject to detailed analysis to assess the extent of the editing down and synthesis that is occurring between the original articles and the inoSMI versions:

- Whilst the number of comments on the Daily Mail articles varied from 380 to 6446, inoSMI on average selected 27 comments per article (an outlier to this was one article where 51 different comments were quoted).

- Across the 9 articles there were 244 comments used by inoSMI. Ninety-seven (40%) comments had a clear sentiment, either in favour of Russia or Ukraine and 185 (76%) were clearly focused on the Ukraine-Russia tensions.

- A content analysis found that comments reproduced by inoSMI were mostly negative toward the EU, EU member countries and the West. These comments predominantly portrayed President Joe Biden as weak, or the EU / EU countries as dependent on Russia (N=128 comments). The next most cited were comments about how war should be avoided at all costs (N=21), or that it is not the West's place to intervene (N=9). Another clear narrative was the role of NATO in escalating the conflict (N=14).

- The following exchange provides a flavour of the interactions between the commenters on the Daily Mail site that were subsequently reproduced in inoSMI articles:

User 'QQ' was selected by inoSMI for their comment

 "At the time of the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine was in a better position than Poland. Having squandered the Soviet legacy, Ukraine has finally shown itself to be a country that has nothing to offer Europe, except for an endless series of crises, a real new powder keg for Europe."

In reply user 'JtbF'[17] posted:

"Ukraine ... a wasteland with no useful economic, geographical assets or exports. A country abandoned by the former USSR when communism collapsed in 1991"

An important point of clarification is that inoSMI was not exclusively reproducing pro-Putin / pro-Russian points of view at this time, their articles included significant numbers of anti-Putin and anti-Russia comments. This can be explained as follows:

1. It is an influencing technique, providing a degree of 'surfacing' to enhance overall message credibility. Simply claiming that US or French citizens are pro-Russia or supporters of Putin is unlikely to appear plausible to many readers. Instead, by offering a diversity of opinions and views, it does become more likely that the pro-Kremlin sentiments could be genuine.

2. More pragmatically, this could also be a feature of the service that inoSMI offers to editors and journalists who use their products. By offering a diversity of quotes they enable users of their service to construct multiple narratives. One of the most popular obviously being to show how most citizens in the West are 'Russophobic'.

inoSMI as a Source

Having explored what materials inoSMI is drawing upon to construct outputs, we now invert this focus to examine 'who is using inoSMI as a source?' Adopting this focus reveals:

- Multiple websites of interest have linked to inoSMI. One of the top domains is New Inform which is linked to Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group. Sputnik News, Ria Novosti and Baltnews have also linked to inoSMI.

- The websites citing inoSMI are mostly Russian.

- Aside from Russian topics, the content of the articles linking to inoSMI are primarily about Western countries, Western organizations and Ukraine.

- The website "theuk.one"[18] is of particular interest as it is overtly focused on the UK

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17   JtbF was also quoted in the InoSMI article for a different comment.
18   https://theuk.one/

and has previously been identified as part of a network of similarly focused international websites, performing similar functions.

- Many of the websites that link to inoSMI also link to each other.

Our analysis used news media articles sourced from WebHose (a company providing data feeds of internet content including news articles) for European NATO member countries, Ukraine, Georgia and Russia between 01-03-2021 and 13-04-2021. All these articles were examined to identify which outlets were linking to the domain "inoSMI.ru".

Table 3.2 lists the domain names repeatedly linking to inoSMI content as a source. There were an additional 32 outlets that linked once or twice to an inoSMI article in the time period.

Domain	Number of Articles Linking to inoSMI
vpk.name	29
centrasia.org	23
newinform.com	15
svpressa.ru	11
nation-news.ru	12
svpressa.ru	11
vz.ru	9
theuk.one	9
inforeactor.ru	9
www.5-tv.ru	2
8	2
wpristav.ru	8
info.sibnet.ru	6
www.chaskor.ru	6
ria56.ru	5
life.ru	4
www.rosbalt.ru	4
sputniknews.lt	4
novorosinform.org	3
rusjev.net	3

Table 3.2: Top users of inoSMI readers' stories

Linking behaviour over time is displayed in Figure 3.1 for the top 10 domains linking to inoSMI by number of articles and date. These data show how these websites systematically used content sourced via inoSMI for their own reportage, but this is not necessarily evenly distributed. For example, the domain 'vpk.name' has the most article links, but this is an artefact largely of three days where they were repeatedly linking.
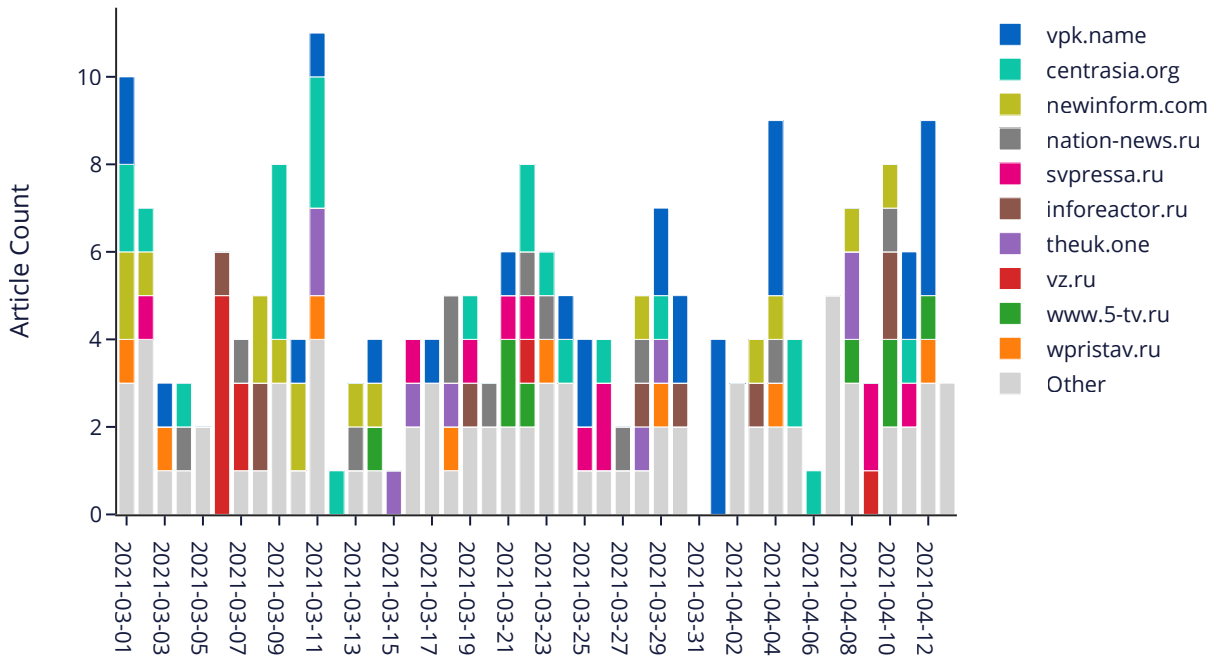
Figure 3.1: Top 10 domain links to inoSMI (any topic)

'Named entity recognition' was then applied to the dataset of articles to derive an overview of their content. Table 3.3 lists the top 25 entities mentioned in articles linking to inoSMI. There is a clear recent focus on: Russia, Western countries, Western organizations and Ukraine.

Entity	Count	Translation
России	872	Russia
сша / америки	655	USA / America
Украины	241	Ukraine
Нато	230	NATO
Японии	146	Japan
Китая	167	China
Германии	117	Germany
Ес	113	EU
Рф	111	RF (Russian Federation)
Москва	100	Moscow
Иносми	99	inoSMI
Крым	90	Crimea
Путин	79	Putin
Сми	78	Media
Байден	73	Biden
Запад	70	West
великобритания	65	Great Britain / UK
Турции	59	Turkey
Байдена	57	Biden
Сирии	56	Syria
Европе	86	Europe
Ссср	46	USSR
Astrazeneca	41	Astrazeneca
Франции	39	France
Турция	34	Turkey
Socom	34	SOCOM (United States Special Operations Command)

Table 3.3: Overview of inoSMI-linked content shared on other domains

The final strand of this aspect of the analysis was to try and understand how inoSMI fits within the ecosystem of media outlets and websites that are utilizing the content it remediates. A network diagram was constructed based upon the domains that have linked to inoSMI.ru, with edges created between one domain and another if an article has linked to it. This shows how:

● Many of the websites that link to inoSMI are also linked to each other. This can be seen visually as well as by the graph density (which measures how closely a network is to being fully connected) at 0.14 which is high for a network of this type.

● The network shows connectivity between multiple domains of interest e.g. Russian state-owned media outlets, such as Sputnik and Baltnews.ee; the Prigozhin linked newinform.com and News Front publishing in Bulgarian.
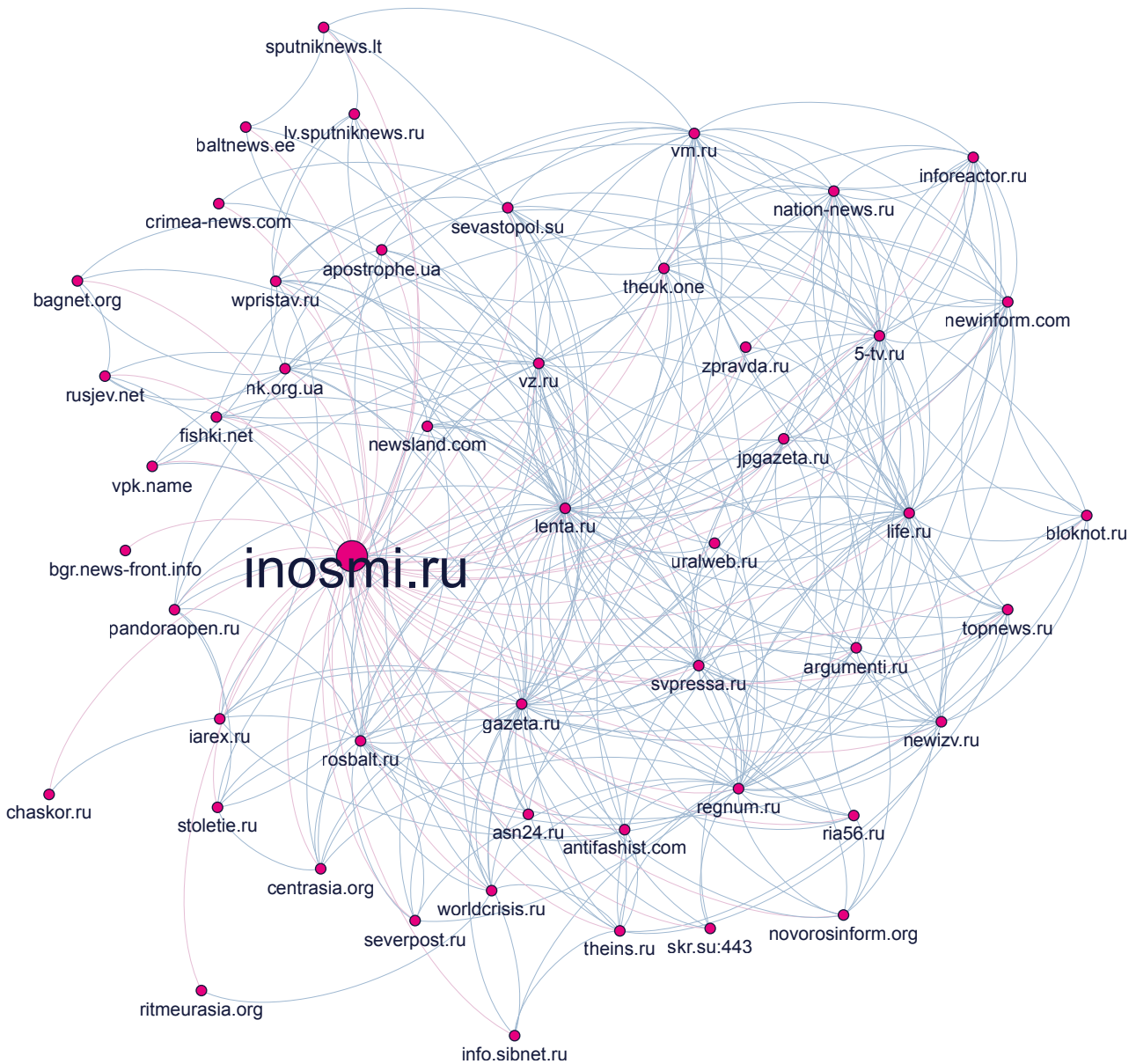

Figure 3.2: Mapping inoSMI's use network

Exploring the extent and nature of some of this network or relationships is the focus of Section 4.

SECTION 4: **AMPLIFICATION NETWORK**

The focus of this section is upon how a range of digital assets amplify and extend the reach of the kind of stories outlined to this point. The analysis is organized around three strands. The first attends to the use of a cross-platform array of social media accounts, groups and channels. The second strand focuses in upon the role of Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group, which, as rehearsed earlier on, is engaged in the influencing methodology via InoSMI and independently. The final strand illuminates the presence of a 'feedback loop' with the content being redirected to Western audiences.

Cross Platform Social Media use

InoSMI.ru operates across six different social media platforms, each linked to its website. For this report, their use of Twitter, Facebook, Telegram and YouTube were explored by analysing fifty recent Twitter and Facebook posts from InoSMI's official accounts sent between 26th February and 6th April. The selected posts were sampled on the basis of matching the influence operation methodology, in that they claimed to show the opinions of different countries, by quoting the comments posted in response to various media articles. Key insights generated via this exercise were:

● The inoSMI articles boosted via social media covered twelve countries: Bulgaria, China, France, UK, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Poland, Slovakia, Spain and the US.

● Articles claiming to examine opinions from China, Italy and the US had the highest average views, but the most voluminous were for the US and the UK, with eight and thirteen articles respectively.

● US-Russia relations were the most popular topic viewed by audiences on the inoSMI website.
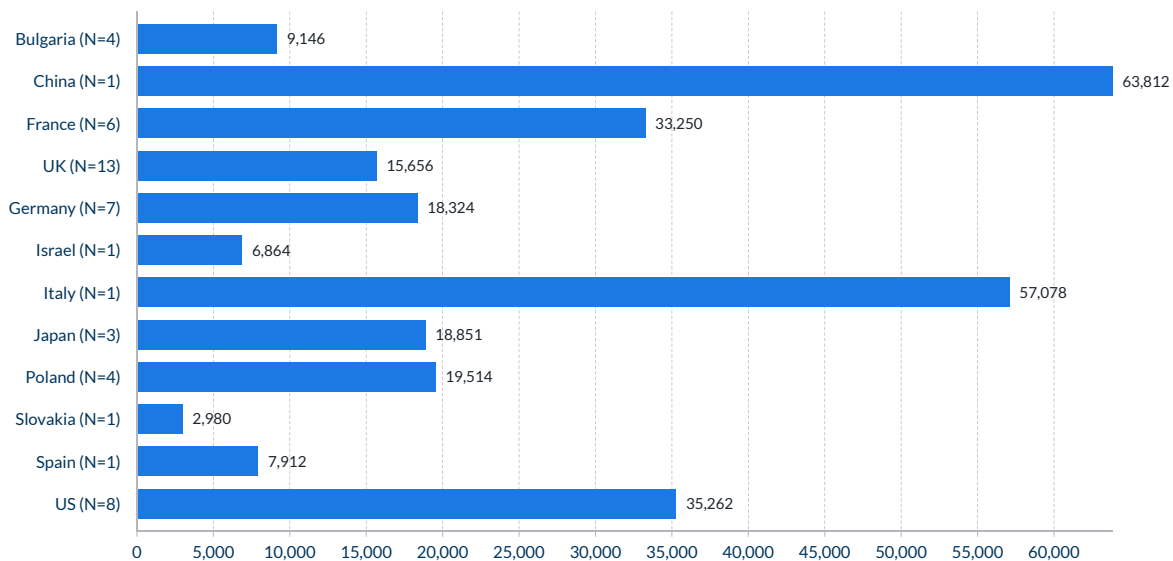

Figure 4.1: Average number of views on inoSMI per country. Source: inoSMI website.
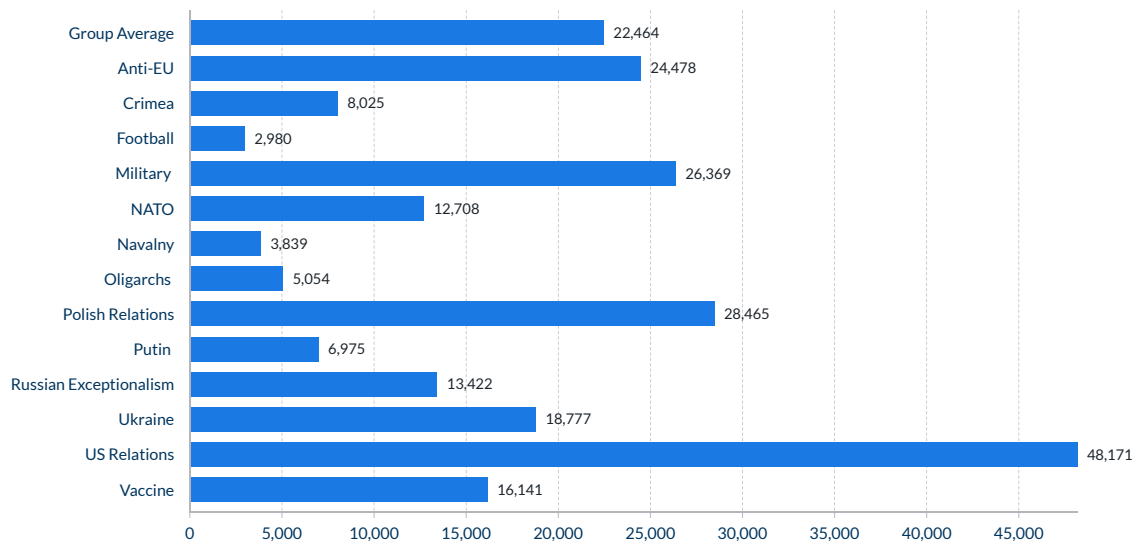
Figure 4.2: Average number of views on inoSMI per topic of interest. Source: inoSMI website.

Topic	Views
Group Average	22,464
Anti-EU	24,478
Crimea	8,025
Football	2,980
Military	26,369
NATO	12,708
Navalny	3,839
Oligarchs	5,054
Polish Relations	28,465
Putin	6,975
Russian Exceptionalism	13,422
Ukraine	18,777
US Relations	48,171
Vaccine	16,141

Telegram

- Two Telegram channels appear to be an important amplification mechanism for inoSMI.ru. A total of 28.7k mentions or posts matching 'inoSMI.ru' were detected on Telegram between 01/01/20 and 07/04/21.

- The UK's Daily Mail and France's Le Figaro are the two main quoted outlets on Telegram

- Coordination on Telegram around the stories of interest was achieved via two pathways: (a) high-profile journalists/ propagandists embedded in channels; and (b) a network of anonymous Telegram channels with large audiences, including media outlets.

YouTube

- For YouTube, 39 videos in Russian language referencing "читатели Inosmi" (inoSMI readers) were retrieved from the YouTube page with the name "ИноСМИ переводы" (4,77k subscribers[19]) (inoSMI translations), which appears to be the YouTube channel for the inoSMI outlet.

- The videos have been uploaded between 7/5/2018 (first reference) and 25/3/2020 (last reference) where the content shows a clear interest in engaging Chinese audiences.

Overall engagement with the articles on Twitter and Facebook was generally low considering the reported number of views and comments and inoSMI's sizeable following on these social media platforms (168.8K Twitter followers, 193K Facebook page likes).

- Averaging engagement across the sample of posts showed more 'likes' for posts on Facebook than Twitter and few shares on either platform.
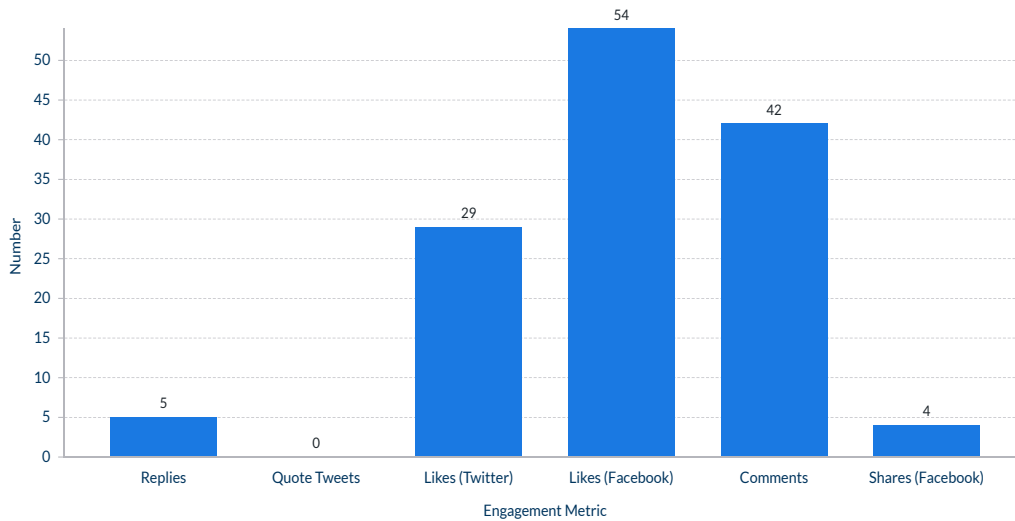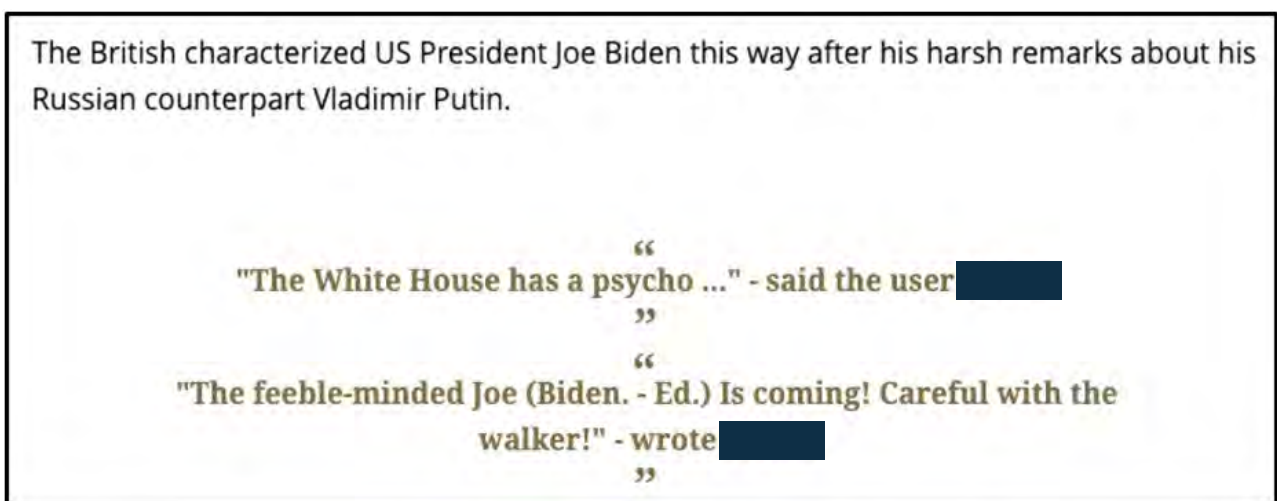
---

19   https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDyxWZW6AabSOwwepI8_bGA

Figure 4.3: inoSMI social media interactions on Twitter and Facebook: average engagement.

The Engagement of the Patriot Media Group

The historic activities of the Internet Research Agency and other Patriot Media Group (PMG) entities makes clear they possess the capacity and capability to conduct an extensive international, multi-lingual, multi-platform trolling campaign. Following the formula established above, inoSMI reader comments stories were amplified by the PMG entity RuEconomics.ru. For example (translated from Russian):

> The British characterized US President Joe Biden this way after his harsh remarks about his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.
>
> "The White House has a psycho ..." - said the user ▮▮▮▮▮
>
> "The feeble-minded Joe (Biden. - Ed.) Is coming! Careful with the walker!" - wrote ▮▮▮

This exemplifies how inoSMI's framing of the story seeks to accentuate possible tensions between allied countries. Additionally however, examples were identified of PMG outlets independently constructing their own versions of these narratives. RuEconomics.ru for instance, published the following (translated):

Daily Express readers argued in the comments about the military response to the new Russian weapons. Some propose to "strike at Russia" in the event of any threat of the use of Poseidon and other nuclear systems. Others respond by reminding them of the Russian military power that is incomparable with Britain.

> 21 HRS AGO
>
> If Russia ever uses any of these nuclear weapons in anger, we should just bomb Russia out of existence. No thinking about it. We know the Russians do not care, so why should we.
>
> REPLY | REPLY 👍

> KA · 10 HRS AGO
>
> LOL, LOL, LOL - if Russia decided to attack us, we would not exist to return the favour, the UK would be a big hole full of sea water. Get real. Russia is not our enemy, China is.
>
> REPLY 👍

Daily Express readers told about the threat to Britain of an attempt to destroy Russia

A Primer on Prigozhin and the Patriot Media Group

Yevgeny Prigozhin is the head of the Patriot Media Group which formally includes five pro-Kremlin media news organisations: RiaFan, PolitRussia.com, nation-news.ru, and RuEconomics.ru.[20] RiaFan in particular has been extensively investigated for its links to the IRA, including initially sharing the same address until it later moved to its own premises.[21] In 2017, the Russian investigative journal RBC also identified an additional 11 websites as being part of Prigozhin's 'media factory'. The label 'media factory' was used by the Russian investigators to refer to a group of related online websites which are associated, in one way or another to the original 'troll factory' (aka the IRA).[22]

The following is a list of digital entities linked to the IRA: RiaFan.ru; RuEconomics.ru; Nation-news.ru; Polit-info; PolitRussia.com; Newinform.com; Politros.com; Kievsmi.net; Politexpert.net; Nevnov.ru; Nahnews.org; Inforeactor.ru; Jpgazeta.com; Slovodel.com; Politpuzzle.ru; Whoswhos.org.

Connecting Patriot Media Group to the Influence Operation Targeting Ukraine

The initial connection between Patriot Media Group and the ongoing influence operation in Ukraine was identified through website politros.com linking to an inoSMI story. Further investigation revealed multiple overlapping connections. In an effort to tease these out, the level of interest and engagement being displayed by Patriot Media Group with the situation in Ukraine more generally was examined.

Using keywords associated with Ukraine and NATO, the number of articles published since the start of the year by three Patriot Media Group websites were calculated - jpgazeta.ru, novorosinform.org and politpuzzle.ru.

- The resulting data can be plotted using a rolling 7-day average to show growth in the number of articles published by these outlets matching on keywords for Ukraine, with growth over time also seen for NATO (see Figure 4.4).

20   https://mediapatriot.ru/
21   https://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2017/04/58d106b09a794710fa8934ac).
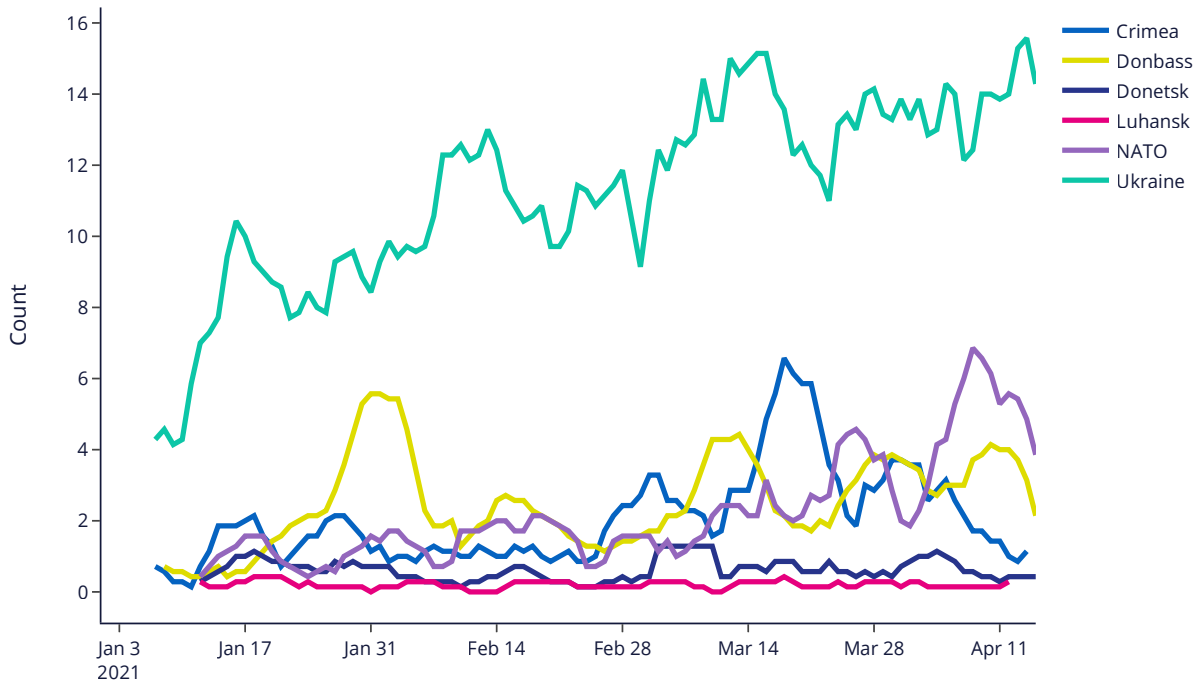22   https://meduza.io/feature/2017/03/23/imperiya-nahnews-i-pohnews

Figure 4.4: Summary trend of Patriot Media interest in topics allied to Ukraine (Jan to Apr)

Informed by this insight, a search was completed across a selection of known Patriot Media Group assets for headlines consistent with the basic 'reader comments' template for April 2021. The results are displayed in Figure 4.5 below. There are likely other stories not yet identified, but these results are sufficient to evidence that this is not just an occasional engagement with the reader's stories emanating from inoSMI, but is more systematic.
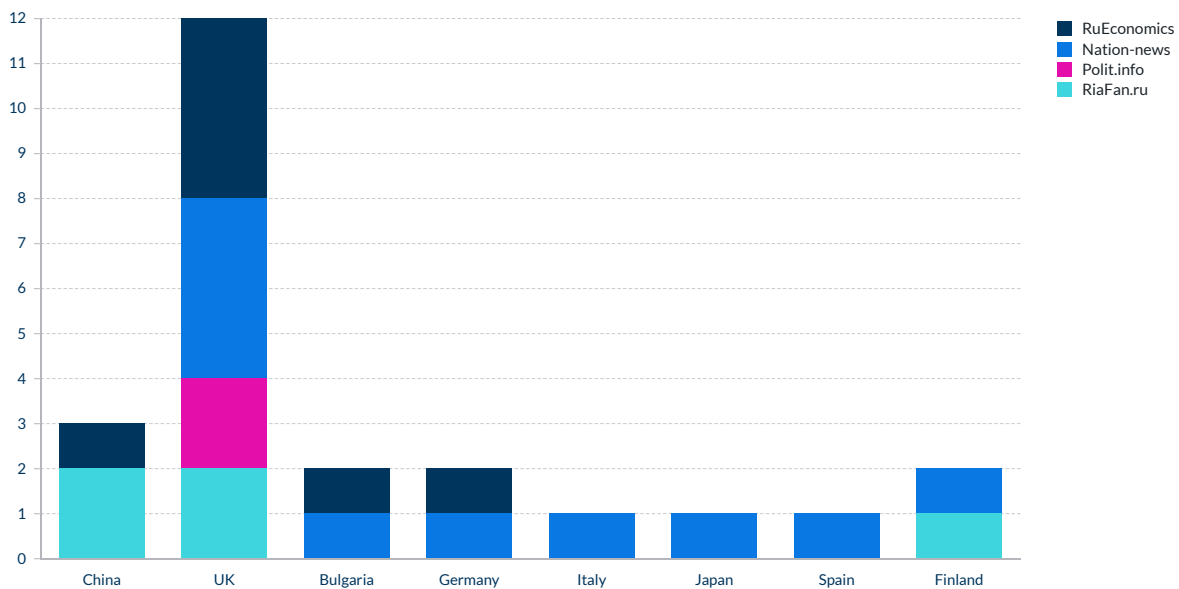

Figure 4.5:   Reader's stories published by Patriot Media in April 21 by target country.

Whilst 'reader comments' articles published by these four Patriot Media outlets all targeted the UK based on comments in the Daily Mail or Daily Express, also of note are articles about China. Potentially, this may be an angle that the Patriot assets in particular are engaging with:

- The Chinese articles got above average number of views relative to other target countries (ranging from 14K to 31K);
- The Chinese articles were each re-shared from other media assets linked to the Patriot Media Group.

Co-ordination

A second dimension to the analysis attends to co-ordination across PMG-linked media entities in connection with articles picked up by inoSMI (but not necessarily attributed). The table below evidences how, in response to a story in Germany's Der Spiegel, four separate PMG outlets published very similar stories to each other within the space of fifty minutes:

Outlet	Date/Time	Headlines	Source
Inosmi	05.04.21	German readers: Russians will always be one step ahead of NATO	Der Spiegel
Politros	05.04.2021, 20:11	The Germans accused the West of the tense situation in the east of Ukraine[23]	Der Spiegel
Slovodel	05.04.2021, 20:13	Readers of the German media called the West an unequivocal aggressor in relations with Russia[24]	Der Spiegel
Politexpert	05.04.2021, 20:23	The Germans called the West a real warmonger in the Donbass[25]	Der Spiegel
Inforeactor	05.04.2021, 20:58	The Germans told who is actually to blame for the escalation of the conflict in Donbass[26]	Der Spiegel

Table 4.1: Tight co-ordination across PMG-linked outlets for a German reader's story.

This temporally condensed form of co-ordination was not always apparent. It was more common for multiple outlets linked to the PMG to provide a more loosely co-ordinated response to the same stories with similar perspectives, using the 'reader comments' template. For example, as happened in response to a Daily Express narrative:

Outlet	Date/Time	Headlines	Source
Inosmi	03.04.21	British readers: Churchill was right about the Russian bear	The Daily Express
Newinform	04.04.2021, 6:28	The British reacted violently to the West's position on Ukraine[27]	The Daily Express
Politros	04.04.2021, 16:25	The British were outraged by the reaction of the West to the manoeuvres of the Armed Forces of Ukraine near the borders of Russia[28]	The Daily Express
SM News	04.04.2021, 17:44	The British were outraged by the West's reaction to the manoeuvres of the Ukrainian Armed Forces near the Russian borders[29]	The Daily Express
Nation News	04.04.2021, 20:03	The West's reaction to the exercises of the Armed Forces of Ukraine near the borders of Russia outraged the inhabitants of Britain[30]	The Daily Express

Table 4.2: 'Looser' co-ordination across PMG-linked outlets for a UK reader's story.

23   https://politros.com/204512-nemcy-obvinili-zapad-v-napryazhennoi-obstanovke-na-vostoke-ukrainy
24   https://slovodel.com/601474-chitateli-nemeckih-smi-nazvali-zapad-odnoznachnym-agressorom-v-otnosheniyah-s-rossiei?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop
25   https://politexpert.net/240618-nemcy-nazvali-zapad-nastoyashchim-razzhigatelem-voiny-v-
26   https://inforeactor.ru/364653-nemcy-rasskazali-kto-na-samom-dele-vinoven-v-eskalacii-konflikta-v-donbasse?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop
27   https://newinform.com/281752-britancy-burno-otreagirovali-na-poziciyu-zapada-po-povodu-ukrainy
28   https://politros.com/204384-britancev-vozmutila-reakciya-zapada-na-manevry-vsu-u-granic-rossii
29   https://sm.news/britancev-vozmutila-reakciya-zapada-na-manevry-vs-ukrainy-u-granic-rossii-68502-u3t5/
30   https://nation-news.ru/614107-reakciya-zapada-na-ucheniya-vsu-u-granic-rossii-vozmutila-zhitelei-britanii

Unlike the inoSMI articles, when the PMG-linked outlets were making use of reader comments there was no attempt to mix pro-Russian and pro-Kremlin ones in with a selection of more anti- ones. Any comments cited in shorter PMG-linked stories using the methodology were exclusively pro-Putin, pro-Kremlin, anti-West or denigrating of Ukraine.

Independent authoring

Focused analysis was undertaken of Prigozhin-linked entity Polit Russia (domain: politros.com) and its role in authoring reader's stories from the Daily Express on Russia-Ukraine during April 2021.

- Polit Russia have created 12 readers' stories of their own since 01 April, seven of them taking a UK focus. Of these, 2 cite the Daily Mail and the remainder the Daily Express.

- Readers' stories comprise a small (10%) proportion of their overall media output, therefore they are not operating at the scale of InoSMI, and the impact (travel) of Polit Russia readers' stories is a fraction of that seen for InoSMI.

The Polit Russia website has a tab for inoSMI and does remediate reader comment articles from this source, as shown above. However, three strands of evidence support the role of Polit Russia as a novel author of reader comments articles:

1. They self-attribute authorship: "PolitRussia presents an exclusive retelling of this article, as well as comments from readers of the British edition". A limited number of other outlets remediating their work also name Polit Russia, or include a hyperlink to the politros.com website.

2. One article sourced from the Daily Express shows Polit Russia's publication of a reader comments article pre-dates a reader's story from inoSMI on the same article.

3. The Polit Russia article uses different PKT quotes from the inoSMI version and typically does not cite the username.

Aside from differences in scale, other differences in the methodology of Polit Russia and inoSMI reader's articles are apparent:

- Polit Russia use the Daily Express as a source more frequently than the Daily Mail, which is most favoured by inoSMI.

- Articles authored by Polit Russia are shorter in length and report fewer user comments than inoSMI. Average for Politros = 3, for InoSMI = 25.

- In reader comments articles where Polit Russia attributes authorship, the article presents PKT comments as screenshots on the page with a larger font text quote underneath in blue. The usernames of the PKT accounts are obscured (see Figure below). In contrast, inoSMI lists the usernames and comments in the body of the article.

- InoSMI reader comments articles always provide a hyperlink to the UK media source article whereas Polit Russia link only to the news main webpage. Coupled with the anonymization of PKT usernames, this makes finding the source article for a Polit Russia version very difficult. We have, however, been able to verify a Daily Express source and a PKT comment reported anonymously in an article by Polit Russia, therefore we can confirm that these authors are using genuine comments from the website of UK press.

Why would Ukraine want to buy anything "hi-tech" from backward old Britain? Ukraine has been building aircraft carriers and selling them to China (e.g. Liaoning) for decades.

I'm amazed. We've been stuck in the navel-gazing technologically illiterate EU for four decades. We've lost any technology lead we used to have. The UK can't even build a flatscreen TV or a mobile phone these days.

And some people think we're going to supply advanced military tech?

"Why would Ukraine buy something" high-tech "from backward and old Britain? Ukraine has been building aircraft carriers for decades and selling them to China (for example, the Liaoning). I am surprised. We are stuck in a technologically illiterate European Union that has been staring at it for four decades. We have lost all the technological advantages that we had. Currently, the UK cannot even build a flat screen TV or mobile phone. And some people think that we will supply advanced military technology? " - asks one of the commentators.

Figure 4.6: The presentational style of reader comments articles authored by PolitRussia. Source: https://politros.com/204691-chitateli-britanskikh-smi-vysmeyali-namereniya-velikobritanii-zagnat-rossiyu-v-lovushku "British media readers ridiculed Britain's intentions to drive Russia into a trap" 07/04/21.

Feedback Loop

A third strand to the amplification process involves a kind of feedback loop, whereby a small selection of the reader comments stories are communicated back to Western audiences. To date, we have detected only limited instances of this, suggesting it is not a major focus of the operating methodology. Nevertheless, the fact that it does happen, is an important part of the influence operation to capture and document.

Analysis of 6 inoSMI pro-Russian articles, based upon Spanish language comments made on ABC. es (N = 6) and El País (N = 1) articles[31] , dated between April 2020 and April 2021, confirms how these materials are sometimes targeted towards the Russian diaspora. Five of these Spanish origins narratives were tracked being disseminated via Russpain.com a specialist website for Russian speakers living in Spain.

There were examples of English language versions of the reader comments template uncovered, including on: News Front; TheDuran.com; and bulgarianmilitary.com. The fact that all of them are known for engaging in propaganda and disinformation, probably implies something about the limited segments of Western media audiences thought likely to be receptive to such content.

A PKT comment posted on the 10/04 in response to a Daily Mail article was cited independently by Russian State media Ria Novosti and by News Front in a Russian language story: "The British admired the Russian military robots." The time stamps on the articles indicate that Sputnik Serbia ran the story first, followed by News Front and then Ria Novosti several hours later.

News Front is linked to the Russian FSB and was subject to recent US sanctions in relation to interference in the 2020 elections.   Additional searches of the News Front website, which publishes in ten languages, found a total of 23 reader comments stories in April all on Ukraine, 3 of them published in the English language. None referenced inoSMI as a source. Additionally:

- There were 7 readers stories in the Bulgarian edition of News Front in April referring to the situation in Ukraine.

- Publishing in the English language did not mean the reader comments stories were exclusively from the UK media. The 13/04 article "It's not our problem" – Britons criticised military demarche against Russia" used comments from the Daily Mail, but the others were from the United States.

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31   There were 6 articles in total as one article targeted both ABC and El País readers.

- In total, however, ten reader comments stories across all languages did cite UK media, the Daily Mail (N=9) and The Sun (N=1), most commonly in Spanish:

  o   The British laughed at Biden's promises to Zelensky
  o   Article on "sinister" Russian submarines amused the British
  o   In the UK they were interested in the heavy military robots "Uran" from Russia
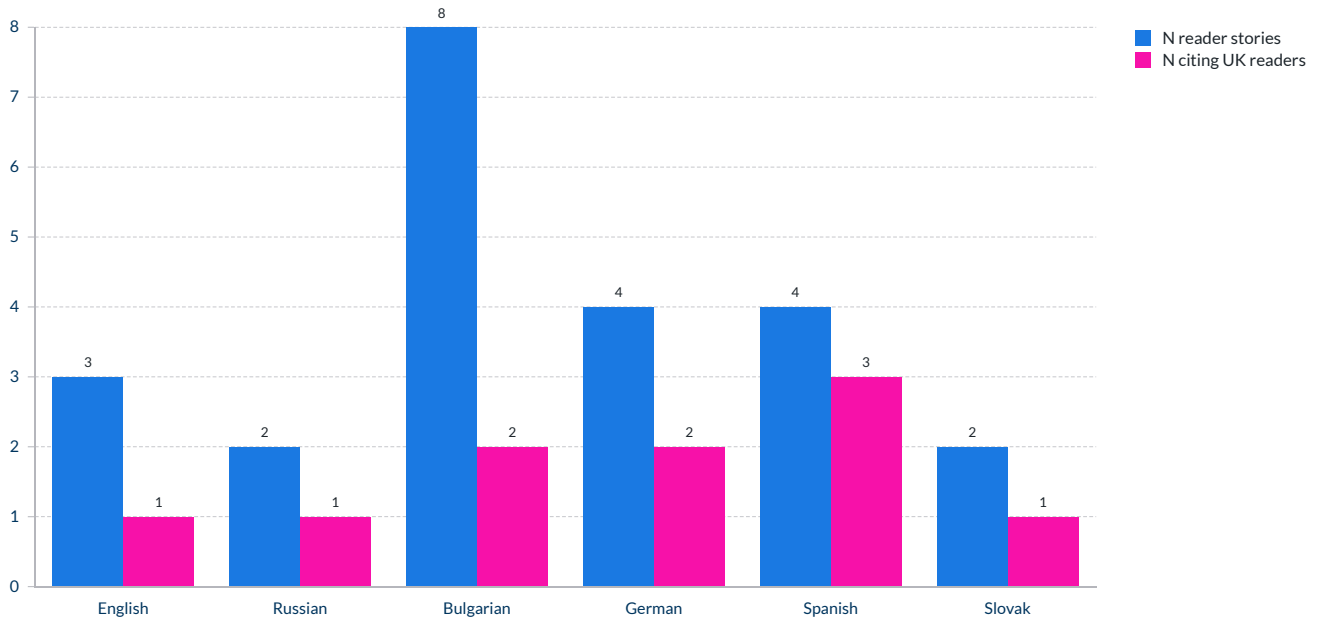

Figure 4.7 summarizes the language News Front articles were published in.

- Figure 4.7: News Front article numbers by language of publication

Figure 4.7 shows News Front using UK reader comments to portray British viewpoints to non-English language audiences, although its particular focus is Bulgaria.

On 19th April the website theDuran.com published two English language articles based upon translations of inoSMI articles derived from US media sources. The two Duran articles are authored by Seraphim Hanisch, an American living permanently in Moscow, who has previously written for USAreally.com and is listed as an 'expert' on their website. USAreally.com was indicted by the Mueller investigation and latterly has been sanctioned by the US Treasury for its links to the IRA. Seraphim has written hundreds of pro-Russian, anti-Western articles for a variety of outlets. The Duran is owned by a company incorporated in Cyprus.

The two articles in question are:

Figure 4.8: Screenshots of two theDuran.com articles

Importantly, for both pieces, Hanisch has added his own 'Forwards' where he introduces his own themes and interpretations. He suggests that Americans should replicate the service provided by inoSMI, and that it does not constitute propaganda, at least in the traditional sense, on the grounds that it is merely reporting how the US media is self-generating all the material evidencing how many problems there are in the country. As he summarizes (in grammar that might indicate a non-native English speaker):

> *What makes this piece so interesting is that here, it shows how many Americans themselves know there are problems, and their own frankness is refreshing. Somehow, even though the comments are from a well-known US outlet, seeing them duplicated in Russia and sent back makes them a bit more meaningful and worthy of reflection.*

The last sentence in this extract is especially noteworthy, inasmuch as it highlights the value of such perspectives being "sent back."

The story *'The Russians know Americans do not like Biden'*32 is based on an inoSMI article *'Fox News (USA): Russia expels 10 American diplomats after Biden's administration announces new sanctions'*33. This inoSMI article followed the 'reader comments' template and was originally called *'Readers Fox News: Russian are not afraid of anyone'* when scraped on the 20th April. Why the title was changed is not known.

32   https://theduran.com/the-russians-know-americans-do-not-like-biden-video/
33   https://inosmi.ru/politic/20210419/249589138.html

SECTION 5: **CONCLUSIONS**

There are several strengths of the influence operation methodology that has been outlined in this report:

- By operating along multiple influence vectors it has the potential to shape the thoughts, emotions and behaviour of several diverse international audiences.

- Relatedly, by adopting a 'full spectrum' media strategy that blends together social and mainstream media outlets, it possesses far greater potential audience reach than those methods depending upon social media alone.

- Finally, and most importantly, the particular tactics and techniques used to 'hack' the comments function in the media ecosystem, make it almost impossible to attribute responsibility for the pro-Kremlin trolling behaviour on the basis of publicly available open source data.

Accordingly, in conducting and reporting on the analysis and assessment undertaken, we have tried to be appropriately cautious in terms of the inferences and conclusions drawn. The analysis has been organized 'prismatically', partially separating out and focusing in upon each of the components that are blended together in the operational strategy. Informed by the available evidence we do not conclude that all of the pro-Putin/pro-Kremlin/anti-West comments posted on Western media sites are being authored by foreign state operatives. Some of the comments are likely organic, but for others there are consistent and repeating inauthenticity and co-ordination signals.

There is greater clarity available on the ways that Russian state media, along with other fringe media and web-based digital assets, are functioning to misrepresent these comments as indicators of Western public opinion, often casting the Western media outlets themselves as 'credible messengers' to support the key claims. The principal audience target of this influencing effort is Russian language speaking populations, including those across Europe. However, in addition, some limited indicators were identified of these messages being played back in a feedback loop in other languages. It is not clear whether inoSMI.ru is a witting or unwitting accomplice to this strategy. Much of its output appears legitimate, but equally the recurrent picking up on the 'reader comments' and how they are packaged suggests some awareness of the propaganda value of this material. It is also evident that the methodology affords detailed surveillance of Western media, using the reader comments as an indicator of public opinion.

Also of note is the extensive engagement of the Patriot Media Group and other outlets alleged to be connected to Russian security services, with a history of promoting disinforming and propagandistic information. Although it cannot be substantiated, one possible scenario is that the trolling activity is being conducted by employees of the successor agencies to the Internet Research Agency, which after all is also part of Prigohzin's network of companies. With this acting as source material that seeds the activities of a wider array or more, and less, legitimate media entities to engage in messaging that aligns with Kremlin talking points and geopolitical strategic interests.

The active 'management' of domestic public opinion has been a longstanding focus of the Putin regime. Indeed, this was the original purpose of the St Petersburg based Internet Research Agency, albeit its popular infamy is tied to more international ventures. Likewise, it has been extensively documented that the Kremlin has a particular interest in seeking to influence public perceptions and political decisions in its 'near-abroad', and those countries it sees as falling within its 'sphere of influence.' Key components of the methodology outlined above are clearly coherent with these strategic aims.

This is especially the case in light of claims that popular support for Putin's administration has been weakening on the home front.

It is probably no accident that the key components of this influence operation methodology have been illuminated in relation to the recent Ukraine-Russia tensions. The potential for armed conflict in Crimea and Donbass generated both a focusing of attention and escalation of activity, revealing traces that allowed us to unpick the key components and phases of the playbook. Equally however, although it is not possible to be especially definitive about such matters, it is clear that elements of the methodology pre-date the Ukraine crisis, and they have also been applied to a much wider array of issues and topics. Comprehensively cataloguing these, will require further extended and intensive research.

ABOUT **OSCAR**

The **OSCAR (Open Source Communications Analytics Research)** programme at Cardiff University is a large multi-disciplinary research effort designed to develop an evidence-based understanding of the causes, construction, communication and consequences of (dis)information operations and campaigns. Funded by UK government, the EU and the UK science research councils amongst others, it uses techniques and methodologies from across the social, behavioural and data sciences to investigate the ways digital deception and distortion shapes public perceptions and political decision-making. The research reported in this document was funded by UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as part of this wider programme.

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