

## Fronts & Friends: An Investigation into Two Twitter Networks Linked to Russian Actors

Renée DiResta and Shelby Grossman

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## 1 Introduction

On February 23, 2021 Twitter announced the removal of two networks linked to Russian actors, which it had shared with the Stanford Internet Observatory on February 12. The first network, which we will call Network 1, “can be reliably tied to Russian state actors,” according to Twitter. It consisted of two types of accounts: accounts that claimed to be located in Syria and accounts that spread anti-NATO messaging. Many of these accounts were sockpuppets, claiming to be individuals that did not exist, or fake media fronts. The network includes 26,762 tweets that date back to the end of 2013. The most recent tweets were from the end of 2020. The largest account had 20,505 followers, but the rest had far fewer. Accounts tweeted in English, Russian, and Arabic. Many accounts were nominally multilingual. A handful of the fake accounts in this set have already been noted in a September 2020 [Graphika report](#) into a [Facebook takedown](#) of accounts attributed to the Russian military.

The second network, which we will call Network 2, consisted of 31 accounts created between July 2009 and October 2020. While we are using the term “Network 2” to differentiate the data set, it appears to consist of scattered collections of accounts tied to previously-unearthed operations on other social media platforms, including Facebook. According to Twitter, this network shows “signs of being affiliated with the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and Russian government-linked actors.” This network produced 68,914 tweets and tweeted in English, Russian, Turkish, and French – several accounts tweeted in multiple languages. Subjects included international affairs of interest to the Russian government, and a cluster with a specific focus on Turkey and disputing the Armenian genocide. The largest account had 11,542 followers but only 8 had over 1,000 followers, and 11 had under ten. The accounts in aggregate had only 79,807 engagements across the entire tweet corpus, and appear to have been linked to the operations primarily via technical indicators rather than amplification or conversation between them. A few of the bios from accounts in the set claim to be journalists. Two profiles, belonging to an American activist and a Russian academic, were definitively real people; we do not have sufficient visibility into the technical indicators that led to their inclusion in the network and thus do not include them in our discussion. However, several of the accounts in Network 2 were tied to quasi-think tank media properties – a favored legitimization tactic leveraged by multiple information operations actors within the Russian intelligence services and additionally by mercenary social media operators linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin (such as the Internet Research Agency). We discuss those accounts, and how this tactic has been repeatedly leveraged by multiple entities within the Russian intelligence services and adjacent actors, in this report.

Specific attribution for these networks is challenging to assess. In some ways the accounts from Network 1 resemble activity [we have investigated previously](#) attributed to Russia’s Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, colloquially known as the GRU. For example the narratives spread about Syria are nearly identical to narratives that the GRU-attributed fake media outlet the Inside Syria Media Center shared. Additionally, we see fake personas with Medium

accounts and Telegram channels, as we have seen in GRU-attributed activity. But at the same time, when looking at both the Syria and anti-NATO activity, we do not see overlap in domains shared. Within Network 2, we see ties to operations previously attributed to at least two distinct entities: Russia's Служба внешней разведки Российской Федерации (the Foreign Intelligence Service, known by the acronym SVR), and the Internet Research Agency. Some of the behavior between the two is quite similar, though the IRA was established in 2013, and some of the websites and accounts in the data set were active within the 2009-2012 timeframe and are thus more likely to have at least initial ties to a state entity.

Key takeaways:

- The two Russian networks reinforce earlier findings about the centrality of fake media outlets and quasi-think tank properties to Russian disinformation campaigns. This is a favored legitimization tactic leveraged by multiple information operations actors within the Russian intelligence services and actors linked to the Internet Research Agency.
- Network 1: As Twitter, Facebook, and Medium continue to chip away at the presence of Russian government-linked fake accounts pushing Russia-aligned narratives about Syria and NATO, we find that the activity persists on Telegram and LiveJournal.

## 2 Network 1

In this section we discuss Network 1, which had accounts that tweeted about Syria, and accounts that tweeted about NATO and Western Europe.

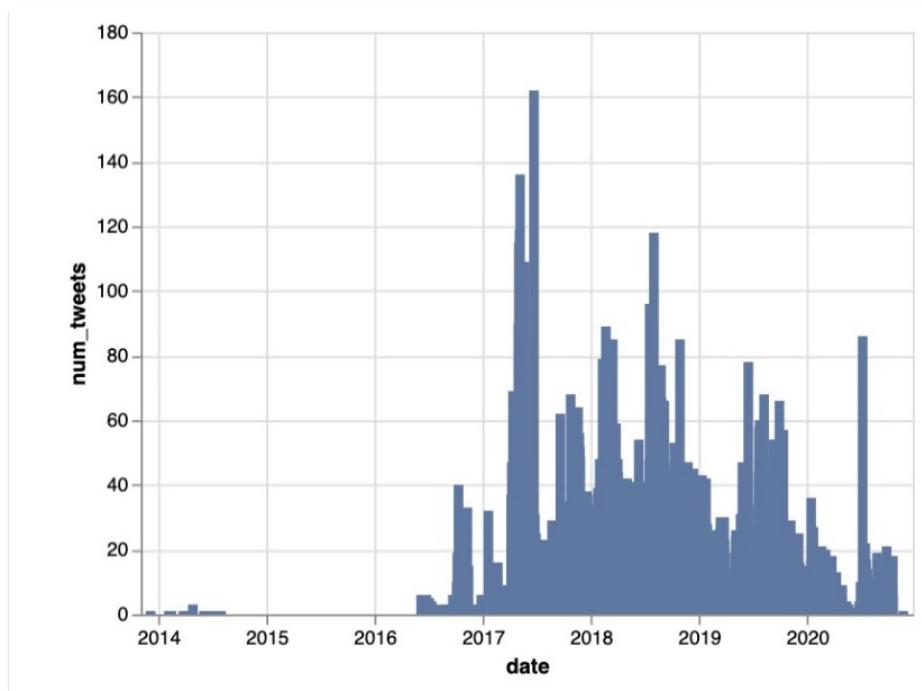


Figure 1: Network 1: Tweet frequency over time

## 2.1 Syria Accounts

Approximately one-third of the suspended accounts tweeted primarily about Syria, in English, Russian, and Arabic; many accounts tweeted in all three languages. The themes these accounts pushed will be familiar to anyone who has studied Russian overt or covert information operations about Syria:

- Praising Russia's role in Syria; claiming Russia was killing terrorists in Syria and highlighting Russia's humanitarian aid
- Criticizing the role of the Turkey and the US in Syria; claiming the US killed civilians in Syria
- Criticizing the White Helmets, and claiming that they worked with Westerners to created scenes to make it look like the Syrian government used chemical weapons

The two most prominent Syria accounts were @Syria\_FreeNews and @Pam-Spenser.

@Syria\_FreeNews had 20,505 followers and was created on April 6, 2017. The account's bio said "Exclusive information about Middle East and Northern Africa countries events. BreaKing news from the scene." It had a presence on other platforms as well, including a [Tumblr account](#), with what appear to be original articles in English and Russian. (We thank the Wayback Machine for archiving all posts from this Tumblr. We can share archived links on request.) We believe this was a [linked but now-suspended](#) YouTube channel, and this is its [live but inactive](#)

YouTube channel. It has a [live VK profile](#) that stopped posting mid-2020, around the same time that the Tumblr went quiet.



Figure 2: An [archived version](#) of @Syria\_FreeNews from October 29, 2019. The visible tweet links to a Telegram channel with the name and photo of a man who has been identified as a reporter who was embedded with Wagner mercenaries in Syria.

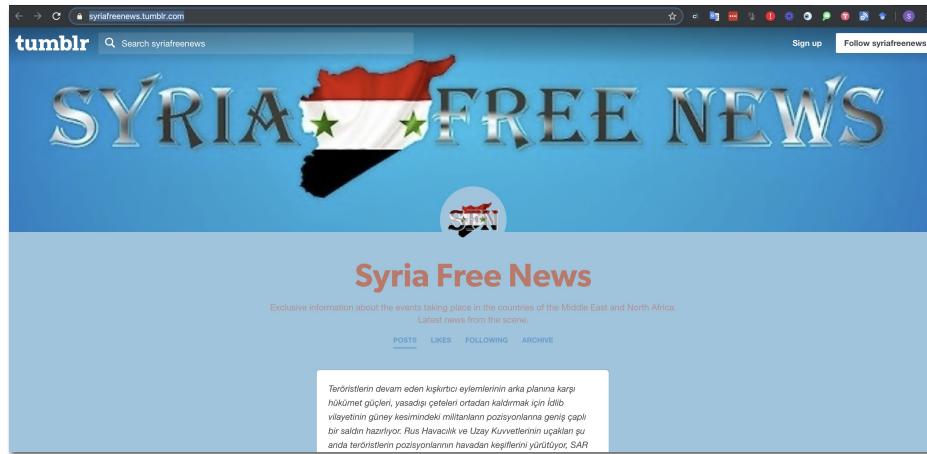


Figure 3: The Syria Free News Tumblr.

We compared the top hashtags from posts from the [GRU-attributed Inside Syria Media Center](#) Facebook Page, and @Syria\_FreeNews in Figure 4. While the hashtags are similar, they are also quite generic. Neither @Syria\_FreeNews nor any accounts in the network ever referenced the Inside Syria Media Center.

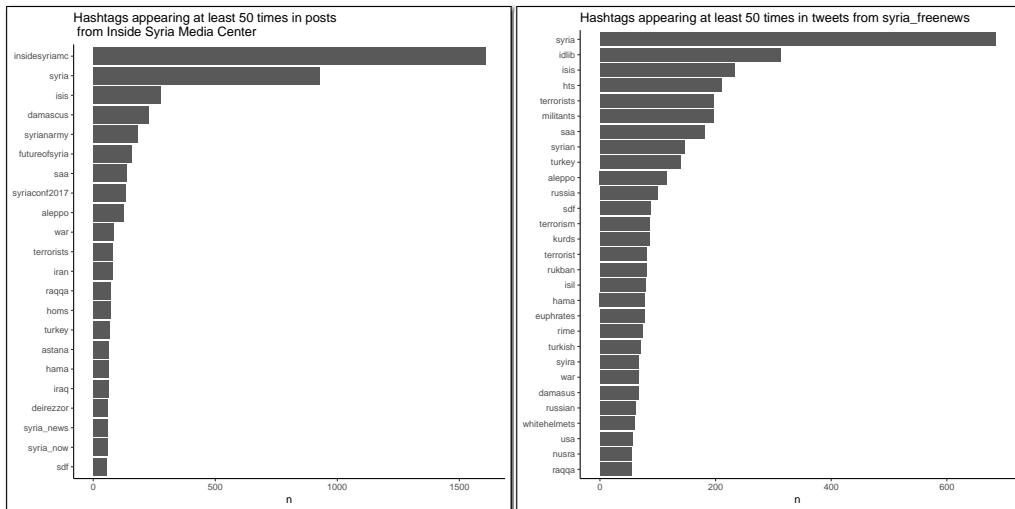


Figure 4: Left: Top hashtags from the GRU-attributed Inside Syria Media Center Facebook Page. Right: Top hashtags from @Syria\_FreeNews.

The @PamSpenser account was created on July 8, 2017. It had 6,502 followers, and its tweets had 36,597 engagements overall – the highest in the network. The account claimed to be located in Oslo, Norway, and listed a [Facebook profile](#) that is down. Her Twitter and Facebook account banner images said “War is what happens when language fails.” [Graphika has previously identified](#) the Pam Spenser persona while writing about a network that Facebook suspended at the end of 2020 and attributed to the Russian military.



Figure 5: An [archived version](#) of the Pam Spenser account from May 25, 2018. We believe the profile photo is of Norwegian actress Josefine Frida Pettersen.

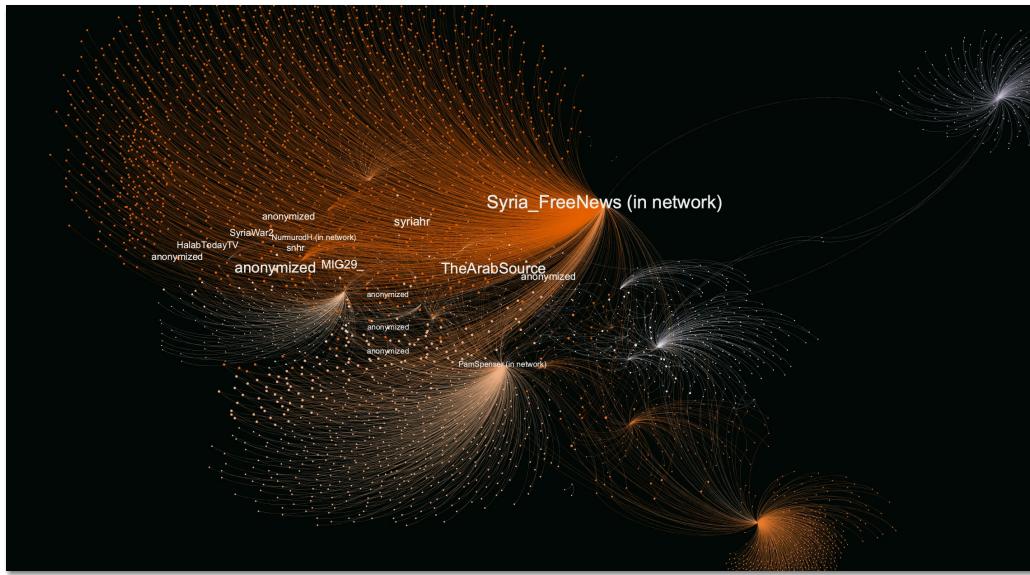


Figure 6: A graph showing the accounts most frequently mentioned in the entire suspended network. Suspended accounts frequently mentioned fellow suspended accounts @Syria\_FreeNews and @PamSpenser.

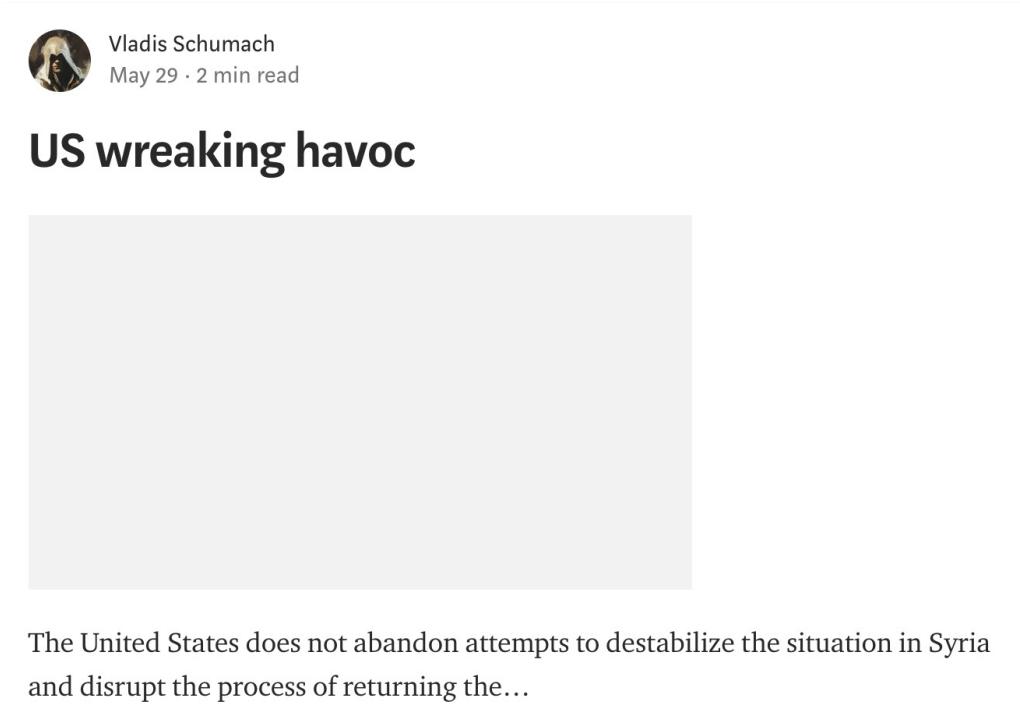
Pam Spenser had a [now-suspended Medium page](#) that oddly went by the name Pamela Caramela. An [archived version of the Medium page](#) shows that it wrote articles about Syria. Interestingly, the logo on the Medium page was the Syria Free News logo. Another account in the network that wrote about Syria, Vladis Schumach, had a [now-suspended Medium page](#) as well.

medium.com › [@pamela.caramela.86](#) ::

**US To Support IS Terrorists in Syria - [Pamela Spenser - Medium](#)**

The Islamic State resumed attempts to penetrate the Palmyra area while the Syrian Arab Army fights jihadists in northwestern Syria. According to a military ...

Figure 7: The Medium page for Pamela Spenser also used the name Pamela Caramela.



Vladis Schumach  
May 29 · 2 min read

## US wreaking havoc

The United States does not abandon attempts to destabilize the situation in Syria and disrupt the process of returning the...

Figure 8: A post from a [now-suspended Medium page](#) connected to one of the suspended Twitter accounts.

The Syria portion of the network included additional sockpuppet accounts. One of these claimed to be a gay rights defender in Syria. Several said they were Syrian journalists. Another account, @SophiaHammer3, said she was born in Syria but currently lives in London. “I’m fond of history and politics. I struggle for justice.” Twitter users had previously observed that Sophia was likely a sockpuppet.

Several of these Syria Twitter accounts linked to a Telegram channel for [the Syrian Humanitarian Observer Group](#). The Telegram channel is active, as of February 2021, spreading disinformation about the White Helmets and linking to a [Twitter account that protects its tweets](#).



Figure 9: Left: A currently-active Telegram channel many of the suspended accounts linked to. Right: A Twitter account with protected tweets that the Telegram channel frequently links to.

## 2.2 Anti-NATO/Western Europe Accounts

Approximately ten accounts tweeted primarily about NATO. These accounts were created between 2016 and 2020, and tweeted in Russian and English. Themes included:

- NATO is ineffective.
- NATO is arming terrorists in Syria.
- There are divisions within NATO.
- Content trying to divide Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Gibraltar from the UK, particularly vis a vis Brexit. (Tweets on this topic are from 2018.)
- Content pushing for Russian influence in the Arctic / claims that the US is militarizing the Arctic.

One of these accounts, which used the display name Brussels Snitch, linked in its bio to a [Russian-language Telegram channel](#) with the same name. The Brussels Snitch “brand” appears to have written an [article on Riafan](#) describing how NATO supposedly brainwashes young people in former Soviet countries to dislike Russia. [Graphika has previously observed](#) the Brussels Snitch account, as part of their September 2020 investigation into a network suspended by Facebook. It is interesting that the brand’s activity has persisted on [Telegram](#) and through this Riafan collaboration, despite its Instagram and Twitter accounts being suspended.

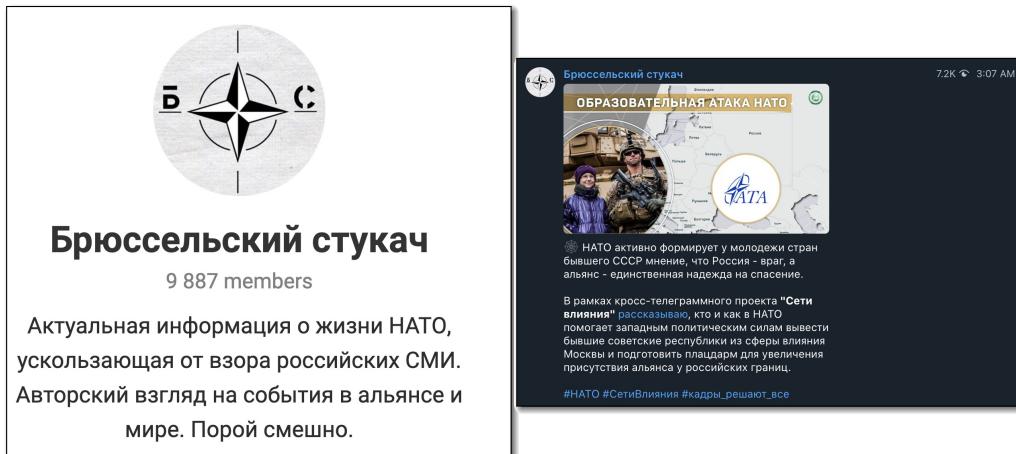


Figure 10: Left: A [Telegram channel](#) called Brussels Snitch. A suspended account used the same display name, and linked to this channel in its bio. The channel description translates to “Actual information about the life of NATO, eluding the gaze of the Russian media. Author’s view of events in the alliance and the world. Sometimes it’s funny.” Right: A post from the Telegram channel on February 20, 2021. It says that NATO is creating the impression that Russia is the enemy among the youth of former Soviet countries. It also links to this [Riafan article](#).

Brussels Snitch’s tweets, along with many of the other anti-NATO accounts, linked to two domains: [westvoices.com](#) and [akdat.com](#). Both are currently for sale, and pushed standard pro-Russia content, at least in recent years. We encourage researchers to investigate the narratives on these sites further; both were active for several years, and dozens of archives of their content can be found on archive.org. We note that [westvoice.com](#)’s Facebook activity [appears to have been suspended](#) at the end of 2020.

Several accounts in the network linked to the Russian-language [nat-antivirus.live-journal.com](#), and one of the suspended Twitter accounts shared a name with this LiveJournal. The LiveJournal posts mirror the themes described previously in this post. As of writing, it is still active.



Figure 11: Images shared by the fake account Viktor Zar (Zaretsky) on July 26, 2018. This persona’s Facebook account [was suspended](#) in September 2020.

## 2.3 Other Content

In this section we want to highlight two additional observations from Network 1. First, one of the anti-NATO accounts, @LeonBak33 (who has a [Medium account](#) with one article, in Russian, from December 2, 2019, mocking NATO) shared a three memes mocking Russian opposition figure Alexei Navalny. One of these memes can be seen in Figure 12.

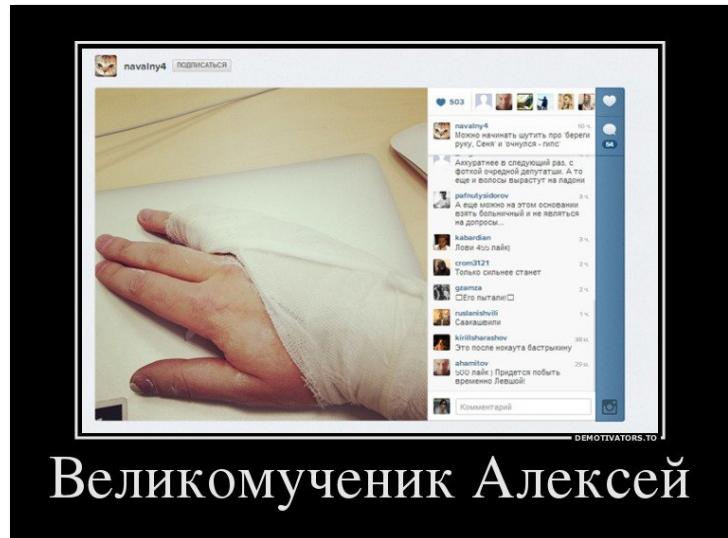


Figure 12: An image shared by @LeonBak33 on August 26, 2018 mocking Alexei Navalny. The bottom text says: “Great Martyr Saint Aleksei”.

Second, in September 2017, the Viktor Zar(etsky) account tweeted at dozens of users attempting to counter a narrative that Russia accidentally killed civilians (or nearly killed civilians - it is difficult to assess the precise content this account is responding to) during Zapad 2017, a joint military exercise between Russia and Belarus. A small sample of these tweets are shown in Figure 13.

2017-09-20T06:13:00	null	@ [REDACTED] the event did not take place during Zapad 2017. It happened earlier when the Russian Air Forces trained to hit targets. No victims
2017-09-20T06:11:00	null	@ [REDACTED] The Russian Ministry of Defense states that it happened during the Russian Air Forces trainings some time ago. No victims
2017-09-20T06:11:00	null	@ [REDACTED] The Russian Ministry of Defense states that it happened during the Russian Air Forces trainings some time ago. No victims
2017-09-20T06:10:00	null	@ [REDACTED] el evento no ocurrió en Zapad2017. Pasó más temprano cuando las fuerzas aéreas de Rusia estaban entrenando batir objetivos. No hubo víctimas
2017-09-20T06:09:00	null	@ [REDACTED] the event did not take place during Zapad 2017. It happened earlier when the Russian Air Forces trained to hit targets. No victims

Figure 13: A sample of Viktor Zar(etsky)'s tweets about Zapad 2017.

## 3 Network 2

As noted in the introduction, Facebook [took action](#) against three distinct Russia-linked networks in a takedown announced on September 24, 2020. One of the three networks appeared linked to Twitter Network 1, and two of the others appear to be linked to various accounts within Twitter Network 2.

In addition to the military-linked entity's Pages (tied to Twitter Network 1), the

Facebook takedown included a separate cluster of Pages for think tank-media hybrid websites Strategic Culture Foundation, Oriental Review, and several other grey propaganda sites (discussed later in this section). Two accounts in Twitter Network 2 appear to have been operated by Oriental Review and the Strategic Culture Foundation, respectively. Oriental Review bills itself as an “open source site for free thinking”, though it trades in outlandish conspiracy theories and posts content bylined by fake people. Stanford Internet Observatory researchers and **investigative journalists** have previously noted the presence of content bylined by fake “reporter” personas tied to the **GRU-linked** front Inside Syria Media Center, posted on Oriental Review.

Strategic Culture Foundation (SCF), a quasi-think tank, has been described **in an extensive report** by the U.S. State Department as having ties to the Служба внешней разведки Российской Федерации, Russia’s externally-tasked Foreign Intelligence Service, colloquially known as the SVR. As has been observed by **other researchers in the past**, these two properties are part of a broader ecosystem of “grey propaganda” properties that share authors and contributors as well as some technical links.

Researchers at the Digital Forensic Research Lab of the Atlantic Council **explored the Facebook SCF and Oriental Review-network takedown**, and noted several additional associated media properties that were taken down. One example was Route Magazine, which also appears in Twitter Network 2. It had ties to the broader Facebook network and was shared by the affiliated fake persona accounts. The Twitter account @routemag, created in 2012, identified itself as a “Independent Russian journalist writing and tweeting about #economy, #energy, #Arctic and #Eurasian affairs”. Its domain is presently down, but a version of the site remains up on Wordpress at routemag.wordpress.com, and it indeed focuses on those topics with a pro-Kremlin stance. Several of the profile names appearing in the Facebook network diagram by DFRLab (Figure 14), including Eva Merkurieva, Владимир Максименко, Anton Bespalov, appear as usernames in the Twitter Network 2 takedown data as well. Others in Twitter Network 2, such as @andrei\_elvisj1, have incomplete usernames (“Andrei”), but tweeted dozens of links to Strategic Culture articles.

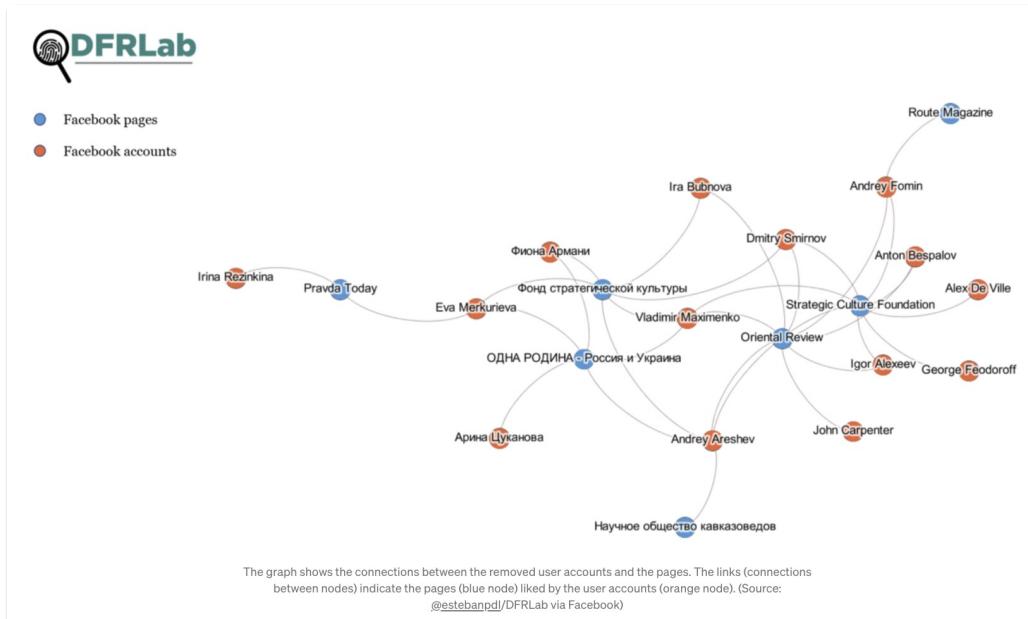


Figure 14: Image from a DFRLab report.

The DFRLab analysis of domains shared on the Facebook Pages (and by the related profiles) additionally notes the prominent presence of yet another domain, fondsk.ru (see Figure 15).

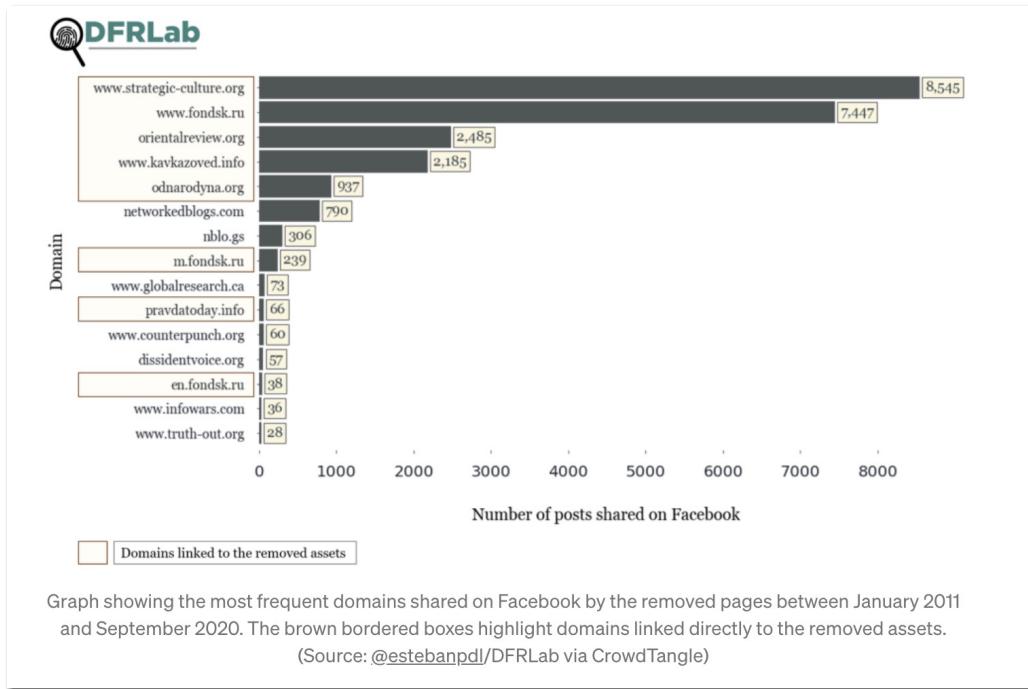


Figure 15: Image from a DFRLab report.

One of the accounts in Twitter Network 2 has the same username, Andrey Areshev,

as a profile that appears in the Facebook network. Its handle is @fondskru and in the Twitter data it exclusively shared fondsk.ru articles. Andrey Areshev is additionally the name of the individual initially listed as the domain registrant of strategic-culture.org (spelled "Andrey G Areshev"); a search using the email address affiliated with his registration of that domain additionally turns up domain registrations for fondsk.net and fondsk.org, as well as two other domains linked to Pages that came down in the Facebook action in September 2020. A third transliteration, Andrei Areshev, is additionally a noted expert listed on the website affiliated with one of the other properties that came down in this takedown, the Valdai Club (discussed later in this report).

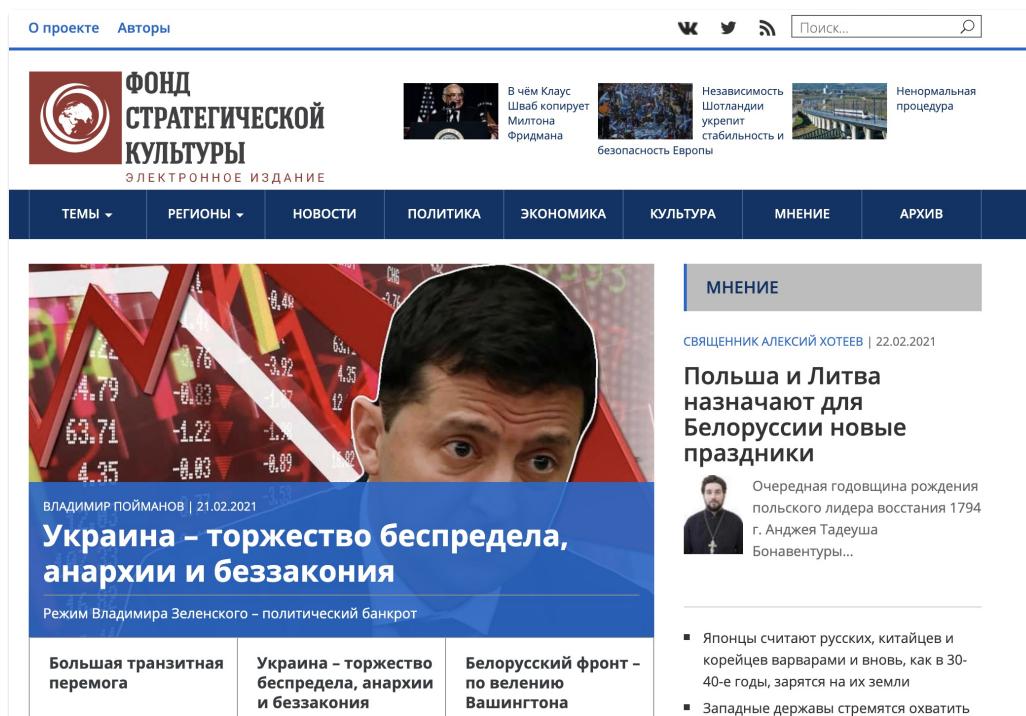


Figure 16: Screenshot of fondsk.ru homepage on February 21, 2021.

Adding to the complexity of Twitter Network 2, three of the accounts were linked to yet another quasi-think tank entity, United World International (UWI). UWI, which presents as a Turkish think tank, also appeared in Facebook's September 2020 takedown. It was determined by Facebook and Twitter to have **ties to** individuals affiliated with the Internet Research Agency, a mercenary social media manipulation outfit linked to Evgeniy Prigozhin - therefore, plausibly outside of official Russian government control, and yet close to it by way of Prigozhin's well-documented relationships. DFRLab also **evaluated this operation** as it appeared on Facebook, noting that it had a YouTube channel as well, but ultimately concluding "All in all, the network was not particularly successful despite being active for nearly two years." Twitter data from Network 2 corroborates this assessment – the UWI operation performed similarly dismally (in engagement terms) on Twitter. The Network 2 data set included two accounts that appeared to be directly linked,

including one with username @jeune\_turque (created in July 2015) that primarily retweeted other users until January 1, 2020, when it began to extensivley retweet content from UWI. In March 2020 it additionally began to mass-reply to other Twitter users, sending repetitive verbatim messages about the Armenian genocide (“Le génocide arménien est un mensonge impérialiste!”) in French and Turkish. A second account, @Kemalist\_61 (created in October 2020) similarly tweeted in bursts, replying to prominent Twitter users with pro-Turkey, anti-Armenian content in French, Turkish, and English.

There were two other accounts in Twitter Network 2 that were similarly linked to quasi-think tank or media websites, but for which attribution was unclear. One, tweeting under the handle @Ukraine4all from March through October 2014, extensively shared from yet another media property, PolitNavigator, which posts news related to Ukraine and Russia from a pro-Kremlin point of view. Ukrainian fact-checking organization StopFake has written numerous fact-checks in which this publication appears as a source or reposter of conspiratorial content and disinformation. Content about what to do about Navalny presently occupies much of the front page, as well as articles alleging that Ukraine continues to depend on Russia for energy despite extensive Ukrainian propaganda constantly vilifying Russia.

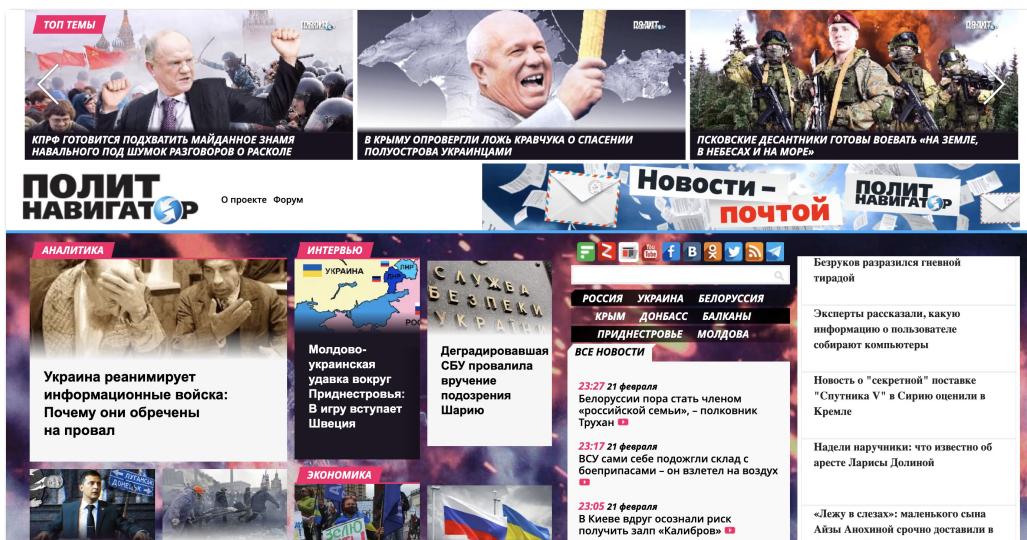


Figure 17: Screenshot of politnavigator.net homepage on February 21, 2021.

Another, @AmericaRussia, was created in 2011 and was tweeting between 2011-2015. It most recently had the Twitter bio “America-Russia: from confrontation to alliance” and a bio link to the site us-russia.org. US-Russia’s site describes itself as a think tank whose mission is to promote political, economic, and civil cooperation between the United States and Russia. The “Think-Tank” about page links to russiahouse.org (which lists a US address in Washington, DC), and notes a relationship to an entity called the “American University in Moscow.” Presently, it appears to primarily repost content from a broad mix of US and Russian news sites including Washington Times, RT, Sputnik, TASS, and others. There is some **past**

media coverage of this collection of entities and the individual they are affiliated with, which includes debates about legitimacy, speculation about sources of funding and ties to the Russian government, and questions about the extent to which the University exists. However, we do not have visibility into the technical indicators that led to this account's takedown and make no attribution.

There was one final property with 2 accounts in the set, the Valdai Discussion Club, that we mention separately. Valdai is a Moscow-based think tank and discussion forum that was established in 2004. The Club and its related conference programming are closely linked to Russian President Vladimir Putin, who speaks at its annual meeting. Its forums are widely attended by Russian government elites and it has been compared to Davos. We do not have visibility into why this account was included in the takedown. It is clearly affiliated with individuals within the Russian government, and its original website domain registrant was Rossiya Segodnya, the Russian government news agency. However, many Russian government-linked entities operate on Twitter, with some falling under a labeling policy. The specific technical or account-level factors that would suggest coordinated inauthentic behavior from Valdai's Twitter account were opaque to SIO researchers.

## 4 Conclusion

These networks reinforce findings about the centrality of media fronts and quasi-think tank properties to Russian information operations. We encourage researchers to further investigate the live and active Telegram channels and LiveJournal page discussed in Section 2. Similarly, while some of the domains discussed in Section 3 have been deeply studied, others merit further investigation.



*The Stanford Internet Observatory is a cross-disciplinary program of research, teaching and policy engagement for the study of abuse in current information technologies, with a focus on social media. The Observatory was created to learn about the abuse of the internet in real time, and to translate our research discoveries into training and policy innovations for the public good.*

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