



From Russia With Blogs

GRU Operators Leveraged
Blogs, Social Media
Accounts and Private
Messaging to Reach
Audiences Across Europe

By Ben Nimmo, Camille François,
C. Shawn Eib, L. Tamora

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Executive Summary

This report examines several campaigns manned by Russian military intelligence operators using fake accounts to influence audiences around Russia's borders, with a primary focus on Ukraine. The accounts were initially identified and [taken down](#) by Facebook on February 12, 2020. Most of this activity occurred around 2016 and 2017, but some of these accounts were still active in 2020 at the time of the takedown. The content of these campaigns is aligned with narratives traditionally promoted by Russian state-sponsored media and with the types of content that have been promoted in previous information operations attributed to Russian operators: promoting pro-Kremlin politicians in foreign countries, attacking public figures advocating for closer ties with the West, and attacking humanitarian groups involved in documenting war crimes occurring in the Syrian conflict.

This latest examination of campaigns conducted by Russian military intelligence operators highlights a few characteristic traits important for the public's understanding of these efforts:

- This report is most focused on public posts made by these different accounts, but it also demonstrates that these accounts engaged and, sometimes, entrapped users via private messaging. The use of direct messages and emails to approach journalists and political figures has featured as a vector of several former [information operations](#). It appears to us as important and critically understudied.
- Although this report is based on activity detected on Facebook, Graphika was able to unravel multiple assets across platforms and blogs. Information operations on social media continue to operate, ignoring the boundaries of products and Silicon Valley campuses, and to leverage smaller blogging platforms on which users can easily upload content that can later be shared across platforms.
- Finally, this operation highlights that media outlets themselves are routinely targeted by information operations, who seek to legitimize their content by having it be re-published by other outlets to whom they can, in a sense, pass the narrative baton.

Background

On February 12, 2020, Facebook [took down](#) a network of fake accounts, groups, and pages that were run from Russia and promoted pro-Kremlin narratives across Europe, with a particular focus on Ukraine and former-Soviet countries. Facebook said that the operation was linked to "Russian military intelligence services," who are more commonly known by their traditional acronym, GRU.

Russia's military intelligence has repeatedly been found to use fake accounts on social media to conduct information operations. Most notoriously, in 2016-2017, it [used](#) personas such as

Guccifer 2.0 and Fancy Bears Hack Team to spread leaks aimed at discrediting the Democratic Party in the United States and justifying Russia's campaign of state-sponsored doping. In August 2018, it was [exposed](#) as promoting false information and Kremlin narratives about the conflict in Syria; further reports chronicled its activities around issues including Syria, Ukraine, Russia's territorial dispute with Japan, and the doping leaks.

Ahead of the takedown, Facebook shared the names of the accounts, pages, and groups with Graphika for independent analysis.

Working from an initial list of 96 assets, some of which had already been suspended as the analysis started, Graphika identified a network of false personas that posted anti-Western and pro-Kremlin messaging across Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and news websites in Russian, Ukrainian, English, German, and Turkish. Blogs formed the backbone of the operation, which used social media accounts to amplify posts to selected audiences, including Facebook groups that the operation itself controlled. Much of the activity clustered in 2016-2018, but a few accounts were still active into February 2020. The following report details our forensic examination of these online traces, to better contribute to the understanding of information operations and to enable other investigators to continue following these traces.

Ukraine received the most attention from the GRU operators throughout these campaigns, with Moldova and the breakaway region of Transnistria also appearing as important targets. A few assets focused on other countries surrounding Russia's borders: the Baltic States, Belarus, Turkey, and Armenia. Farther West, a few assets focused on Germany and the United Kingdom but left little trace of online activity. The assets do not appear to have dealt with the 2020 US election directly, but the techniques the operation used could be turned toward US targets.

The operators picked their targets with care and took pains to create realistic-looking accounts, many of which had unique profile pictures rather than images copied from elsewhere online. The overall engagement numbers were low, and the accounts' friends seem to have included purchased inauthentic engagements ("followers for hire"), making a numerical estimate of their true online following difficult to judge. Some of their articles were picked up by outlets not run by the operation, however, suggesting that they had at least some impact in the Russian-language space. It is likely that operators behind these campaigns also engaged with activities that would not be visible to us, for instance leveraging these assets to directly contact targets across platforms: this modus operandi has been used by [Russian](#) and [Iranian](#) information operations in the past.

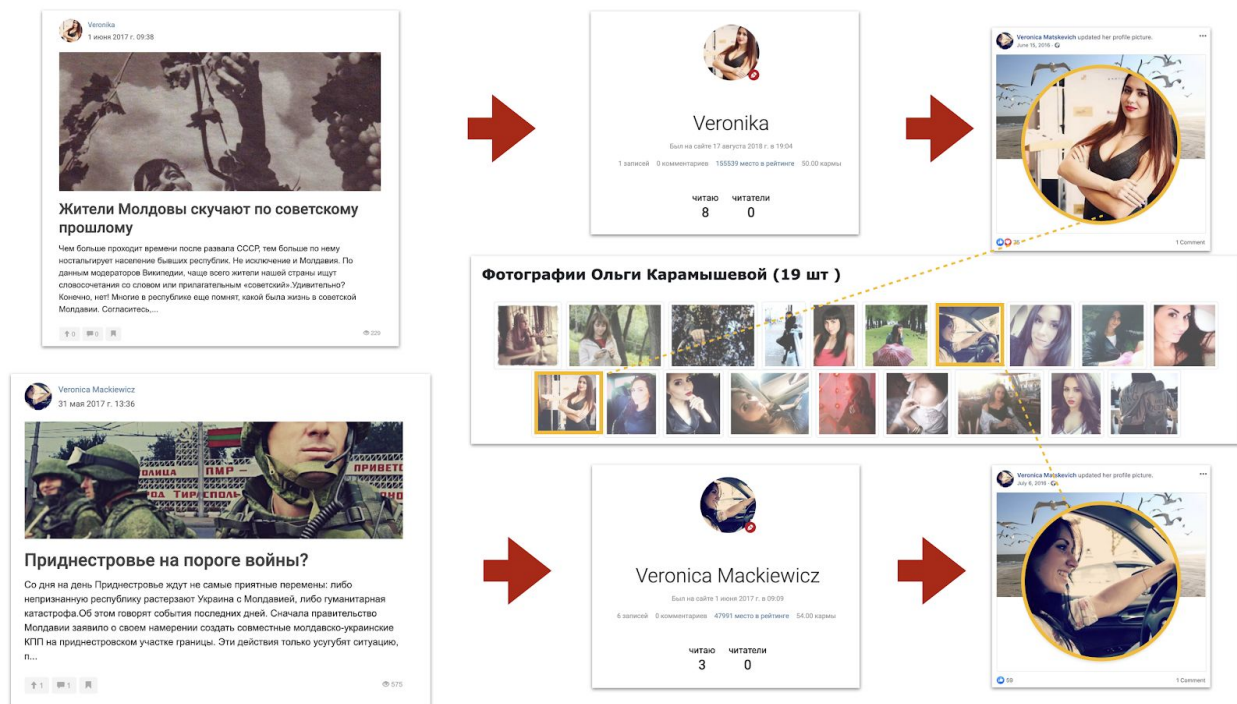
The operators did not leave technical traces that would allow a high-confidence attribution from open sources. One of the English-language assets in this set repeatedly shared posts from a previously exposed GRU asset, the "Inside Syria Media Centre." Overall, the operation's narratives and geopolitical concerns were consistent with previously documented information operations run by the Kremlin: the campaigns contained attacks on pro-Western politicians in Ukraine and Moldova and attacks on the White Helmets rescue group in Syria and accused the Baltic States of

paranoia and Russophobia. The German-language assets in this set also amplified the Russian government-funded media network Russia Today.

Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTPs)

Blogs formed the backbone of this operation. The operators specialized in posting long-form articles on blogging platforms that allow users to create new accounts easily, especially the Russian platforms cont[.]ws (registered in Samoa), newsland[.]ru, and korrespondent[.]net. Stories posted on these platforms by the GRU operators examined in this report covered a range of subjects and were tailored to individual countries but generally promoted a pro-Kremlin line and attacked politicians advocating for closer ties with the West.

Having created a presence across various blogs, the operators used fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter to promote their content. Some of these accounts bore the same names as the purported authors of the blog posts, such as Veronica Mackiewicz, a persona focused on Moldova and Transnistria.



Cross-platform activity. On the left, [two posts](#) by the persona known as Veronika or Veronica Mackiewicz on blogging platform cont[.]ws, claiming that Moldovan citizens miss the USSR (top) and accusing Moldova and Ukraine of planning to annex Transnistria (bottom). The [two accounts](#) had different profile pictures (center, top and bottom), but both pictures featured on the Facebook account Veronica Matskevich (right, top and bottom). The profile pictures were stolen from a Russian [social media user](#) (center right). Mackiewicz is a Polish surname pronounced in English as Matskevich.

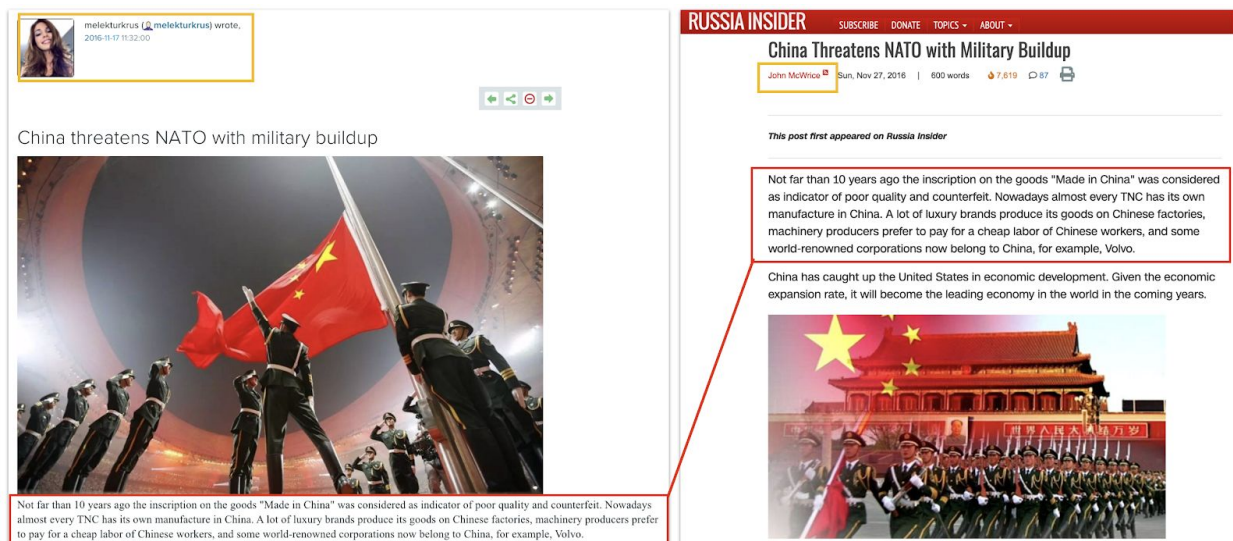
The operators frequently used different assets to boost their content at different stages of the process and across different platforms. For example, Veronica Matskevich posted very little content on “her” own Facebook timeline: four English-language news articles from genuine outlets and a handful of profile pictures. The same account was much more active as a member of a group run by the Russian operation called В центре внимания (“in the center of attention”), where it posted many news articles. The majority of these were legitimate news articles, but among them was a [blog](#) on cont[.]ws accusing the West of plotting a revolution in Moldova.

That article was attributed to a writer called Ekaterina Borodina. That name, as [Katrin Borodina](#), was attached to another account run by the same operators, focused on Transnistria. Meanwhile, the same article was also published on korrespondent[.]net, but there it was attributed to yet a third persona, [Ралина Васильева](#). That third account posted 26 articles between August 2016 and July 2017; many of the articles also appeared under other bylines run by the operation.

This was a complex operation with many interlocking parts, aimed at creating the appearance of organic activity. On a number of occasions, however, the operators seem to have stumbled, publishing the same article under multiple bylines, either out of carelessness or assuming that they would not be caught.

For example, on November 17, 2016, one of the operation’s personas, an apparently Turkish woman called Melek Ismail-Kızı, whose profile pictures were taken from model Jessica Ashley, posted a [LiveJournal article](#) in English headlined “China threatens NATO with military buildup,” with passages such as: “Nowadays the world has entered an era of multipolarity. There are centers of power in every Earth corner and all territories are under the influence of powerful actors of international relations.”

On November 27, 2016, this exact article appeared on the pro-Kremlin site [russia-insider.com](#), but this time attributed to “John McWrice,” which was yet another persona run by these Russian operators, allegedly based in Glasgow. (The surname “McWrice” appears unique to this operation.) Russia Insider has repeatedly published articles by Russian information operations, most notably a false GRU persona called [Sophie Mangal](#), who was [associated](#) with the Inside Syria Media Centre.



Left, the [article](#) attributed to Melek. Right, the same [article](#), attributed to John McWrice.

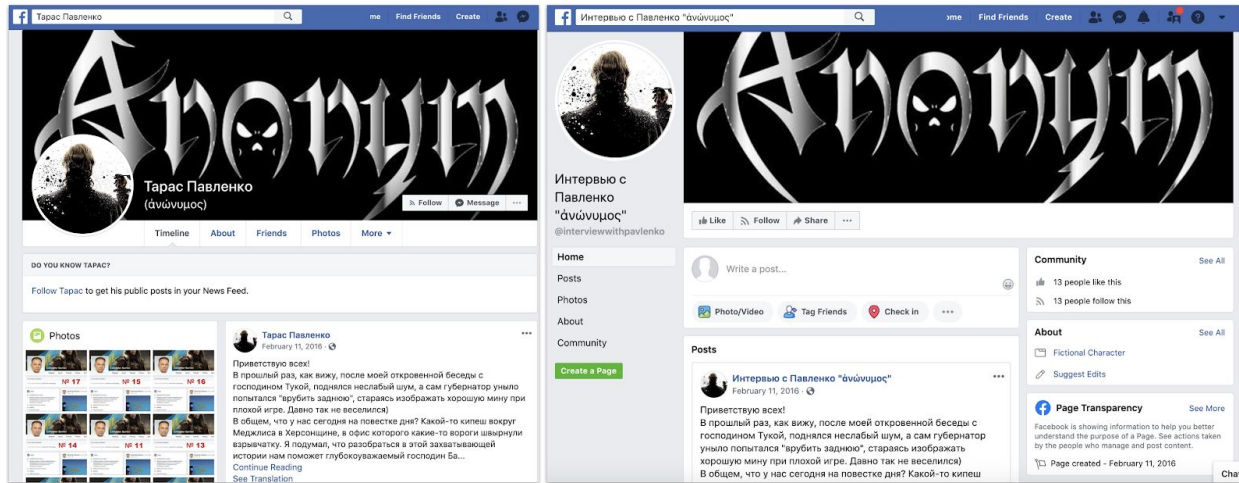
None of these articles and posts performed especially well in terms of follower numbers, likes, or shares. The Ukraine-focused groups had the highest follower numbers, with one group, [Привет, Крым](#) (Hello, Crimea), gathering 1,996 followers. Some of the Russian-language Facebook accounts totaled between 2,000 and 3,000 friends. Typical posts by the more popular accounts and in the more active groups achieved a few dozen reactions. This operation did not achieve great virality for its public postings on social media (and this may have not been its goal).

The operators of these accounts appear to have had more success in pitching their blog posts directly to genuine news outlets, thus tapping into these outlets' audiences. Some of the personas that Facebook identified as part of the operation were prolific publishers. For example, the persona Roman Ardelyanu contributed [over 100 articles](#) to the Moldovan newspaper [vedomosti.md](#). Most of them dealt with local politics, [praising](#) pro-Russian politicians and [attacking](#) pro-European ones. This persona's most recent post was a [criticism](#) of the US Peace Corps, posted on February 7, 2020. It read: "Obviously, all this [the Peace Corps' activities] is designed for illiterate and backward Bantustans, but not for a European country. How did our Moldova fit into the list of goals, alongside some similar post-Soviet countries?"

A persona posing as a Ukrainian citizen, Дворецька Михайлина (Dvoretska Mikhailina), published a dozen articles on the Ukrainian news website [news.ua](#). These largely dealt with Ukrainian politics and the conflict with Russia. The persona's latest [article](#), dated October 17, 2019, reported on the alleged mistreatment of Ukrainians in Poland through the lens of historical tensions between the two countries. This narrative is reminiscent of previously exposed [Russian operations](#) on social media, which also sought to inflame Polish-Ukrainian tensions in an apparent attempt to weaken ties between Ukraine and the West.

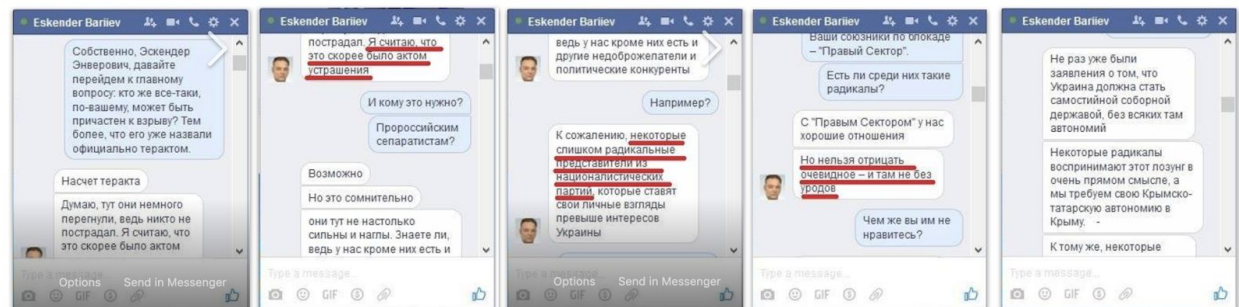
One final example of this operation's output illustrates the extent to which the operators used direct messaging to achieve their aims. One page in the set was called Interview with Pavlenko. It

used the same profile picture and surname as a personal account run by the operation, called Taras Pavlenko. Both the page and the account were primarily active on February 11, 2016, and posted the identical article: a long exposure of an alleged Facebook Messenger conversation with [Eskender Bariiev](#), a representative of the Crimean Tatar group, [widely reported](#) as facing repression since Russia's annexation of Crimea.



Left, Taras Pavlenko account. Right, Interview with Pavlenko.

The [article](#) consisted of 16 screenshots of the purported conversation with Bariiev, in which the Pavlenko persona posed as a journalist of the Russian service of the US-funded Radio Free Europe. In this act of entrapment, the "journalist" asked leading questions about the Tatar community's relationship with the far-right Right Sector group and with pro-Russian groups in Crimea and invited him to criticize another Tatar leader.



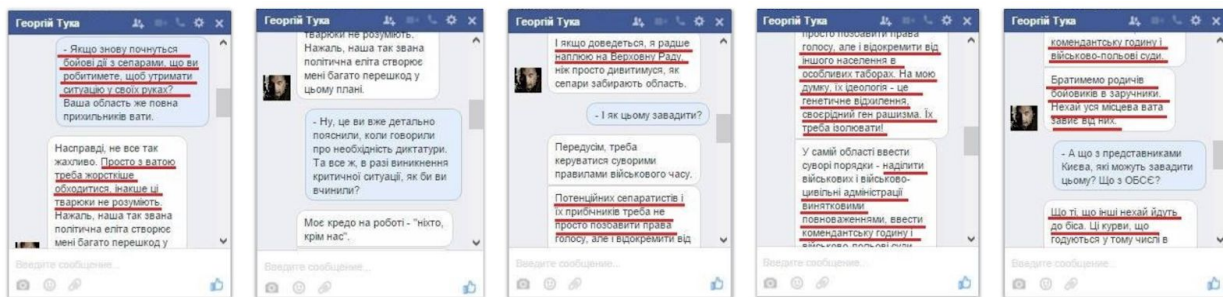
Portrait of an entrapment: the first five screenshots of the interview with Bariiev, with key sentences underlined by the Pavlenko persona. The screenshots match Bariiev's [profile picture](#) on Facebook.

The article did not receive reactions online, but it was reprinted verbatim three days later by the Crimean-focused website [kryminfo.net](#), as part of an article by a local journalist.

This documented use of direct messaging to entrap a local leader into making divisive comments illustrates the Russian operators' direct approach to their targets - in many ways, it is reminiscent

of previously exposed GRU operations in which social media direct messaging features were leveraged to “pitch” documents to various journalists and establish contact with activists. It also resembles a suspected [Iranian operation](#), exposed in 2019, that used Twitter direct messages and emails to approach journalists.

The same persona, Taras Pavlenko, [entrapped](#) the governor of the Lugansk region, Georgii Tuka, in a similar way in January 2016, posing as a Ukrainian newspaper journalist, and again posted screenshots of the conversation, this time to a [group](#) controlled by the same operators, Ж.Б.О. ‘Жовто-блакитні окуляри’. The post was shared 49 times and was covered by a number of Ukrainian outlets, including [riafan.ru](#), an outlet closely tied to Yevgeny Prigozhin’s infamous Internet Research Agency.



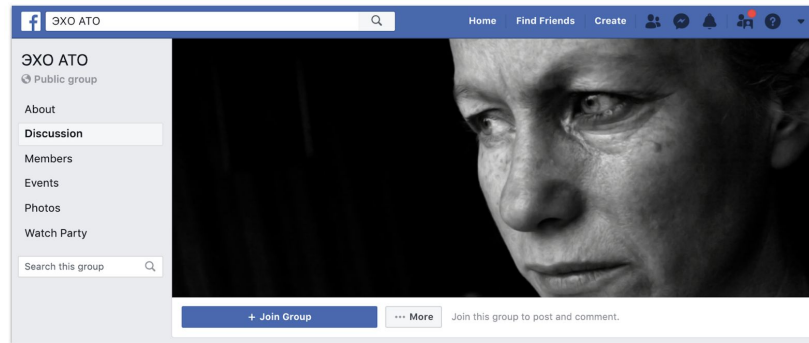
The first five screenshots of the interview with Tuka, annotated by the Pavlenko persona.

Given the private nature of direct messages, the full scale of this part of the operation cannot be assessed from open sources, but it is likely to have encompassed more targets and cases across the various countries targeted by the operators.

Ukraine

Ukraine was the single most important focus of the Russian operation’s activity. Of the almost 100 assets that Facebook shared with Graphika, at least 20 had Ukraine as their primary focus; several were even more narrowly focused on the Crimean Tatars, whose plight aroused [international condemnation](#) of Russia’s behavior.

The operation’s content ranged widely over Ukrainian politics, but it placed a particular emphasis on a few issues: Crimea and its “return” to Russia; criticism of the Ukrainian government; posts about the Crimean Tatars, together with the argument that they were being abused by the Ukrainian government; and Ukraine’s “anti-terrorist operation” or ATO, against Russian-backed separatists in the East. One group, ЭХО АТО (Echo of the ATO), did not feature any posts, but its banner image of a weeping woman encapsulates the Russian operation’s portrayal of Ukraine’s military engagement.



Banner of the ЭХО АТО group.

One detailed persona, Айше Муратова (Aishe Muratova), bridged two issues: the war in Ukraine and the status of the Crimean Tatars. This persona was associated with a Facebook account and blogging accounts on cont.ws, politforums.net, and korrespondent.net. On each platform, the persona told the same story: the author was a Crimean Tatar woman whose husband believed the “lies” of the Ukrainian government and went to fight in the Donbass, only to disappear in action.



“A deception that cost a life”: post by Aishe on cont.ws.

A number of the personas targeting Ukraine enjoyed a relatively substantial network on Facebook, numbering between 2,000 and 3,000 friends each, although some of these appeared to have little connection to Ukraine and may have been purchased.

The operation's accounts were present on Facebook but more active on blog forums; several, like Aishe, maintained accounts simultaneously on [cont\[.\]ws](#), [korrespondent\[.\]net](#), [blog.i\[.\]ua](#), and others. The more prolific personas included Юрий Крамаренко (Yuriy Kramarenko) on [cont.ws](#), [blog.i.ua](#), and [korrespondent.net](#) and Герман Логаза (German Lozaga) on [cont.ws](#), [pandoraopen.ru](#), and [korrespondent.net](#).

One particularly prolific persona was called Vladislava Melnik, active on [cont.ws](#) and [korrespondent.net](#). This persona featured as the author of news articles from outlets not apparently associated with the operation, suggesting that the operators managed to plant their content with real editors, thus reaching an audience beyond the reach of their fake accounts on social media.

For example, the Facebook account attributed to Vladislava Melnik shared one article that criticized the Ukrainian government's pension plans. The same article, attributed to the same persona, also appeared on two Ukrainian news sites, [fromua.news](#) and [lifedon.com.ua](#).



The article on pensions, posted by Vladislava Melnik on Facebook and attributed to the same persona on Ukrainian news sites.

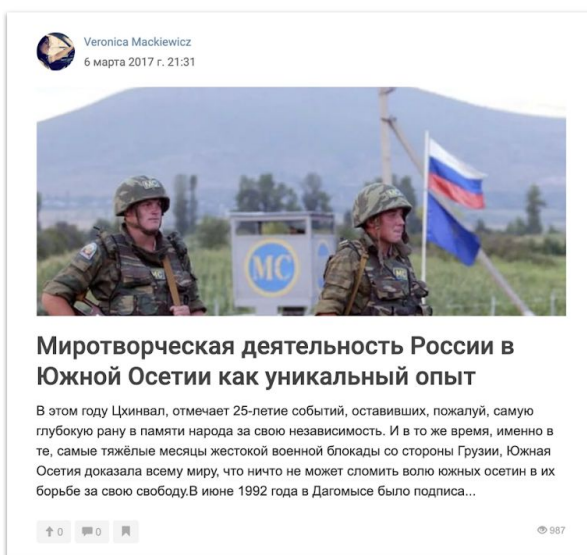
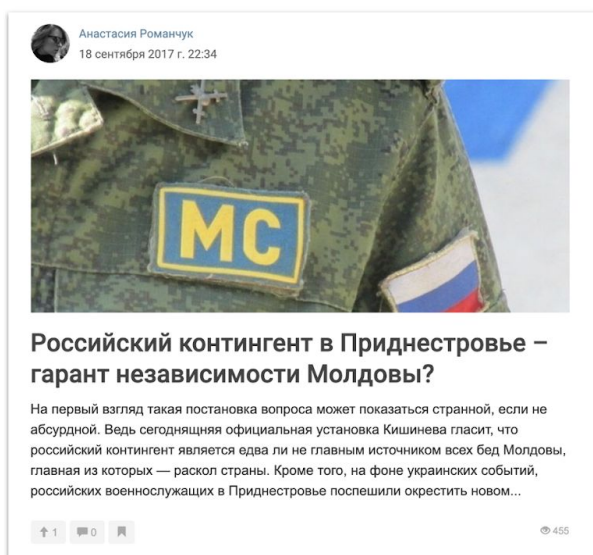
Unlike most of the accounts run by this operation, the Vladislava Melnik persona was still active in 2020, posting negative content about the Ukrainian government and Crimean Tatars. This

suggests that the operation adapted as its needs changed: for example, its need for Turkish content, described below, lessened as Russia's tensions with Turkey lessened. It may also indicate that the operators chose to focus on a few more effective accounts. Overall, however, Ukraine remained the primary focus of the operation's activity, underlining the continued importance of the country and its conflict to Russia's military.

Moldova

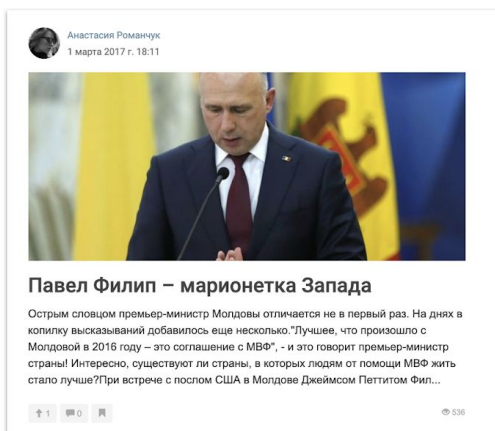
A number of the operation's assets posed as Molodovans or residents of Transnistria, the breakaway part of Moldova that forms a "frozen conflict" along Moldova's border with Ukraine. Russia maintains a military presence there, formally portrayed as peacekeepers; this may explain the operation's focus on the region.

As with the Ukrainian assets, the Moldova-focused assets attacked Western states and policies and promoted Kremlin narratives, with particular praise for Russia's peacekeepers.



Articles on the positive role played by Russian peacekeepers in Transnistria (left) and the occupied Georgian region of South Ossetia (right), posted on cont[.]ws by operation assets [Anastasia Romanchuk](#) and [Veronica Mackiewicz](#).

These operational personas routinely condemned pro-Western politicians such as Prime Minister Pavel Filip, presenting him as a [puppet of the West](#), and accused the West of interference or underhand dealings in the region - including with an article questioning the engagement of the [US Peace Corps](#) in Moldova.



Operation articles on Filip (left) and the Peace Corps (right), from cont.ws and [LiveJournal](https://livejournal.com).

As with the Ukraine-focused assets, the Moldova-focused assets are likely to have engaged in direct outreach that did not leave a visible online trace. This was especially true of the persona Roman Ardelyanu, [self-described](#) as a “beginner freelance journalist,” but identified by Facebook as an operation asset and also present on [livejournal](#), [Twitter](#), and [Medium](#). While active on social media, the persona was particularly present on the news website vedomosti.md. A simple [search](#) for the persona’s surname in Cyrillic, АРДЕЛЯНУ, turns up over 100 results on the website, marking the persona as a regular contributor.

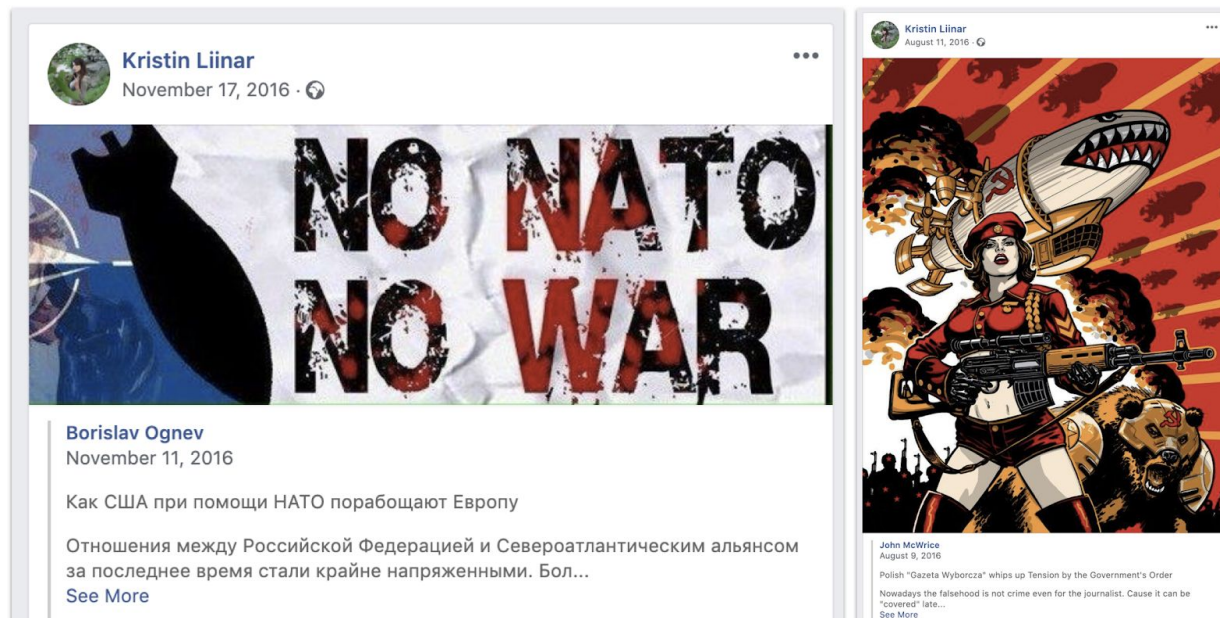
This is not an unprecedented phenomenon: from 2015 onward, Russian military intelligence used fake personas such as [Alice Donovan](#) and [Sophie Mangal](#) to plant pro-Kremlin or anti-Western articles in Western news outlets and websites. It does, however, underline the danger of direct targeting. As with the politicians tricked by the Taras Pavlenko persona, it appears likely that news editors and journalists were also tricked by the operation into taking its content and amplifying it.

This is much more like a classic intelligence operation than the free-wheeling and high-volume trolling of the Internet Research Agency, but it is more insidious, potentially further-reaching, and more of a direct challenge to news and commissioning editors.

Baltic States

The operation maintained one persona focused on each of the Baltic States. In Estonia, the persona Kristin Liinar was associated with a single article on a cont.ws account and a matching post on [Facebook](#). Its content questioned the credibility of the European Union in Estonia, claiming that except for a couple of advantages, joining the EU only wrought havoc in the country and made people poorer. Despite its Estonian moniker, the account posted exclusively in Russian. The persona reposted at least two [articles](#) from the pro-Kremlin outlet Komsomolskaya Pravda, [one](#) of which was picked up from an outlet previously exposed for having its editorial line secretly controlled by the Kremlin, [Baltnews](#). In the sample of articles shared by the account, most were

trying to undermine the European Union and NATO. The account shared content attributed to at least two other assets in this network, John McWrice and Borislav Ognev.



Shares by Kristin Liinar of posts by Borislav Ognev and John McWrice, also assets of this operation.

In Lithuania, Facebook identified a group run by the Russian operation called Tik tiesa, Lithuanian for Just the truth. The group was inactive, with no members and no posts, but Graphika noted that it was created by an account called Antanas Petrauskas. This account's main activity was to post Russian-language articles to a Facebook group devoted to Russians and Baltic citizens in Norway. None of the articles gave a link to its source, but in each case, the same article appeared on cont[.]ws blogs that Graphika has identified as likely being run by the operation.

The image displays a comparison between three social media posts on the left and three articles from the website cont.ws on the right. The posts on the left are all attributed to the persona 'Antanas Petrauskas' and are part of a group titled 'Русские и Прибалты(Латвия,Л...'. The first post, dated December 27, 2016, at 1:55 AM, features a portrait of a man and discusses a witness to a coup in Ukraine. The second post, dated December 26, 2016, at 8:24 AM, features an image of a Tu-154 aircraft and discusses a crash. The third post, dated December 17, 2016, at 2:55 AM, features an image of Vladimir Olenyuk and discusses a court proceeding. The articles on the right are identical to the ones shared in the posts. The first article is attributed to 'Тина Наморадзе' (Tina Namoradze) and is titled 'Свидетель госпереворота в борьбе с нелегитимной украинской властью'. The second article is attributed to 'Тина Наморадзе' and is titled 'ТУ-154: мир – скорбит, Украина – ликует'. The third article is attributed to 'Дмитро Кулинченко' (Dmitro Kulichenko) and is titled 'Владимир Олейник в судебном порядке привел доказательства нелегитимности киевских властей'.

Left, three shares by the Antanas Petrauskas persona. Right, the [same three articles](#) on [cont\[.\]ws](#). The first was attributed to Тина Наморадзе. The second featured under the byline Тина Наморадзе on [cont.ws](#) but also featured under the byline Petrauskas Antanas on [korrespondent.net](#). The last was attributed to Дмитро Кулинченко on [cont.ws](#).

A third account posed as a resident of Latvia, Андрей Перовский. This persona was tied to a [cont\[.\]ws](#) account with only [one article](#), which accused NATO of encircling the Russian Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad. The persona shared it to a single Russian-language group, whose translated name means “the real Latvia.”

The image shows a social media post by the persona 'Андрей Перовский' (Andrei Perovskiy) from a group titled 'Настоящая Латвия' (Real Latvia). The post is dated July 14, 2016, at 6:43 AM. It includes a link to <https://cont.ws/post/318852> and a headline: 'НАТО замыкает кольцо вокруг Калининграда. | Блог Андрей Перовский | КОНТ'. The post also features a small image of a brick building and indicates it has 1 comment.

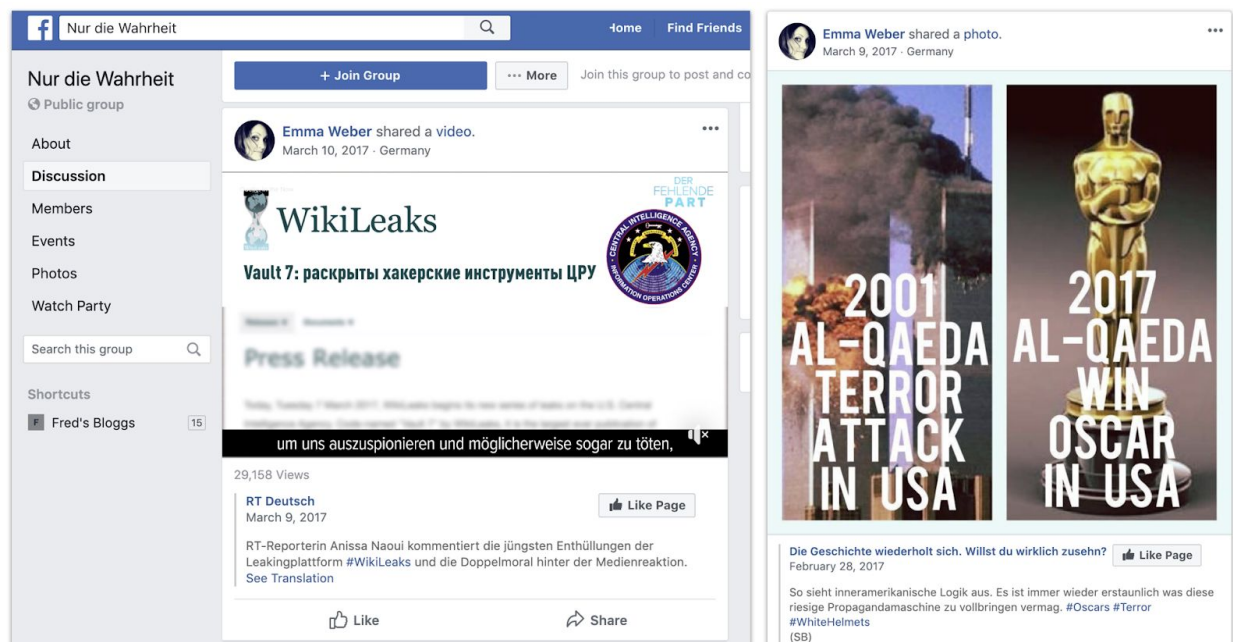
The one known share of the article by the Андрей Перовский persona.

This does not appear to have been a highly active or effective account. Its post on Facebook received no likes or shares, and the article on cont[.]ws was not reproduced elsewhere.

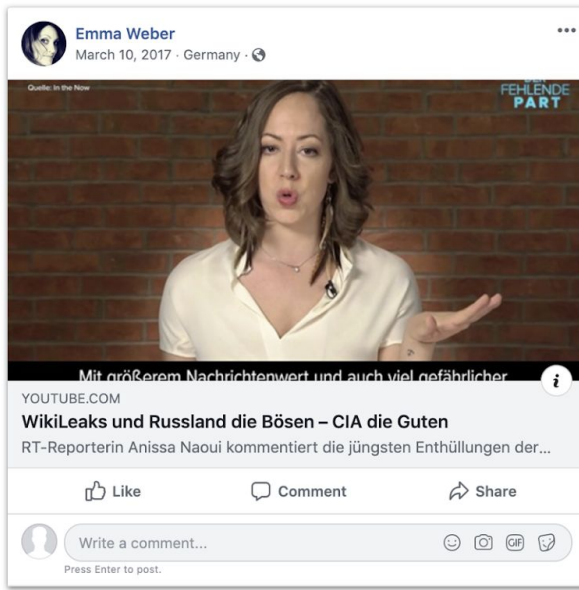
Germany

These operators also managed two groups targeting German audiences. Both claimed to focus on news: Nur die Wahrheit (Only the truth) and In der Welt der Politik (In the world of politics). They shared a single administrator, a personal account called Emma Weber.

The “In the world of politics” group was set to private, but both “Only the truth” and the Emma Weber persona made publicly visible posts. These posts interspersed links to genuine news outlets with posts from Russia Today and attacks on the White Helmets humanitarian organization operating in Syria. This discovery adds to a [growing body of evidence](#) demonstrating that Russian information operations on social media actively targeted organizations seeking to expose war crimes in Syria.



Shares by Emma Weber in the Nur die Wahrheit group: left, RT Deutsch on Wikileaks and its Vault 7 leaks; right, a meme accusing the White Helmets of being an al-Qaeda offshoot.



Posts by Emma Weber on “her” own timeline: left, RT Deutsch on the CIA and Wikileaks; right, Sputnik Deutsch on tensions between the United States and Iran.

Other than sharing pro-Kremlin content, the Emma Weber persona shared content from a range of anti-Western and anti-Islam outlets, including the conspiracy site sott[.]net and anti-immigrant site contra-magazin[.]com, and also shared images promoting the anti-immigrant AfD party.

However, the Emma Weber account and its associated groups stopped posting in March 2017 after only four months of activity. By that stage, the group had 25 members, at least two of which were assets run by the same Russian operators; Emma Weber had 17 followers. The Emma Weber persona did not advertise any blog posts or articles under the same byline.

It is unknown whether this account also engaged in direct outreach to other users on social media using private messaging features; its public content did not achieve significant resonance.

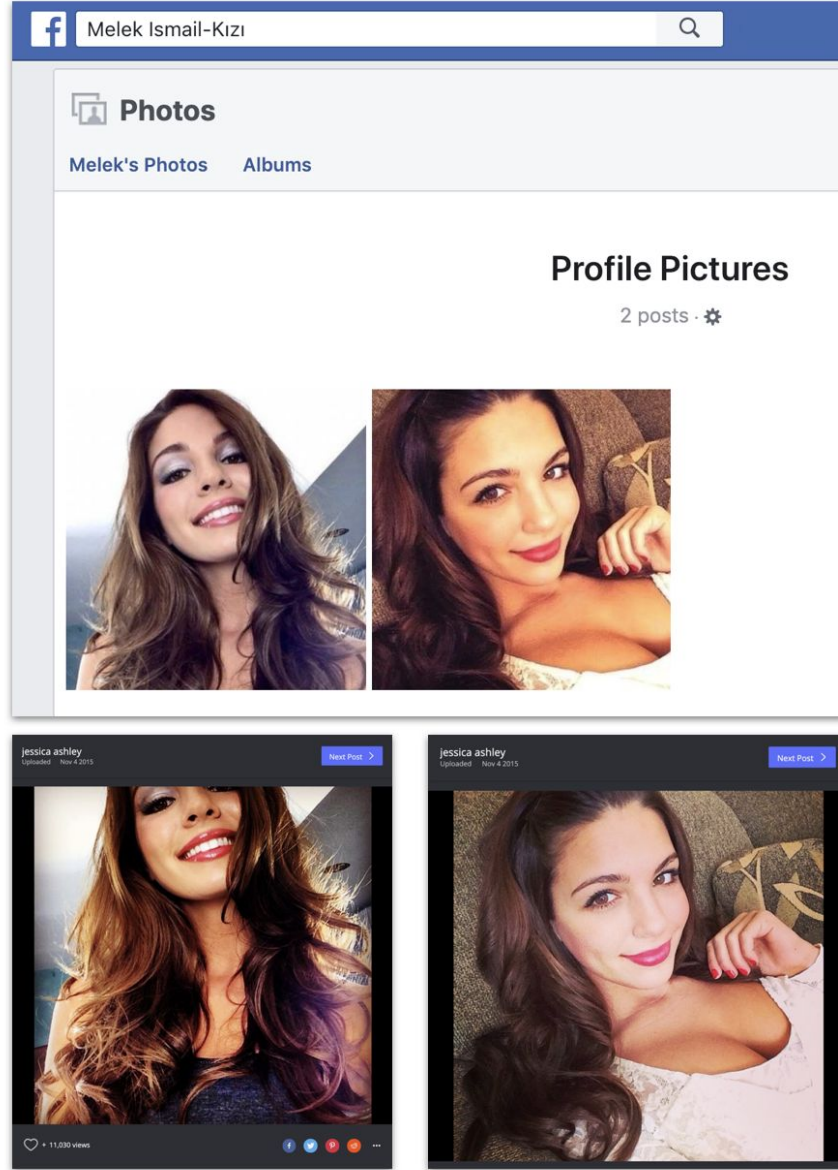


Left, “mma Weber sharing an AfD poster; right, Emma Weber sharing a meme describing mainstream German politicians as “successor Nazis.”

Turkey

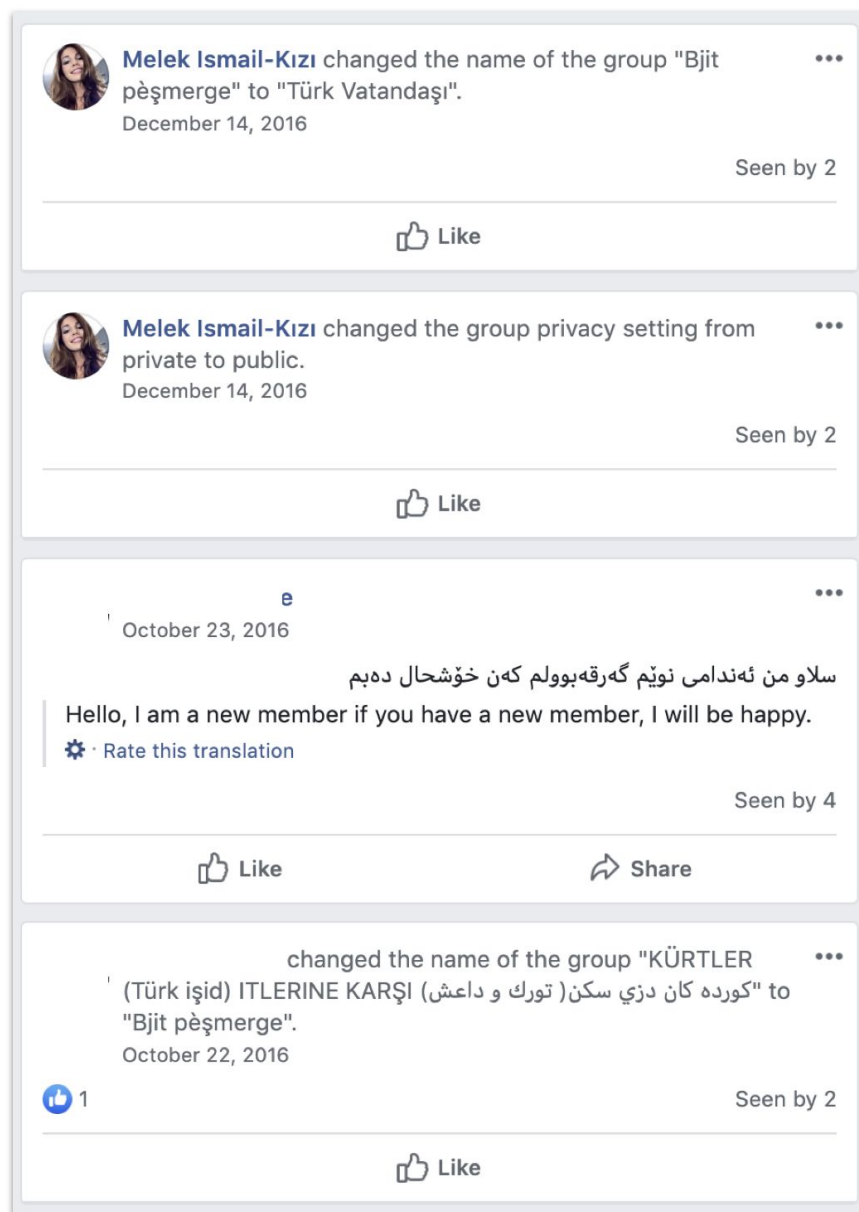
These GRU operators also ran a small cluster of Turkish-focused assets - one account and two groups - between June 2016 and June 2017. (Group members remained active after June 2017, but the account fell silent.)

At the core of this activity was a persona named Melek Ismail-Kızı, posing as a young woman speaking Turkish, Russian, and English and whose profile pictures were taken from model Jessica Ashley. This account was the sole administrator of both groups.



Top, profile pictures for Melek Ismail-Kızı, both dated 2016. Bottom, Jessica Ashley photos on Imgur, dated 2015.

One of the two groups on which the Melek persona was an administrator was named Türk Vatandaşı (Turkish citizen) at the time of the takedown. Unusually for this operation, the group was initially created under a different name and by an apparently real user in 2015; “Melek Ismail-Kızı” seems to have taken it over and renamed it in December 2016.

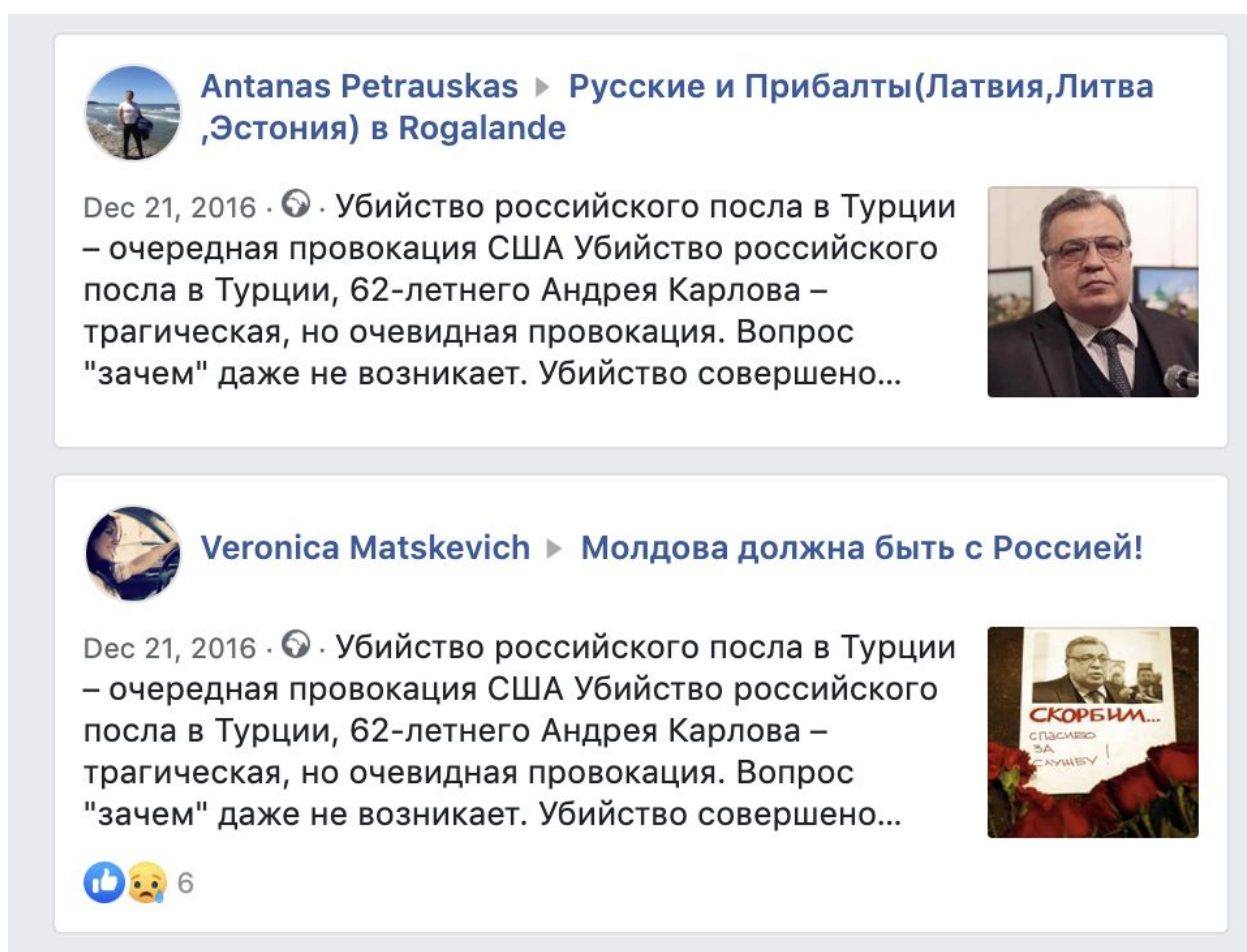


Group history, showing the successive name changes. Graphika has obscured the name of the group's original manager, who appears unrelated to the operation. The first two group names referenced the Turks and Kurds.

Between December 2016 and March 2017, the Melek persona was the only account that posted content to the group. Some of the posts were deleted for unknown reasons before the February 2020 takedown; those that remained visible were shares of posts that ultimately led back, via the Melek persona's own account, to a blog on cont[.]ws called Melek, featuring the same profile picture and a number of articles in Turkish, Russian, and English.

These articles espoused an anti-Western and pro-Russian bent. One Russian-language [post](#), for example, called the [murder](#) of the Russian ambassador to Turkey by a policeman who sympathized with the plight of civilians in Syria a “provocation by the USA.” The article was posted just one day after the killing, on December 20, 2016. Identical versions also appeared on the Russian forum [korrespondent.net](#) and the Transnistrian forum [forumpmr.org](#) under different bylines (Dmitiry Kulinich and Ekaterina) that also appear to have been run by the operation.

On December 21, two other personas run by the same Russian operators, Antanas Petrauskas and Veronica Matskevich” shared the same article to two Russian-language Facebook groups, [one](#) dedicated to Russians and citizens of the Baltic States in Rogaland, Norway, and the [other](#) dedicated to the thesis that Moldova should be “with Russia.”



Facebook shares of the same article by suspected assets Antanas Petrauskas and Veronica Matskevich on December 21, 2016, two days after the ambassador’s death.

[Other articles](#) attributed to Melek accused the United States of interfering in the Joint Investigative Team (JIT) into the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine, a disaster that [investigators have blamed](#) on a Russian anti-aircraft missile. Headlines included: “Why did the USA force the JIT to blame Russia for the Boeing crash?” and “The ‘independent’ JIT

and the MH17 crash (a farce in two acts).” This has been a [trope](#) of Kremlin propaganda since the 2014 crash and appears aimed at shifting the blame for a possible war crime away from the Russian government and armed forces.

Typically for this operation, the Melek persona maintained accounts on multiple platforms. The persona also posted blogs on [LiveJournal](#) (@melekturkrus) and on [Twitter](#) (@Melek_IsmailKiz). However, by the time of the takedown, this persona did not appear to have successfully published articles in more mainstream media outlets and had stopped posting to the Facebook group in 2017.

United Kingdom



Profile of John McWrice

The John McWrice persona, claiming to hail from Glasgow, United Kingdom, was a prolific poster between January 2016 through the end of May 2017. The account re-posted content focused on UK and US politics, as well as involvement by those nations in the Middle East and abroad; this appears likely to have been an effort at character building between its authored posts. No person with this name could be located in the UK or elsewhere; a Scottish Public Records search returned no results by that name from 1513 to present. Likewise, reverse image searches for both profile pictures available for the persona did not find the images used elsewhere.

The persona frequently shared content from the Inside Syria Media Center, a website exposed for its ties to GRU information operations. This content often came with captions and comments in language typical of a non-native English speaker. The account also shared pro-Assad content critical of the White Helmets and the Bellingcat investigative group.



"Does it seem that the WH always need "absolute Enemy" who will always fight against the WH's enemies?"



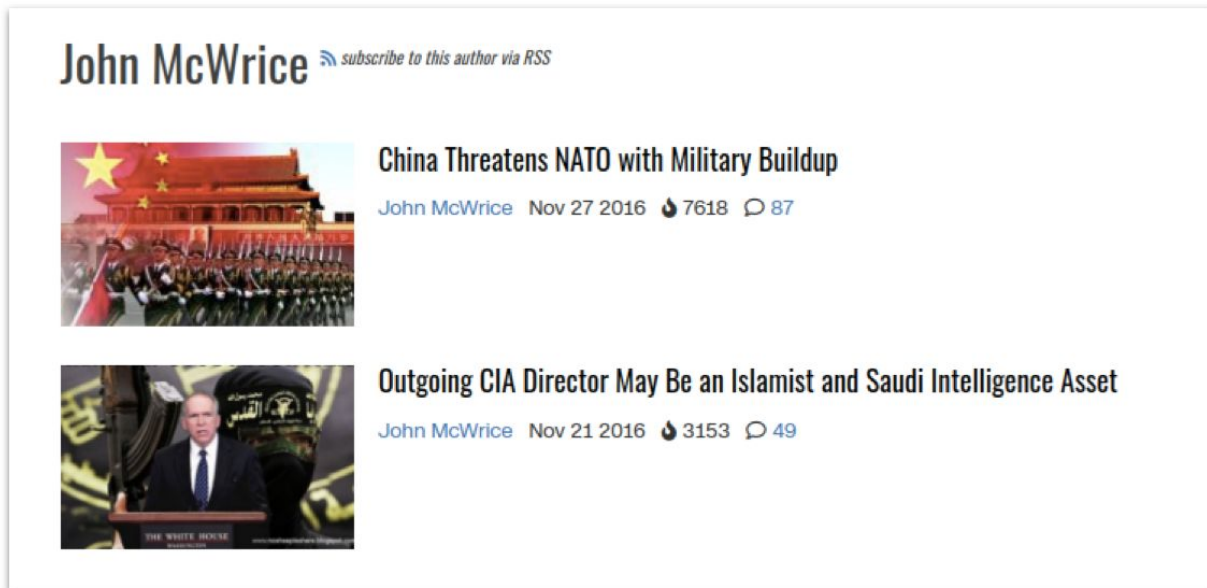
Anti-Bellingcat, pro-Assad Content Shared by McWrice; "Another one Fake from the Bellingcat proved, that Russia didn't bomb UN Convoy."

The US- and UK- focused content that this persona re-posted was predominately pro-Brexit, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigration, with support for Boris Johnson and Donald Trump, and promoted the dissemination of anti-Hillary Clinton materials, sharing articles on the Podesta Wikileaks releases within hours of their initial release on October 7, 2016. In some cases, the resharing of this content was so quick that it resulted in matching timestamps.



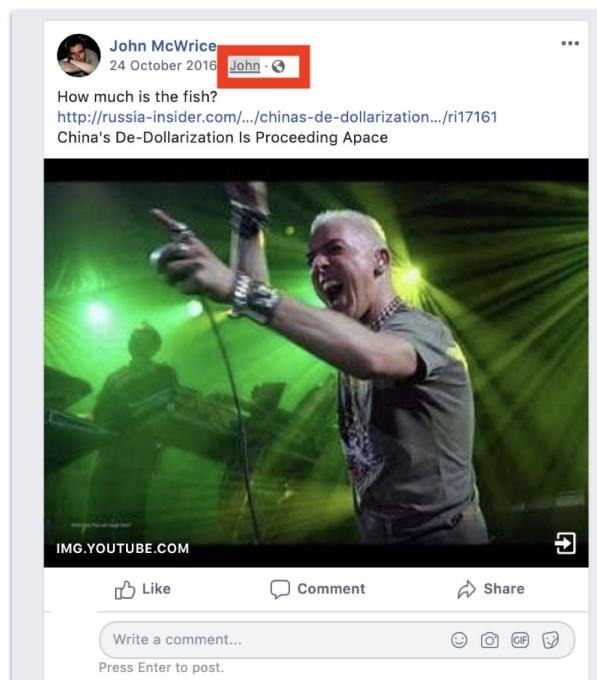
McWrice reposting an early post about the contents of the Podesta Emails released on October 7, 2016; the time stamps imply that McWrice had reposted this content within 60 seconds of its original post time

The McWrice account shared content from the website russia-insider.com twice, but it did not share any links to the two articles accredited to John McWrice per his author [page](#). As mentioned earlier in this report, the article "China Threatens NATO with Military Buildup" was also shared by the Melek persona.



Author Page for John McWrice on russia-insider.com.

The same persona posted links to russia-insider.com twice, one of which was a standard post linking to an article [How Russia Outsmarted OPEC](#), attributed to an Irina Shah, which they posted on December 7, 2016. The other post, dated October 24, 2016, appears to have been posted using an app called John; the app appears to be defunct, with the link leading to an error screen regarding “John’s” misconfiguration.



A John McWrice post, showing the “John” source.

There were a few longer form posts from John McWrice directly on Facebook, including [one](#) on October 27, 2016, that raised concerns about US involvement in the breakaway region of Transnistria, saying “Russian peacemakers play an important role in conflicts in former Soviet Union countries: South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Tajikistan, and also Moldavia.” As noted earlier, this message matches the theme of the Moldova-centric accounts.



One of McWrice's Medium Posts, pushing pro-Kremlin narratives surrounding MH17; note the stilted English used.

The McWrice persona was also active on Medium as [@johnmcwrice](#), with a brief period of overlap in activity on both platforms; the [first post](#), dated May 4, 2017, presents a pro-Kremlin depiction of issues surrounding Ukraine and the Crimea. The narrative of the article overlaps the anti-Ukrainian and anti-Crimean Tatars content pushed by Russian-speaking accounts; it especially targets the Mejlis of the Crimean Tatars - the representative body of Crimean Tatars - one of whose leaders was entrapped by the persona Taras Pavlenko via Messenger. The [final post](#) to the Medium account, dated June 2, 2017, was related to the shootdown of MH17. The Facebook account had last posted on March 15, 2017, and the only further posting from the account occurred on May 31, 2017, resharing a story favorable to Melania Trump 26 minutes after it had originally been posted.

Finally, the operation included an English-language persona named Patrick Covenant, ostensibly an Irish Republican sympathizer. The Facebook account did not feature any posts other than a stock profile picture and a Republican banner. Graphika will continue to investigate this account and other activity conducted by the operation; we welcome information from users who were contacted directly by this persona.



Profile and banner for the Patrick Covenant persona. No posts by the account have yet been identified.