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**To:** Greg Rowett, Institute of Statecraft

**Subject:** Mainstream & Social Media Analysis following Poisoning of Sergei & Yulia Skripal

**Date:** 11 April 2018

**Our Ref:** Project Iris

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## 1. BACKGROUND

This report aims to provide an initial analysis of mainstream and social media reporting as it developed, following the poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in Salisbury, Wiltshire on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2018.

Increased speculation as to the origins of the attack, along with the ever changing international diplomatic situation, means that the analysis provided can only be assessed as being relevant at the time of research. It should therefore be read in that context, and it is recommended that further analysis is conducted as the situation develops in order to provide decision makers with the most up to date information.

The report will focus briefly on the initial events surrounding the attack on the Skripals and then provide more detail, analysis and trend information as the diplomatic situation intensified. Specific events surrounding the nerve agent attack are taken to be generally known by the audience and, hence, are not specifically detailed within the report unless directly relevant to the analysis.

For ease of understanding, the report will separately analyse how sentiment is being influenced over the different media platforms and relevant countries, and finally make an overall assessment of the propaganda campaigns and how these may influence public opinion. From research on social media platforms, it has become clear that Twitter is by far the most relevant and is therefore the basis for this analysis report. It encompasses a user base spanning both eastern and western countries and, as such, it is the prime propaganda tool to influence public sentiment through a concerted disinformation campaign.

As would be expected, there are a vast number of posts and reports on the subject in both mainstream and social media. It has therefore only been possible to reference a representative sample. For ease of comparison, all times referred to by the author relate to the Universal Time Clock (GMT+0000). However, this is not reflected in Twitter post screenshots, which are often only available in the local time zone of the account holder.

Many of the mainstream and social media posts and reports are in foreign languages. These have been translated to English using online automated translation software and this should be taken into

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account when assessing the text. This is especially so with the Russian name “Skripal”, which is often translated literally to the English word “violin”.

Where relevant, footnotes have been added identifying the source of the information or, where this has not been practical, a list of appendices has been added at the end and referenced within the report.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

1. To establish the flow across social media of the messaging and establish key influencers, friendly and anti, to Her Majesty’s Government (HMG).
2. To undertake live monitoring of established identifiers and influencers.
3. To establish how news of the poisoning was and is being perceived across the UK, USA, France, Germany and Russia.
4. To seek to provide early warning of identified threat to HMG or the UK.
5. To report on any additional intelligence that may be useful to the investigation.

## 3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Some UK mainstream media reporting of the Skripal incident did little to support the UK cause through unsubstantiated accusations against Russia. This was a catalyst for Russian media and pro Kremlin trolls to commence their respective disinformation campaigns. The BBC and tabloid press were particularly targeted in the early stages as being sensationalist in their reporting and spreading pro UK propaganda.
- UK based social media comments were initially targeted toward Russia being the culprit, but certain elements of the British population were already accusing UK media of being part of an anti-Russian propaganda machine.
- UK based pro Kremlin trolls were quick to pick up on parallels being made with the Litvinenko poisoning, countering this with an attack on UK media’s attempts at evidence fabrication. Due to their vast network of followers and influencers, allegations of Russophobia by the UK was able to spread quickly throughout the social media network.

- Russian State media outlets really commenced their propaganda campaigns following the statement by the Foreign Secretary threatening repercussions against Russia if they were found to be culpable. Russian media countered this by moving attention away from Russia and focusing it on to the possibility that the nerve agent had come from nearby Porton Down. The chemical weapons' facility became the subject of much attention and was the subject of multiple tweets and re-tweets by pro Russia trolls and sympathisers. This was especially so after former UK Ambassador Craig Murray blogged about Boris Johnson (and, by association, the UK Government) lying as to the confirmation of Novichok and the fact that it had been manufactured in Russia; points that were later denied by the Head of Porton Down.

The Russian media sites spearheading the propaganda campaigns were RT News and Sputnik, both of which have a UK base and English speaking news platforms. TASS, the main State run news agency, which also has a version of its web platform in English, did report on the Skripal affair as it developed but, in comparison to the two other news outlets, stayed much further in the background.

- By mid-March, the Russian propaganda machine was in full swing, and social media analysis suggests that the pro Russia lobby was starting to get the upper hand by changing people's perception of events and making them question the possible motives and complicity of the UK establishment in the Skripal attack. Later, an alleged UK based Kremlin troll (@Ian56789), who has a history of deflecting accusations of Russian aggression, likened the "cover up" in the Skripal case to the "dodgy dossier" of the 2003 Iraq war. As a prolific troll account, posting 1000s of times per month on pro Kremlin issues and with a following of 32,500, it, and similar troll accounts within a network, has the ability to bombard the social media platform with disinformation supportive of their cause. This ripple effect over an extended period could, ultimately, have the ability to change an individual's previously held beliefs and finally their voting behaviour.
- Analysis of the Skripal affair and how social media impacted other western democracies, showed that, in both Germany and France, there was a certain amount of apathy, especially in the initial stages. Whilst national media networks reported the story through their web based platforms and journalist accounts, there was little response from their followers. Only when some of the troll accounts (e.g. @Ian56789 – UK, @MarcelSardo and @Nina Byzantina - Russia) became involved in the debate did interest in the subject increase which, as was expected, was anti UK, questioning the stance and handling of the issue by the UK Government and, in particular, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary.

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- In the US, the incident was reported by the mainstream media but it was Skripal's involvement with Christopher Steele (the author of a well-known dossier detailing President Trump's alleged connections to Russia) that was the first to propagate throughout the country. There was harsh criticism of Putin, Russia and also Trump due to his alleged connections to the two. Russian disinformation campaigns in the US at this stage generally failed to take hold as American social media users saw these as further proof of Russia's involvement in the incident. That changed during the latter part of the month; Theresa May's ultimatum to Russia on 12<sup>th</sup> March was met with a generally positive response on US online platforms. That changed during mid-March when pro-Russian rhetoric through the Russian RT News network begins to find its way to prominence in the US social media landscape, with allegations that the UK Government was involved in planning the incident. Interest ebbs and flows with a spike in Skripal-related comments coinciding with the expulsion of 60 Russian diplomats from the US.
- A list of 18 suspected pro Kremlin trolls has been compiled from research undertaken on the Skripal incident (Appendix O). There are many others operating in a similar fashion but it is believed that this list will provide the basis for an accurate analysis of how Russian disinformation is impacting public sentiment. It is recommended that these accounts be monitored on a regular basis, along with mainstream Russian media outlets, to provide updates on how the political and social perception of issues relating to this incident may be shifting as events unravel.
- In relation to this investigation, Twitter has been identified through research as by far and away the most important social media platform for the spreading of pro Russia propaganda and disinformation via the web. The Russian social media platform Vkontakte has been utilised to air (exclusively) pro Russian feelings on the Skripal affair and, whilst media sites like RT and Sputnik have a presence, in this case at least, it is not permeated by trolls, probably due to its limited reach with the Russian speaking world, where the requirement to gain influence is limited.
- The impact of troll accounts cannot be underestimated as they add an additional dimension to an organised disinformation campaign that is difficult to counter. It was noticeable during the research that, whilst UK media could hold its own against its Russian counterparts, there was no UK equivalent to the Russian trolls, who would be able to counter their relentless bombardment of anti-establishment rhetoric.

## 4. METHODOLOGY

The use of specialist cyber analysis and monitoring tools has been deployed in this case. The tools are able to analyse deep areas of the World Wide Web, social media and numerous other sources of information contained within our linked databases. The software, under human analytical supervision, automatically cross matches information and diagrams the information/data found into chart format.

The analysis has been reported in a chart format, with references. In this case, there have been 3 charts produced to detail the investigation. The charts are labelled Appendix P, Q and X. This report serves as an interpretation of the charts and should be read in conjunction with them.

Investigators overseeing the case have made interpretations to assist an understanding of the overall case. This may involve accessing publicly available or subscription based sites for further detailed information.

All the work has been undertaken using open source material and legally available closed data sets and has been discovered without any form of hacking or accessing of private information. All information contained in this report is subject to verification, but is true to the best of our knowledge and belief.

## 5. TIMELINE

A brief timeline of major events has been produced below to assist in showing how the media campaigns evolved as events unfolded:

### **4<sup>th</sup> March 2018, 16:15 - victims**

Police officers were alerted to the incident at the Maltings Shopping Centre in Salisbury after a man and a younger woman are seen virtually unconscious on a park bench. The man and young woman are taken to Salisbury District Hospital.

### **5<sup>th</sup> March 2018 - police declare major incident**

Wiltshire Police declare a "major incident"<sup>1</sup>. Victims are later identified as Yulia and Sergei Skripal.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wiltshire.police.uk/article/1736/Major-incident-after-two-people-suspected-of-being-exposed-to-unknown-substance-in-Salisbury>

**5<sup>th</sup> March 2018 - diplomatic heat increases**

As the names of the victims leak, rumours of Russian involvement become widespread. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson says Britain will "respond appropriately and robustly" if evidence emerges of Russia's involvement in Skripal's suspected poisoning.

**7<sup>th</sup> March 2018 - police confirm use of nerve agent**

Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley, the outgoing Head of National Counter-Terror Policing, reveals that the Sergei and Yulia Skripal were poisoned with a nerve agent and that a police officer was also infected.

**8<sup>th</sup> March 2018 – “brazen and reckless act” (Daily Mirror)**

Home Secretary Amber Rudd said that the use of a nerve agent on UK soil was a "brazen and reckless act" of attempted murder "in the most cruel and public way".

She later chairs a meeting of the National Security Council and Theresa May calls a meeting of the Government's emergency response coordination unit Cobra.

**12<sup>th</sup> March 2018 - tough talk from the PM and an ultimatum**

Prime Minister Theresa May tells the Commons that the poison used in the attack was a military-grade nerve agent developed by Russia. She said it was part of a group of nerve agents known as Novichok.

***She gave Vladimir Putin's administration until midnight on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> March...***

...to explain how a former spy was poisoned in Salisbury; "should there be no credible response, we will conclude that this action amounts to an unlawful use of force by the Russian state against the United Kingdom," she said, promising to return to the House with a full range of retaliatory measures.

**13<sup>th</sup> March 2018, 1800 - Russia threatens “crooked” UK with retaliation**

The Russian Embassy sent out a series of scathing tweets which directly threaten the “crooked” UK with retaliation. The Embassy said its country would take action if the British Government continues to suggest it was involved in the poisoning of the former spy.

**14<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

London says that Moscow is "culpable" and it will expel 23 of the 59 Russian diplomats present in the United Kingdom. It also suspends high-level diplomatic contact with Moscow and will keep Royals at home during the 2018 football World Cup.



**15<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

Britain, France, Germany and the US say that "there is no plausible alternative explanation" to Russian involvement and call on Moscow to provide "full and complete disclosure" of the Soviet-era chemical programme that developed Novichok.

The 29 member NATO alliance expresses solidarity with Britain over what it calls the first offensive use of a nerve agent on the military alliance's territory since World War II.

**16<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson says it is "overwhelmingly likely" that Russian President Vladimir Putin was behind the poisoning. The Kremlin says the accusation is "unforgivable".

**17<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

On the eve of the election which is widely expected to give Putin a fourth term, Russia says it will expel 23 British diplomats and halt the activities of the British Council in Russia following London's "provocative" measures.

**26<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

The United States expels 60 Russian diplomats and closes the Russian Embassy in Washington. Fourteen EU member states also decided to expel Russian diplomats. The expulsion order includes 12 Russian intelligence officers from the United Nations Mission in New York, while several nations, including France and Germany, also announce plans to expel diplomats.

**27<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

Tánaiste Simon Coveney confirms that the Irish Government will follow the response of countries across the world and expel 1 diplomat.

**28<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

The UK confirms there was a high quantity of the nerve agent found at the former spy's front door, with the highest concentration found on the front door handle.

**29<sup>th</sup> March 2018**

Yulia Skripal wakes up. Her condition is now beginning to improve rapidly and she is talking. Sergei Skripal remains critically ill.

## 6. FINDINGS

### *a. UK Mainstream Media Reporting*

Research indicates that UK mainstream media in the form of national TV networks and their associated social media accounts have, in general, reported the news accurately in relation to both events that have occurred and statements made by senior figures involved in the aftermath.

The first major national news corporation to break the Skripal story on social media (Twitter) was Sky News (@SkyNewsBreak) at 12:09 on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2018. The tweet quoted a “major incident” declared by Wiltshire Police although, at this stage, there was no mention of the names of the victims. The report received 144 re-tweets<sup>2</sup> with some public comments suggesting (often light heartedly) that it may be linked with Porton Down<sup>3</sup>. Examination of these accounts showed that few of the public comments on the subject received any likes or re-tweets and there was little mention at this stage of any Russian links.

Other national and local networks soon followed suit in reporting the incident, but it was not until 17:01 on 5<sup>th</sup> March that the BBC News Twitter account (@BBCBreaking) named Sergei Skripal as one of the victims, linking the tweet to its online news platform [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk).<sup>4</sup> This tweet received 2659 re-tweets, 2,236 likes and 359 comments. Once the link was made to a former Russian spy, many of the public comments start to point the blame at Russia, including making parallels to alleged historical assassinations of UK based Russian defectors who had fallen foul of the Kremlin.<sup>5</sup> At this stage, criticism started being levelled at some of the UK TV networks and, in particular, the BBC, for early speculation as to Russian involvement in the assassination plot without any evidence<sup>6</sup>; it is these accusations that Russian trolls and Russian mainstream media first pick up on when they commence their propaganda campaigns.

Review of public comments on Twitter (Appendix A) indicated that, at that point, most were targeted towards Russia being the culprit. However, there were also those advocating restraint until the evidence had been examined suggesting that, at that stage, an attack on Skripal by the Russian State made little or no sense. Some went further in condemning the anti-Russia stance with tweets like:

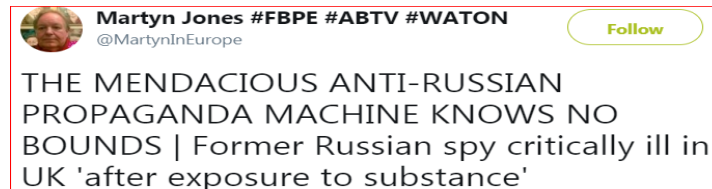
<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/SkyNewsBreak/status/970647393145446400>

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/longadey/status/970699864513359873>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/BBCBreaking/status/970720887505907713>

<sup>5</sup> [https://twitter.com/Inspired12\\_1\\_17/status/970894199980617728](https://twitter.com/Inspired12_1_17/status/970894199980617728)

<sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/BBCNewsnight/status/970796634031341569>



Initial public social media responses to UK media reports tended to be from an English speaking and predominantly UK based audience. It does not appear that, during the very early stages of UK mass media reporting, there was any deliberate strategy by pro Russia social media accounts to hijack the articles with disinformation in order to influence public opinion or deflect suspicion away from Russia. That said, as early as 18:25 on 5<sup>th</sup> March, a suspected UK based Kremlin troll (@Malinka1102) posted on Twitter “*Watch #BBC making up #Litvinenko case No.2. We have no evidence whatsoever (channel4news at 19:00) ... but we will try our best to make some*”. This post was only re-tweeted 13 times with 18 likes. However, two of the accounts that re-tweeted were in Russian and were connected to virtually all of the Russian troll accounts identified during this research. This was, in effect, the start of the Russian propaganda campaign that quickly gained pace each day thereafter. Russian propaganda (troll) accounts and how they attempted to influence public opinion both in the UK and further afield are examined later in further detail.

During the course of March 2018, as the diplomatic situation escalated, UK media TV networks and their associated social media accounts continued to report on the events and statements of key individuals involved in the ongoing diplomatic crisis. An example of reporting by these networks through their associated Twitter accounts is reproduced at Appendix B. An examination of 3 of the UK’s main TV networks’ social media accounts (BBC, ITV and Sky) show that they together tweeted 648 times during the period 5<sup>th</sup> March to 6<sup>th</sup> April 2018 in relation to keywords associated with this incident. Those primary tweets were re-tweeted 103,568 times. In comparison, using similar criteria, Russian mainstream media accounts (TASS, Sputnik and RT) tweeted 724 times and their posts were re-tweeted 37,222 times. Excel spreadsheets showing the relevant comparative data, including post narratives for both UK and Russian mainstream media reporting via Twitter, are produced at Appendix C and D.

**b. UK Tabloid Press**

Despite accusations from Russian propaganda sites to the contrary, it is assessed that UK mainstream media outlets (BBC, ITV, Sky, etc.) have, with a few exceptions, tended to accurately report the news without any perceived bias. Twitter accounts of the tabloid press have likewise reported accurately on events relating to this case as they have unfolded, including more recent reporting which may not reflect favourably on the UK Government’s accusations against Russia. However, hard copy and web editions of some of these media outlets have been accused by Russian

propaganda news sites like Sputnik and RT, perhaps with some justification, of inflaming the already delicate situation, with headlines such as *"I'm on Putin's hit list"*<sup>7</sup>, *"West unites to confront Russia over poisonings"*<sup>8</sup> and *"Will Britain launch CYBER ATTACK on Moscow?"*<sup>9</sup>

@SputnikInt responded to one of these headlines by quoting the Russian Embassy in the UK as saying *"@RussianEmbassy outraged at #UK media's one-sided coverage of #Skripal case."*<sup>10</sup> As will be shown later, this type of reporting was seen in Moscow (and probably more widely within Russia and beyond) as being both accusatorial and confrontational and based purely on unsubstantiated allegations.

Posted responses to tabloid web based news articles came from a generally English speaking audience and were mixed in their reaction to the accusations against Russia and the certainty regarding who had supplied the nerve agent. Further examples of tabloid media reporting and reactions from the readership during the relevant period are reproduced at Appendix E. In addition, an Excel spreadsheet of some of the main tabloid newspapers' Twitter accounts covering the period until 6<sup>th</sup> April 2018, is produced at Appendix F. This shows post narratives, links to the articles and the number of re-tweets for each post. Analysis of this data, using keywords connected to the case, shows that the tabloid Twitter accounts posted 304 times and were re-tweeted 9,081 times. This suggests that, whilst web based tabloid media produced what could be described as more sensationalised headlines, it was the mainstream TV outlets that had, by far, the greatest reach through their respective social media platforms.

### ***c. Russian Mainstream Media Reporting***

Within minutes of the first social media reporting on the poisoning incident by UK National news organisations, UK based Russian media outlets also began to relay the "breaking" news<sup>11</sup>. On 5<sup>th</sup> March 2018 at 17:52, the first Russia based news website, [www.russianinsight.com](http://www.russianinsight.com), relayed the Skripal story via its Twitter account (@RussianInsight) quoting a report by the Moscow times<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://twitter.com/BBCNews/status/973688959720189960/photo/1?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rt.com%2Fuk%2F421508-salisbury-skripal-cold-war%2F](https://twitter.com/BBCNews/status/973688959720189960/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rt.com%2Fuk%2F421508-salisbury-skripal-cold-war%2F)

<sup>8</sup> [https://twitter.com/thetimes/status/974413689817268226/photo/1?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rt.com%2Fuk%2F421508-salisbury-skripal-cold-war%2F](https://twitter.com/thetimes/status/974413689817268226/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rt.com%2Fuk%2F421508-salisbury-skripal-cold-war%2F)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5493155/Theresa-gives-Putin-midnight-deadline-brazen-spy-attack.html?ito=social-twitter\\_dailymailUK](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5493155/Theresa-gives-Putin-midnight-deadline-brazen-spy-attack.html?ito=social-twitter_dailymailUK)

<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/SputnikInt/status/979519614387441664/photo/1>

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/RLSRUSSIANNEWS/status/970734335363108865>

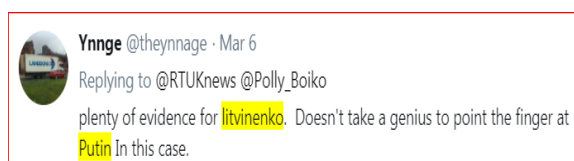
<sup>12</sup> <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/former-russian-spy-critically-ill-in-britain-after-exposure-to-substance-60710>

#### d. Russian Propaganda News Networks

Three of the main Russian State propaganda news agencies (TASS, Sputnik and RT News), which have proved most relevant to this research, started reporting the Skripal incident on the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> March 2018, when RT News posted an article in English via its online media site [www.rt.com](http://www.rt.com)<sup>13</sup>. The article reported the limited facts available at the time, but whilst, at this stage, there was still considerable speculation as to the type of poison used, the article went on to state that “The British media rushed to compare this case with an incident involving former Russian security officer Alexander Litvinenko.....” Later, at 09:10 on 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018 the RT News Russian language version also reported the story via its National website [www.russia.rt.com](http://www.russia.rt.com)<sup>14</sup> and identified the female involved as Skripal’s daughter Yulia.

In the very early stages of the incident, reporting was mainly confined to the events themselves. However, following Boris Johnson’s statement indicating that there would be repercussions should Russia be implicated, its mainstream media, and especially those with a UK presence or English speaking social media platforms, started preparing to deflect attention away from Russia. On 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018, RT News’ UK Twitter account @RTUKnews referenced a statement by historian Martin McCauley tweeting “@foreignoffice and police will immediately think it’s Alexander Litvinenko pt 2”<sup>15</sup>. Examples of early reporting by Russian news networks is attached at Appendix G.

Further tweets by RT News accounts ensued on 6<sup>th</sup> March linking to their online web platform; one quoting @georgegalloway as saying “We’re in an atmosphere of heightened Russophobia”<sup>16</sup> (84 re-tweets) and another stating that the UK media “finds Russia link in alleged poisoning despite no evidence”<sup>17</sup>. Public responses to @RTUKnews tweets were in English and mixed in sentiment. Two examples are shown below:



RT also reported a statement by Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov where he says that “Russia had not received requests (from the UK) for cooperation in investigating the incident”. In relation to speculation of Russia being the culprit, Peskov is alleged to have added “comments of experts in

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.rt.com/news/420542-sergei-skripal-substance-incident-salisbury/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/489187-skripal-velikobritaniya-doch>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/RTUKnews/status/970964706595778560>

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/RTUKnews/status/971055303956496384/video/1>

<sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/RTUKnews/status/970994906209636353/video/1>

*the Western media, which argue that the incident allegedly involved the Russian side, did not take long to wait (emerge).<sup>18</sup>*

Within days of the poisoning attempt and as further information became available suggesting that Russian involvement in the affair was “highly likely”, the British Foreign Secretary requested an explanation from the Russian State as to the circumstance surrounding the attempted murder<sup>19</sup>. As a result, RT upped the rhetoric and, on 15<sup>th</sup> March 2018, reported a statement by Putin where he was said to be “*extremely ‘concerned’ over UK’s ‘destructive, provocative’ stance in Skripal case*”<sup>20</sup>.

The Sputnik News Agency was slightly later in reporting the initial incident but, once it had started, it set about creating tabloid headlines emphasising international support for Russia, attacking the UK’s position and denying at every opportunity Russia’s involvement in the attack. Examples of these web based press headlines covering the research period are reproduced at Appendix H.

Sputnik’s online media presence via its various Twitter accounts, provides a better understanding of how it tried to spin information to influence public opinion in support of the Russian cause. For example, on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2018 @RT\_Sputnik (an online media talk show hosted by George Galloway and others) tweeted a message in relation to the nerve agent Novichok. It quoted Alexander Nekrassov, a former Kremlin advisor, as saying *“The assertion that because it’s the Novichok nerve agent, Russia is behind it. But seven miles from Salisbury is the biggest chemical warfare centre in Europe; Porton Down. They have samples of this particular nerve agent because they need it to produce the antidote.”*<sup>21</sup> This post alone received 223 re-tweets and 215 likes.

There are multiple tweets relating to Porton Down by pro Russia accounts. RT News and TASS have both stirred up uncertainty as to whether the facility is implicated in the affair by spinning information to suit their own purposes. TASS, for example, tweeted a report from its online news platform with the headline *“Reaction at UK’s Porton Down proves it develops toxic chemicals, says Russian diplomat”*<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, in an obvious attempt to detract attention away from any part that Russia may have played in the incident, Twitter account @RTUKnews polled readers on whether Boris Johnson should be sacked following the revelations by Porton Down that they, contrary to Johnson’s earlier statement, could not identify the source of the Novichok. The poll received over 4,208 votes and 399 re-tweets with the alleged results shown below:

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<sup>18</sup> <https://russian.rt.com/world/news/489141-peskov-rassledovanie-incident-skripal>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-43305515/russian-spy-boris-johnson-promises-robust-response>

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.rt.com/news/421397-putin-extremely-concerned-skripal/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=RSS](https://www.rt.com/news/421397-putin-extremely-concerned-skripal/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=RSS)

<sup>21</sup> [https://twitter.com/RT\\_sputnik/status/974710841173053440/photo/1](https://twitter.com/RT_sputnik/status/974710841173053440/photo/1)

<sup>22</sup> <http://tass.com/politics/995932>

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Those responding to the poll were almost exclusively English speaking. Whilst not appearing to be part of an organised network, some of the comments suggest that individuals who are of socialist leanings, have used the Skripal case as a means to pursue their anti UK Government position by attacking specific political figures and Government policy over the affair. It is unclear whether this has developed naturally or whether it was part of a planned Russian media strategy. Conversely, and despite the poll result, there were also - perhaps surprisingly - a considerable number of comments that were either supportive of the UK establishment stance or questioning of RT News' motives for running the poll. Amongst others who took a similar position, the account @TonyFisherPuzls tweeted "*I wonder how many tweets on here are Putin's bots? I also wonder why RT goes along with the lies. Are they paid a lot or in fear of their lives?*"<sup>23</sup> Another account @malachaiAlva tweeted "*He (Johnson) should not be sacked. Only reporting on the information that he was given. Putin is responsible for this, we all know it and so does he.*" These 2 comments, which were representative of this alternative view, only received 3 likes and no re-tweets between them, thus illustrating the limited ability of pro UK establishment supporters to gain any foothold or influence opinion on this or any other Russian State sponsored media sites.

As the diplomatic crisis has intensified, Russian mainstream media has continued to pursue its disinformation and propaganda strategy. The following are examples of some of the most recent tweets by Russia's State media organisations, designed to deflect attention away from Russia and on to the UK:

**@RTUKnews - 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018** - "*Porton Down: Lab behind Skripal poison probe has dark history of human testing*"<sup>24</sup> - 197 re-tweets

**@tassagency\_en - 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018** - "*Senior Russian diplomat says impossible to trust London in investigating #Skripal case*"<sup>25</sup> - 15 re-tweets

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/RTUKnews/status/981544064188370951>

<sup>24</sup> <https://twitter.com/RTUKnews/status/981597267596636165>

<sup>25</sup> [https://twitter.com/tassagency\\_en/status/981599786418757632](https://twitter.com/tassagency_en/status/981599786418757632)

@RT\_Com - 7<sup>th</sup> April 2018 - “Skripal’s niece denied visa to visit UK, says “Britain hiding something” – 130 re-tweets<sup>26</sup>

@SputnikInt - 6<sup>th</sup> April 2018 - “#Skripal incident likely a false flag attack by UK to vilify #Russia – journalist”<sup>27</sup>

These Russian media outlets have a large domestic and international following across multi platforms. With this reach, along with the support of the Russian troll accounts spreading the message, it is not difficult to understand how this ripple effect can impact and influence public sentiment. Whilst not possible to state categorically, it is assessed as likely that the disinformation and deflection tactics unrelentingly spread by these news outlets would eventually lead to questions arising and reassessment of the facts surrounding the case. This could ultimately lead to a more sympathetic view towards Russia and, in the process, call into question the credibility and trustworthiness of the current UK establishment by both its domestic population and Western allies alike.

#### **e. Comparison**

A comparative analysis of posts against time has been conducted for the 3 main UK and Russian media outlets impacting this case. These are produced at Appendix I and J in both graph and infographic format. The results indicate that whilst UK media had a stronger presence during the early and mid-research periods, after that Russian media started to catch up and, in the latter stages, with a few exceptions, overtook both in terms of volume of posts and re-tweets. It is not clear, at this stage, whether UK media, and hence the public, started to lose interest in the Skripal affair or whether the Russian propaganda machine, with the assistance of troll accounts, made a concerted effort to influence public opinion as events began to turn in their favour.

#### **f. Impact of Events on Other Countries**

Whilst in the early stages of the Skripal case interest focussed mostly around the deteriorating relationship between the UK and Russia, as time progressed, diplomatic manoeuvring brought other countries into the fray, which impacted to varying degrees on their respective domestic populations. Analysis of mainstream and social media has been conducted on the United States, Germany and France in an attempt to assess how, if at all, public sentiment changed as events unfolded and whether it was influenced by any external propaganda campaigns.

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<sup>26</sup> [https://twitter.com/RT\\_com/status/982573466690957313](https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/982573466690957313)

<sup>27</sup> <https://twitter.com/SputnikInt/status/982135823343775744>



*i. Germany*

Many of the social media posts emanating from Germany were initially made by individuals who commented on the poisoning incident only in “general news” terms with the major emphasis being placed on the fact that the UK acted too fast in accusing Russia with little or no evidence.



These posts tended to instigate limited likes and re-tweets and, as such, appeared to have little influence across any of the networks. Only subsequently, when the content of the posts, often made by the same accounts, became more accusatorial or critical of the UK (or the USA) by, for example, propagating the theory that the UK itself initiated the attack to deflect criticism of current UK Government policies, did the number of likes and re-tweets grow immeasurably. Examples of this type of accusations are:



28 <https://twitter.com/wachsamkeit65/status/974638632714809350>  
 29 [https://twitter.com/Hamburg\\_klein/status/977101204969975810](https://twitter.com/Hamburg_klein/status/977101204969975810)  
 30 <https://twitter.com/Ian56789/status/973270727523799040>  
 31 <https://twitter.com/Twtitarbacke/status/974693727196377088>

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News of the poisoning incident broke in Germany on 5th March through a post by Chris Sampson (@TAPSTRIMEDIA) taken from a BBC news feed. Shortly afterwards, Sergei Skripal was identified as one of the victims, when details were posted by another individual, Chad Garland (@chadgarland).



Of the German mainstream news agencies, DW News (@dwnews)<sup>32</sup> was one of the most prolific in their coverage of the Skripal case, using Twitter as their social media platform of choice.



Tweets	Following	Followers	Likes	Lists
245K	904	192K	1,681	17

Their first post was made on 6th March and was linked to an interview with Russian critic Bill Browder. Between 6th and 23rd March 2018, DW News tweeted 19 times receiving, on average, 20 likes and 20 re-tweets per post.

<sup>32</sup> <https://twitter.com/dwnews/status/971129795189919744>

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### Other German Mainstream News Agencies & Associated Journalists

DPA International (@dpa\_int) first posted on 6th March 2018 with the headline “Was Britain the scene of a Russian spy attack this week?” Between 6<sup>th</sup> and 23rd March, DPA tweeted 29 times in total. Responses were very limited with the majority of posts receiving no likes or re-tweets.

By comparison, Peter George Oliver (@PeterGOliver\_RT), a European correspondent for the pro Kremlin news organisation RT based in Berlin, re-tweeted just 3 times within the same period with links to articles of interest about the developing story in the UK and the potential political responses. Each post instigated an average 47 re-tweets and 34 likes per post. Examples of his posts are below:



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Der Spiegel’s Deputy Head of Foreign Desk, Mathieu von Rohr (@mathieuvonrohr), posted 31 times on the subject and had substantial reactions to his comments, sometimes running into thousands of likes and re-tweets. The comments and posts that he chose to re-tweet gave an unbiased and holistic overview of the developing situation in the UK and the reaction and subsequent reporting that appeared on the Twitter platform across Europe. His colleague, Veit Medick (@vmedick), a Berlin based Der Spiegel online correspondent, posted just 3 times during the analytical period, re-tweeting 1 post from von Rohr about the possibility and ability of other countries to recreate or copy Novichok, with the other 2 posts questioning its origin and its long term effect on the victims. Interestingly, the most influential accounts within the German mainstream news agencies and journalists are those of Veit Medick, followed by Peter George Oliver and Mathieu von Rohr. This suggests that individuals tend to have more influence across the Twitter platform than the organisations they represent.

A prolific account trolling the UK Government is Carmen Renieri (@RenieriArts)<sup>36</sup>.



<sup>33</sup> <https://twitter.com/RikeFranke/status/973501552358027264>

<sup>34</sup> <https://twitter.com/SputnikInt/status/971442836825665536>

<sup>35</sup> <https://twitter.com/DanielleRyanJ/status/973939501016915970>

<sup>36</sup> <https://twitter.com/@RenieriArts>

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This account posted 35 times during the research period, mainly re-tweeting the posts of others who have what appear to be a staunchly anti UK establishment and pro-Russian outlook.



Amongst those accounts that she is re-tweeting is the (allegedly) UK based, pro Kremlin Twitter troll @lan56789.

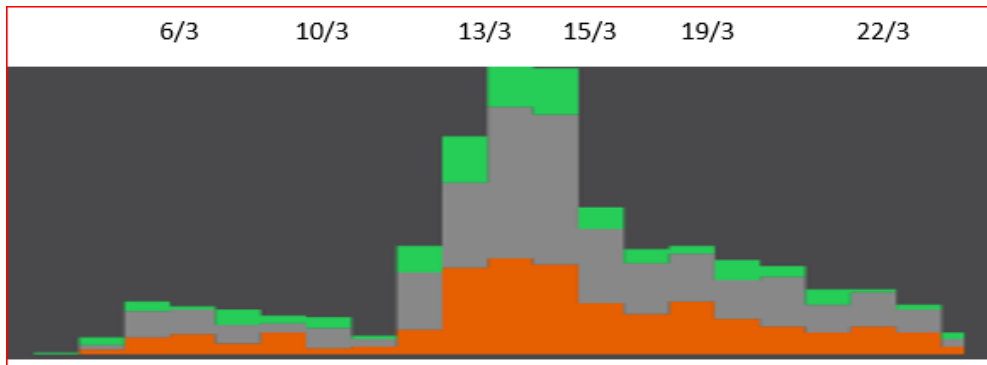
### **Activity**

Over the analysed time period there have been three spikes of activity:

**6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> March 2018** - news breaks of the Skripal poisoning with regular media updates.

**13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> March 2018** - political rhetoric increases. The UK expels Russian diplomats and a Russian chemist confirms Novichok production in Russia in the 1990s.

**19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018** - trolling and rhetoric continue to develop as diplomatic tensions increase. Moscow summons its foreign ambassadors and OPCW investigators visit the UK to collect samples of the nerve agent for independent analysis.



Example posts on Twitter by German accounts:

6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> March 2018

**Gudrun Garcia** @guddie1 Follow

'Unknown Substance': UK Police Declare 'Major Incident', Salisbury Shopping Centre and Hospital Quarantined

'Unknown Substance': UK Police Declare 'Major Incident', S...  
A major incident was declared in Salisbury Monday following the quarantine and disinfecting of a shopping area and hospital in Salisbury, England, with a former Russian military colonel and ...  
breitbart.com

2:49 am - 6 Mar 2018

37

**Ilhame Louisa Maria** @IlhameLouisaMar Follow

'Poisoned spy case' echoes fate of Alexander Litvinenko US News [betrendsetter.today/poisoned-spy-c ...](#)

12:20 am - 6 Mar 2018

38

13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> March 2018

**Ros Chappell** #FBPE #WATON #ABTV @RosChappell Follow

Putin released a weapons grade nerve agent in Salisbury, just one of many instances of his hybrid war on the West, including the UK. He won't stop until we stop him. Trump hasn't condemned him. It is the EU who are our friends, our strength. Brexit is madness.

7:17 pm - 12 Mar 2018

179 Retweets 369 Likes

39

**Craig Murray** @CraigMurrayOrg Follow

The Elephant In The Room - Nerve agents including Sarin and VX are manufactured by the British Government in Porton Down, just 8 miles from where Sergei Skripal was attacked. The official British government story is that these nerve agents are only

The Elephant In The Room  
Nerve agents including Sarin and VX are manufactured by the British Government in Porton Down, just 8 miles from where Sergei Skripal was attacked. The official British government stor...  
craigmurray.org.uk

11:05 am - 7 Mar 2018

977 Retweets 749 Likes

40

<sup>37</sup> <https://twitter.com/guddie1/status/970974726691737600>

<sup>38</sup> <https://twitter.com/IlhameLouisaMar/status/970937242603720705>

<sup>39</sup> <https://twitter.com/RosChappell/status/973382611459543040>

<sup>40</sup> <https://twitter.com/CraigMurrayOrg/status/971461752855592961>

19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018



41



42

Two of the accounts being re-tweeted are those of previously identified pro Kremlin troll accounts @Ian56789 (UK) and Marcellsardo (Russia) and another of @CraigMurryOrg, the former British Ambassador who, from a British perspective, has been one of the leading critics of the UK Government's handling of the Skripal affair.

### Assessment

The analysis demonstrated that the mainstream news agencies, whilst reporting the Salisbury incident, are not as influential as lone journalists/correspondents or individuals within the German network. The German population has followed the unfolding events in the UK across the Twitter platform and has, in general terms, tended to absorb rather than instigate further debate. That is until senior political figures such as Prime Minister Theresa May are either trolled or ridiculed when activity in the forms of likes and re-tweets rise substantially. However, it could be argued this still represents the minority of accounts and issues that are amenable or of concern are dealt with more tactfully and respectfully without the need to put forward one's own view. There are a small number of accounts that support the UK stance and handling of the incident, but the majority of accounts identified through analysis feel that the UK acted too swiftly in its condemnation of Russia and is suffering something of a backlash due to the lack of supporting evidence for its claims. Examples of additional accounts of interest emanating from Germany that are pro-Russian/anti UK in ideology can be found at Appendix K; the volume of posts significantly exceeds similar pro-Russian accounts in France, and it is anticipated that this will continue to be the case in the coming days and weeks. Additional reporting of relevant social media posts will be reported under Phase 2 of this project.

<sup>41</sup> [https://twitter.com/mac123\\_m/status/976190763955576832](https://twitter.com/mac123_m/status/976190763955576832)

<sup>42</sup> <https://twitter.com/dwnews/status/977033445347119106>

*ii. France*

From the research undertaken, it is clear that there is a distinct difference between France and Germany in the way that social media platforms are utilised. In France, it is mainstream news outlets rather than individuals who are responsible for the majority of posts and retain the most influence in relation to events surrounding the attack on Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

News of the incident broke in France on the evening of 5th March 2018 via the AFP News Agency Twitter feed<sup>43</sup>, followed by posts early on 6th March by the English speaking France24 (@France24\_en) under the headline "Russian ex-spy critically ill: State media claims Sergei Skripal poisoned himself".

Linked to that post is a video report<sup>44</sup> from a correspondent in Moscow, who makes reference to the specific language being used by the Russian news agencies, who are referring to Skripal as a traitor rather than someone who had served his country.

Over the next few days, news of the poisoning was steadily transmitted via the main news outlets such as France 24 (@EuropeF24), France Inter (@franceinter) and AFP (@AFP) using their social media Twitter platforms. However, the reaction from individual private accounts following these news channels was very limited. The AFP News Agency, which has in excess of 1.4 million followers, instigated by far the largest response in the form of likes and re-tweets but this was still generally only in the tens and twenties. This apparent apathy for the story is further reinforced through analysis of "Skripal poisoning" keyword data sets which show that the @AFP account has limited influence within the French social media network with interest in the attack.

The first potential anti UK type post appeared on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2018 posted by The Locus (@thelocuspost)<sup>45</sup>, which coincided with the expulsion of Russian "diplomats" based in the UK and sort to deflect attention away from Russia through propaganda suggesting that the UK Intelligence Services were involved in the nerve agent attack.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/970838300779995136>

<sup>44</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbXr82rQ9pA&ref=tw\\_i](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbXr82rQ9pA&ref=tw_i)

<sup>45</sup> <https://twitter.com/thelocuspost/status/973514163371855872>





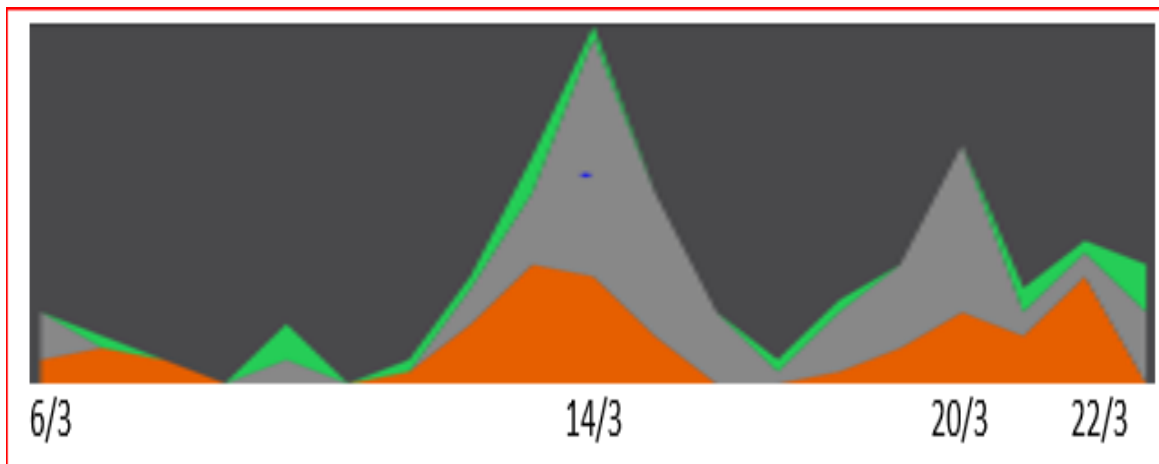
**Activity**

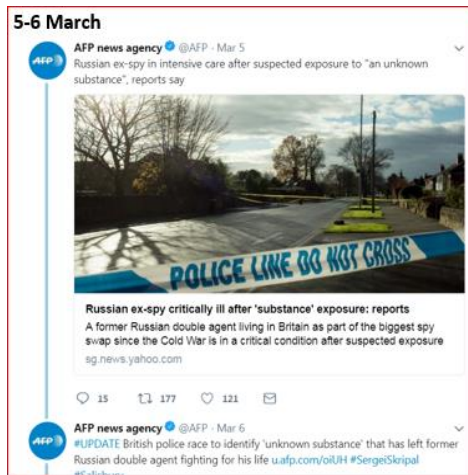
Over the analysed time period, there have been 3 spikes of activity; posts coinciding with the occurrence of specific events relative to these spikes are detailed below:

**6th March 2018** - news first breaks of Skripal poisoning.

**13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> March 2018** - UK expels Russian diplomats and Russian chemist confirms Novichok production in 1990s.

**19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018** - Moscow summons foreign ambassadors and OPCW investigators visit UK to collect samples.





46



47



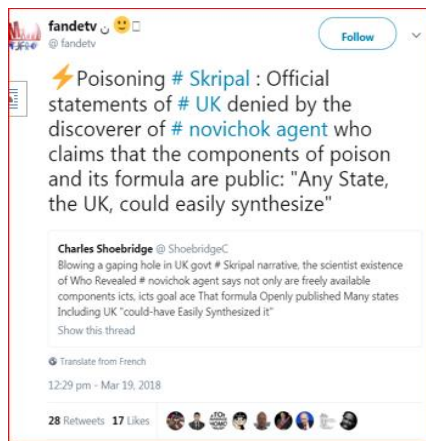
48



49



50



51

Fandetv (@fandetv), an account sited in Paris since 2009 with French political motivations and in excess of 200,000 followers, has posted only 4 times on the subject but has a substantial influence

<sup>46</sup> <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/971010350018715649>

<sup>47</sup> [https://twitter.com/France24\\_en/status/970954666799321088](https://twitter.com/France24_en/status/970954666799321088)

<sup>48</sup> <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/973849935987789824>





<sup>49</sup> <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/973943644129546240>

<sup>50</sup> <https://twitter.com/AFP/status/97576268885317632/video/1>

<sup>51</sup> <https://twitter.com/fandetv/status/975816624572895233>

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within the network of those interested in the Skripal poisoning incident. All of the posts are clearly targeted at the UK establishment in support of Russia's position of denial.

Account	Content	Retweets	Likes	Date
	@fandev: VIDEO: #Skripal's Harassment: British Conservative Party's Vice President in Paris dissociates from @Theresa_May: "I do not see the #Russie's interest in wanting to kill him (...) I'm a lawyer and regrets that the offer of cooperation of #Lavrov was rejected" <a href="https://t.co/lcDXMolt5g">https://t.co/lcDXMolt5g</a>	83	61	15-03-18 4:17
	@fandev: VIDEO #Skripal's mockery: #Inis Research Director wonders who benefits from #crime as relations between #Russia and #Great Britain were warming up with a planned visit from Sergei #Lavrov to #London. <a href="https://t.co/BJjDxGv59">https://t.co/BJjDxGv59</a>	77	47	15-03-18 5:03
	@fandev: VIDEO: @GilbertCollard on the #Skripal Case: "The poison would be of #Russian origin? The secret services would have left their signature? Why not their business card? And all capitals accuse without investigation or proof. It stinks of #manipulation." #RTFrance @RTenfrancais <a href="https://t.co/77yh2Zwbxn">https://t.co/77yh2Zwbxn</a>	228	210	16-03-18 19:44
	@fandev: #Skripal's Harassment: The official statements of the #United Kingdom denied by the #Novichok's discoverer that the poison components & formula are public: "Any state, including GB, could easily synthesize it" <a href="https://twitter.com/ShoebidgeC/status/975459587129335808">https://twitter.com/ShoebidgeC/status/975459587129335808</a>	28	17	18-03-18 18:29

### Other Accounts of Note Impacting France



**Maya's Dolly**  
@mayasdolly

I'm myself - je suis moi- son io - ich bin ich! - Me soy - Я являюсь мной - 我就是我。

52

<b>Tweets</b>	<b>Following</b>	<b>Followers</b>	<b>Likes</b>
101K	2,831	508	7,357

This account appeared in a number of analyses as one that posted its own comments as well as re-tweeting others. Active since March 2011, the account has tweeted in excess of 101,000 times. The account uses a number of languages including Russian, French, English, Arabic and Italian in order to push out its message to a wide audience. Almost all reaction to its posts was by way of re-tweets as opposed to comments.

Interest in the case began on 17<sup>th</sup> March 2018 when the account began to make comment on the Skripal poisoning attack. Since then, the account has posted 123 times. Very limited reaction was

<sup>52</sup> <https://twitter.com/@mayasdolly>

observed on the account's own comments until 21<sup>st</sup> March, when reaction was far more substantial, after the account began to re-tweet posts made by Russia in RSA (@EmbassyofRussia), Nina Byzantina (@NinaByzantina), a suspected pro Kremlin troll account, and the pro Russia news agency Sputnik Italia (@sputnik\_italia). This may suggest that the Russian trolls were using posts made by this account to highlight their own cause by cascading the messages out through their extended network. This would also have given the @mayasdolly account far more credibility amongst its own followers, thereby spreading the pro Russia message to a new audience.



<sup>53</sup> <https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia>

<sup>54</sup> <https://twitter.com/NinaByzantina>

<sup>55</sup> [https://twitter.com/sputnik\\_italia](https://twitter.com/sputnik_italia)

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Examples of the re-tweeted posts are shown below:

Account	Content	Retweets	Likes	Date
	@mayasdolly: RT @EmbassyofRussia: FM #Lavrov: Today, we live in a world where one should not read Western newspapers. All stories are unprecedentedly simplistic, crude & propagandistic. The public is being brainwashed. We are witnessing this time and again, be it #EasternGhoutha or the so-called #Skripal incident <a href="https://t.co/DeWmOhNvcR">https://t.co/DeWmOhNvcR</a>	1071	1219	21-03-18 6:05
	@mayasdolly: RT @NinaByzantina: First, they accused the Kremlin within hours, but now it's going to take months to investigate what happened to Skripal. Let me make a wild guess: by pure coincidence, investigation results are going to get published shortly before the World Cup. <a href="https://t.co/Hp4PSA8TpD">https://t.co/Hp4PSA8TpD</a>	132	179	21-03-18 9:34
	@mayasdolly: RT @EmbassyofRussia: Kremlin Spokesperson #Peskov: #Skripal was handed in to Britain as a result of an exchange. So, why should Russia hand in a man that is of any importance or that is of any value? It's unimaginable. If he's handed in - means Russia quits on him. He's of zero value, zero importance <a href="https://t.co/x2ys5AVWMS">https://t.co/x2ys5AVWMS</a>	160	185	23-03-18 5:59
	@mayasdolly: RT @sputnik_italia: #Lavrov: the British actions bring the relations # Moscow- # London in a dead end #Russia #GranBretagna #GB #Skripal <a href="https://t.co/v3goFrTT9">https://t.co/v3goFrTT9</a> <a href="https://t.co/7TDppKNYF2">https://t.co/7TDppKNYF2</a>	3	2	23-03-18 9:50
	@mayasdolly: RT @EmbassyofRussia: A reminder to our Western colleagues in connection with anti-Russian farce around #Skripal case. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 11) stipulates that "everyone has the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty" - one of the core principles of modern society <a href="https://t.co/954ASNRCjt">https://t.co/954ASNRCjt</a>	528	649	26-03-18 21:07
	@mayasdolly: RT @EmbassyofRussia: US, Canada's and European states' decision to expel scores of Russian diplomats & close @GK_Seattle on basis of groundless allegations vs Russia on the #Skripal case makes one wonder if anyone in those capitals is even remotely interested in finding truth on Salisbury incident <a href="https://t.co/secWYJFIM">https://t.co/secWYJFIM</a>	300	354	27-03-18 8:14
	@mayasdolly: RT @EmbassyofRussia: Slide presentation used by UK officials to blame #Russia for #Salisbury incident highlighted London's main argument - "there is no plausible alternative explanation." Really? Let's help our British Colleagues, post "plausible alternative explanations" in the comments below <a href="https://t.co/YJfZmSHmj">https://t.co/YJfZmSHmj</a>	187	183	29-03-18 6:54

**Russia in RSA** @EmbassyofRussia Follow

Slide presentation used by UK officials to blame #Russia for #Salisbury incident highlighted London's main argument - "there is no plausible alternative explanation." Really? Let's help our British Colleagues, post "plausible alternative explanations" in the comments below 🙄

8:03 am - 28 Mar 2018

187 Retweets 183 Likes

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Tweets	Following	Followers	Likes	Lists
44K	924	889	242	2

This account appeared in a number of analyses as one that posted its own comments as well as re-tweeting others. Active since April 2009, the account has tweeted in excess of 44,000 times. The account posts in a number of languages including French and English.

Interest in the Skripal case began on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2018 when the account began to make comment on the Skripal poisoning attack. Since then the account has posted 94 times. Many of the comments posted by Transition (@bruno\_paul) link or make reference to the pro Russian news feed, Sputnik News. Very limited reaction was observed to these posts. However, reaction was far more substantial after the account began to re-tweet posts made by other accounts that include (@RussianEmbassy), Russian Platform (@Russiaconnects) and MFA Russia (@mfa\_russia).



56



57










58

<sup>56</sup> <https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy>

<sup>57</sup> <https://twitter.com/RussiaConnects>

<sup>58</sup> [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia)

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Account	Content	Retweets	Likes	Date
	@bruno_paul: RT @c_love888: @RTUKnews @georgegalloway @theresa_may @HouseofCommons We are supposed to believe that someone brought nerve agents from Russia to poison people just a mile away from British nerve gas factory in Porton Down? what kind of madness is this?	22	35	13-03-18 18:09
	@bruno_paul: RT @davidicke: Russian spy attack: Vladimir Putin has 24 hours to explain how deadly nerve agent was used on UK soil, says Theresa May <a href="https://t.co/c7O5FyH0q1">https://t.co/c7O5FyH0q1</a> #Russia <a href="https://t.co/vKBjw2xWqK">https://t.co/vKBjw2xWqK</a>	235	295	13-03-18 18:11
	@bruno_paul: RT @zerohedge: Is The UK Manufacturing Its Nerve Agent Case For 'Action' On Russia? <a href="https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2018-03-15/uk-manufacturing-its-nerve-agent-case-action-russia">https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2018-03-15/uk-manufacturing-its-nerve-agent-case-action-russia</a>	79	84	16-03-18 20:29
	@bruno_paul: RT @YasPfav: @BorisJohnson Now everybody knows that the UK and it's allies CAN break the international rules with impunity by collectively expelling Russians with absolutely NO EVIDENCE of Russia's implication on the Skripal case. You're a serious threat to the world with all your horrible warmongering!	29	89	27-03-18 8:13
	@bruno_paul: RT @mfa_russia: In connection with the accusations of poisoning S.#Skripal and his daughter in #Salisbury, we suggest you to read the article published in 2004 by the #UK "Guardian" on the activities of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory in Porton Down. <a href="https://t.co/ENKu9xz2G3">https://t.co/ENKu9xz2G3</a> <a href="https://t.co/hl2hZ7193y">https://t.co/hl2hZ7193y</a>	477	482	27-03-18 16:02
	@bruno_paul: RT @RussianEmbassy: Foreign Secretary @BorisJohnson seems to forget that the Salisbury lab of @defencehq has an impressive record of poisoning British citizens with nerve agents. A friendly reminder: <a href="https://t.co/vO2MyAHAO">https://t.co/vO2MyAHAO</a> <a href="https://t.co/4AdxEnJGo2">https://t.co/4AdxEnJGo2</a>	112	147	27-03-18 16:40
	@bruno_paul: RT @RussianEmbassy: Russian talk shows may have produced 24 or 234 versions of Salisbury attack, but British press sticks to ONE, unsupported by any facts. So much for free and independent media holding government to account. <a href="https://t.co/862TIBVxc">https://t.co/862TIBVxc</a>	322	431	30-03-18 4:40

**Assessment**

It is assessed that, when the news first broke, there was general indifference amongst social media users in France about the story, even though it received significant interest from the mainstream media outlets and senior political figures. As the story developed over the following days and weeks, and the political rhetoric intensified, leading, ultimately, to the tit for tat expulsion of diplomats, interest did increase over the Twitter platform. That interest appeared to be mainly from those questioning the stance and handling of the issue by the UK Government and, in particular, Prime Minister May and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson.

As further events unfold, changes in French sentiment will be monitored and updates of relevant social media posts can, if required, be reported under Phase 2 of this project.

### ***iii. USA - Social Media Timeline Overview***

Below is an overview of social media as it impacted the United States. A more in depth analysis of events and how social media impacted on these is attached at Appendix L.

The onset of US based social media reporting regarding the incident in Salisbury was not delayed in comparison to UK reporting.

The first influential post to break into the US social media landscape was Breitbart's 14:47UTC tweet "*Unknown Substance... UK police declare major incident in Salisbury...*"; 61% of all global posts and re-tweets regarding the incident were of this Breitbart link in the following hour (<https://twitter.com/BreitbartLondon/status/970672161160617986>).

By 16:00 UTC, the news had not significantly spread throughout the US and was mainly being reposted on the East Coast. However, by 17:00 UTC, the whole of the US was involved in the spread of the story and creation of original US based posts and narratives.

Sergei Skripal's involvement with Christopher Steele (the author of a well-known dossier detailing President Trump's alleged connections to Russia) was the first significant narrative to propagate throughout the US. The concept of Trump's connections to Russia became a centre point of discussion over the following days. Most posts discussed factual revelations about the incident as they were discovered alongside harsh criticisms and accusations of Putin and Russia (and anti-Trump rhetoric due to the President's alleged connection to the two).

By 8<sup>th</sup> March, most social media reporting was criticising President Trump's lack of response to the incident, which continues throughout the following few days. Other prominent rhetoric includes a disbelief in the lack of action taken by "the West".

By 9<sup>th</sup> March, posts were propagating focusing on the disinformation campaign mounting by Russian State media and most of these used it as further proof of Russia's involvement in the incident. Theresa May's public statement on 10<sup>th</sup> March promising sanctions and other action is met very positively in US social media with most narratives also criticising Trump for not supporting her decision. May's "ultimatum" on 12<sup>th</sup> March was also met positively throughout US social media.



US social media loses UK focus around 14<sup>th</sup> March when Trump fired Rex Tillerson (the then Secretary of State) after Tillerson spoke out strongly about the Salisbury incident. Much of US social media becomes anti-Trump and many Trump-Russia conspiracy theories begin to emerge.

It is not until 17<sup>th</sup> March that significantly pro-Russian rhetoric begins to find its way to prominence in the US social media landscape. The first impactful post suggests that the UK was involved in planning the incident (<https://twitter.com/soulstray/status/974917257792032768>). The narrative becomes varied at this point with RT News and other sources gaining momentum in the US, but with the overall social media activity significantly decreasing until 20<sup>th</sup> March.

US social media again draws back to domestic narrative when Trump telephones Putin and “congratulates” him on his election victory. Social media criticises Trump for this for the following week and many claim it proves his complicity with Putin’s and Russia’s agenda. US social media activity declines again over this week until 26<sup>th</sup> March when Trump expels 60 Russian diplomats from the US.

This action by Trump does not significantly alter the social media perception of him with regards to the Salisbury incident, and similar rhetoric continues over the remainder of the month with the total US social media activity reducing each day. Russian disinformation studies and factual discoveries around the incident, such as Yulia Skripal waking up on 30<sup>th</sup> March, become the most trending subjects by the end of March.

A comparative analysis has been undertaken of Twitter posts against time in the UK, Russia, US, France and Germany for 30 accounts identified in each country as being influential and representative of a cross section of opinions. These accounts include domestic and foreign media organisations based in or impacting the country, troll accounts and those individuals with a genuine interest in the events that took place. Whilst not scientific in creation, it is believed that the results are a fair reflection of the impact social media had on each country and how posts and re-tweets could have potentially impacted public sentiment. The infographics are produced at Appendix M and N.

#### ***g. Pro Russia Troll Accounts Utilising Social Media***

Whilst a considerable number of pro Kremlin troll accounts have been uncovered during the research, a few have been identified as being prolific in bombarding the audience with pro Kremlin propaganda and disinformation relevant to the Skripal case. A list of those considered worthy of further monitoring is produced below and also attached in Excel format at Appendix O.

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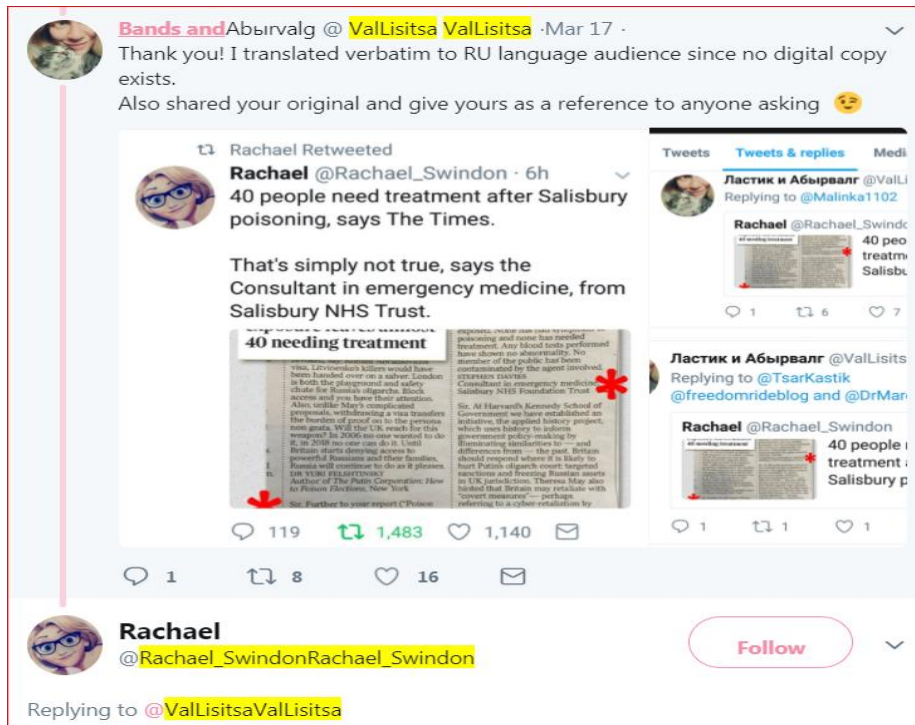
Account	Joined	Posts	Following	Followers	Likes	Stated Location	Other Accounts
<a href="#">@Ian56789</a>	Nov-11	155000	4503	32500	682	UK	<a href="http://ian56.blogspot.com/?view=magazine">ian56.blogspot.com/?view=magazine</a>
<a href="#">@ukgranddad</a>	Aug-10	97100	2359	3609	67600	UK	
<a href="#">@Malinka1102</a>	Jan-12	78500	788	4706	95400	UK	
<a href="#">@KissZuriCheese</a>	Jan-17	17000	175	10200	17300	Switzerland	<a href="https://facebook.com/bessmertny.pol...">facebook.com/bessmertny.pol...</a>
<a href="#">@ belka_strelka</a>	Jun-12	26000	8901	21400	47100	Russia	<a href="http://country.br / belka_strelka">country.br / belka_strelka</a>
<a href="#">Lancier1812</a>	Apr-14	297000	5567	11500	28900	Russia	
<a href="#">@ElenaOxara222</a>	May-14	276000	5080	6051	66300	Russia	<a href="http://page.is/elena">page.is/elena</a>
<a href="#">@Rossia_foreverl</a>	Jun-14	227000	681	5165	131000	Russia	
<a href="#">@LikaVed</a>	Apr-13	207000	530	1151	2996	Russia	
<a href="#">@MoskRussia</a>	Jan-14	176000	3016	21900	11000	Russia	<a href="http://mosk-ru.livejournal.com/5068.html">mosk-ru.livejournal.com/5068.html</a>
<a href="#">@marcelsardo</a>	Apr-11	134000	2645	16300	95600	Russia	<a href="http://marcelsardo.com">marcelsardo.com</a>
<a href="#">@MarkSleboda1</a>	Sep-13	81800	3243	12500	13400	Russia	<a href="https://facebook.com/gramsci">facebook.com/gramsci</a>
<a href="#">@KrResident</a>	Mar-15	41600	212	23600	4959	Russia	<a href="https://vk.com/rkremlin">vk.com/rkremlin</a>
<a href="#">@ UrgIntellegence</a>	Oct-11	35100	64	15000	1574	Russia	
<a href="#">@Vityzeva</a>	Apr-17	5037	72	5821	10700	Russia	<a href="https://vk.com/turandottttt">vk.com/turandottttt</a>
<a href="#">@ValLisitsa</a>	Jul-10	39700	1025	21700	14200	Not stated	<a href="https://m.youtube.com/user/Valentina...">m.youtube.com/user/Valentina...</a>
<a href="#">@SalsBack</a>	Sep-13	15100	189	176	17200	Not stated	<a href="http://fancybears.net">fancybears.net</a>
<a href="#">@NinaByzantina</a>	Mar-13	19800	148	23400	9224	Kremlin Bot factory	<a href="#">@ninakouprianova</a>

A chart showing how the above troll accounts inter connect is attached at Appendix P.

The initial identification of the troll accounts came from research into a poll conducted on Twitter by an unconnected vocal Labour supporter using the handle @Rachael\_Swindon, who asked the question “Are you satisfied that Theresa May has supplied enough evidence for us to be able to confidently point the finger of blame towards Russia?”<sup>59</sup> The result, published on 17<sup>th</sup> March, produced an overwhelming 77% no vote with over 15,000 people having voted. The poll results were commented on 201 times and re-tweeted 2,806 times, some of these being from Russian language accounts which were pro Kremlin in outlook. Later that day, a Russian troll account @ValLisitsa, translated into Russian and re-tweeted 1 of @Rachael\_Swindon posts relating to alleged false information about 40 people being hospitalised in Salisbury having come into contact with the Novichok nerve agent. It is considered likely that the re-tweet by @ValLisitsa was a deliberate attempt to raise the profile of the tweet amongst a Russian audience. @Rachael\_Swindon responded with a post stating “The mood of the British public is starting to shift.”<sup>60</sup> Whilst the account holder may have believed this statement, it is highly likely that the poll result was at least in part manipulated by the activities of the pro Kremlin trolls.

<sup>59</sup> [https://twitter.com/Rachael\\_Swindon/status/975053363065835521](https://twitter.com/Rachael_Swindon/status/975053363065835521)

<sup>60</sup> [https://twitter.com/Rachael\\_Swindon/status/975099983148990465](https://twitter.com/Rachael_Swindon/status/975099983148990465)



In relation to the Skripal case, the identified troll accounts utilise the Twitter platform to either post defamatory messages against the UK establishment, or re-tweet the messages of others (including Russian mainstream media), or both. The “ripple” effect of this action using their considerable network of followers, enables multiple messages supportive of the Russian cause to reach a wide audience within a short period, and hence influence public sentiment.

Some reporting suggests that many of the Russia based individuals operating these accounts are directly employed by the Kremlin for this sole purpose. They are not specifically anti UK but operate more generally to promote pro Kremlin ideology, whilst attacking domestic opposition and mainly Western democracies whose actions and values do not align with their own. An article on the website [www.medium.com](https://www.medium.com) references an historic undercover investigation by Russian reporters into the activities of Kremlin backed trolls that “*exposed the main elements of the troll factory—its management, the fake social media accounts, blog posts and comments, and the attacks on Kremlin critics—within weeks of the Internet Research Agency’s creation. They did so under their own names, and in their own publications. This was journalism of a high order.*”<sup>61</sup>

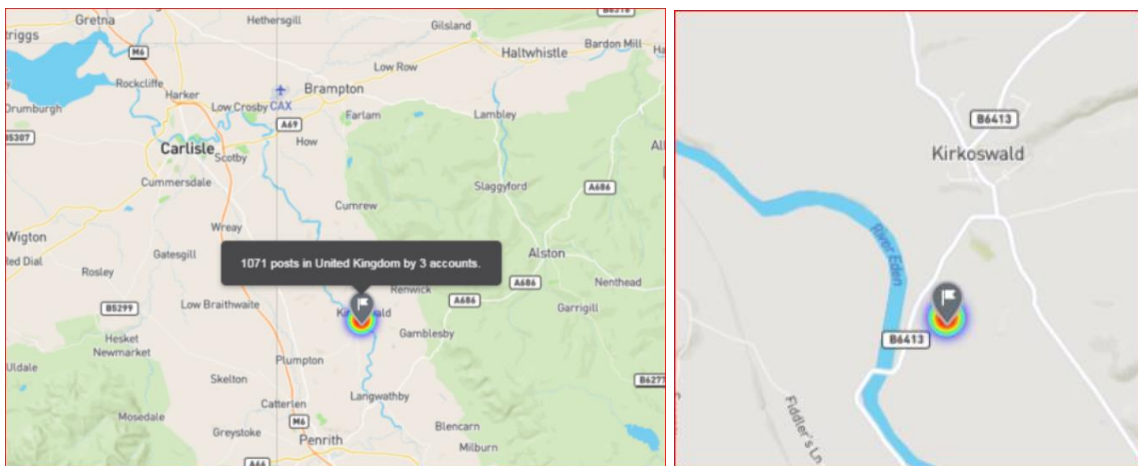
Initial research of 27 suspected troll accounts identified some as having their geolocation facility turned on. With the ability to use proxy servers and VPNs, this is not particularly significant in terms of location. However, it does show that some of the most prolific tweeters of Russian propaganda are located within the exact same geographic areas, suggesting that they are part of an organised group. An example of early research using geolocation is attached at Appendix Q.

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.medium.com/dfrlab/the-russians-who-exposed-russias-trolls-72db132e3cd1>

***h. English Speaking Social Media Troll Accounts with UK Stated Location***



The Twitter accounts @Ian56789<sup>62</sup>, @ukgranddad<sup>63</sup> and @Malinka1102 have been identified through research as those that post regular pro-Russian propaganda and criticise UK and Western policies. These accounts are stated by the holders as being in the UK and this is supported by geolocation data. All 3 accounts, however, geolocate to the same exact position near a small town called Kirkoswald in northern England and, as such, are likely to be using a VPN or proxy server to mask their true location. Being prolific users of social media, these account holders would be aware of their geolocation and it is therefore assessed that this is a deliberate attempt to influence UK sentiment by posting supposedly from within the country.



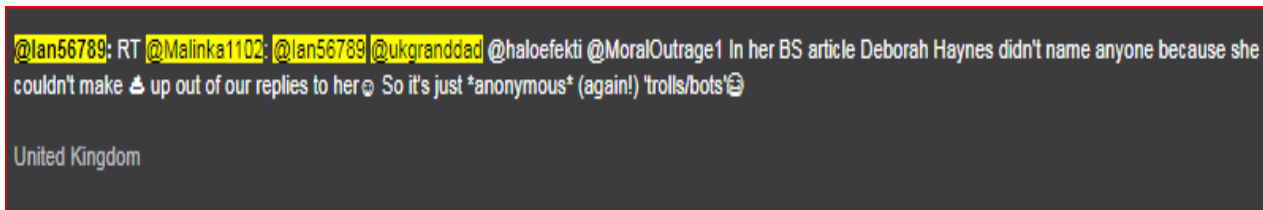
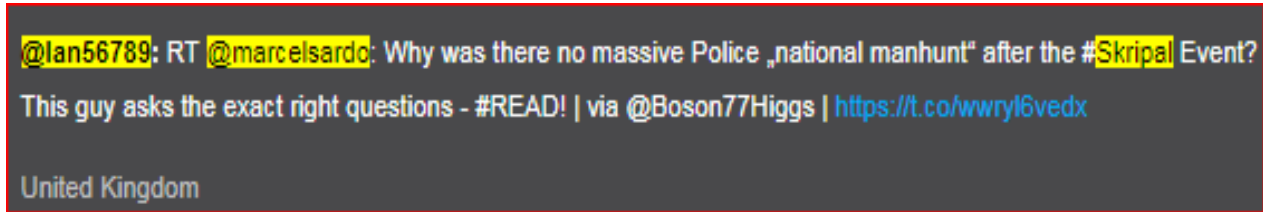
According to Twitter data, the account @Ian56789 has been operating since November 2011, has 32,500 followers and posted 155,000 times. This is equivalent to an average of over 2,000 posts per month including re-tweets. In the last month, the account has posted 281 times using the keyword "Skripal". The account holder's profile picture show a photograph of the male model David Gandy.

<sup>62</sup> <https://twitter.com/Ian56789>

<sup>63</sup> <https://twitter.com/@ukgranddad>

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Using fake or cartoon style photographs is a common feature of these troll accounts. A sample of tweets posted by @Ian56789 during the research period are attached at Appendix R. The account regularly engages with other pro Kremlin troll accounts such as @Malinka1102 and @ukgranddad as well as Russian speaking accounts @ValLisitsa and @marcelsardo, suggesting an organised propaganda network.



@Ian56789 is particularly anti mainstream media and regularly posts messages in an attempt to deflect audiences away from the information they provide. An example of this is a post on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2018 in which the Skripal incident is likened to the 2003 Iraq war and warns readers not to believe anything they read in the mainstream UK/US media.



Whilst @Ian56789 tends to post directly as well as re-tweet, the majority of @ukgranddad's posts are re-tweets of others, enabling important messages to be amplified quickly through the network of followers. Examples of these are attached at Appendix S. During the research period, the account posted 277 times using the keyword "Skripal". @Ian56789 also has a blog spot under the handle Ian56<sup>64</sup>. This follows along the same lines as his Twitter account but, to date, it has not commented on the Skripal case.

<sup>64</sup> <http://ian56.blogspot.co.uk/?view=magazine>

@Malinka1102 follows in the same vein as @Ian56789, posting directly on issues as well as re-tweeting messages of others. Examples of recent Twitter posts relating to this case are attached at Appendix T. During the research period this account posted 170 times using the keyword “Skripal”. In one of the account’s latest tweets it posted a suggestion that the UK Government will make the Skripals disappear “So they can never talk, give statements, shed light, shut them up for good? #rendition - it's what CIA does ...”.<sup>65</sup>

Like the other identified troll accounts, these 3 are anti-Western in outlook and have tweeted regularly over the years on diverse subjects that have required either the highlighting of pro Kremlin policies or the deflection of accusations away from Russia using disinformation tactics. These have included events such as the downing of flight MH17, the Iraq war, the White Helmets and the annexing of Crimea. This goes a long way to confirming that the account holders are part of an organised propaganda machine acting on behalf of the Kremlin. Examples of posts relating to these other issues and events are reproduced below:

 <p><b>Malinka</b> ♦ (Tanya P.) @Malinka1102</p> <p>#MH17: One Thousand Days of Faking</p> <p>Via @RussiaInsider</p>	 <p><b>Ian56</b> @Ian56789</p> <p>Who are the #Oscar nominated White Helmets?</p> <p>A UK &amp; US Gov Funded Propaganda Psy Op for al-Qaeda to Promote Regime Change in Syria For Terrorists</p>
 <p><b>Steve H</b> @ukgranddad</p> <p>Replied to @tehn0mad @Malinka1102</p> <p>Sadly not overstated. Eliot's pitiful fakes are the main plank in the false allegations that Russia had something to do with downing #MH17 - when it is clear to everybody that #UkraineDidIt and US/NATO is covering up the crime</p>	 <p><b>Ian56</b> @Ian56789</p> <p>The Spurious Mueller Indictments of 13 Russians Are Part Of The Ongoing Neocon/Neoliberal War Propaganda Campaign To Demonize Russia</p> <p><a href="http://ian56.blogspot.com/2018/02/the-sp...">ian56.blogspot.com/2018/02/the-sp ...</a></p>

***i. Russia Based or Russian Language Social Media Troll Accounts***

This section references the non UK based suspected troll accounts as listed in the spreadsheet at Appendix O. There is in fact little difference between the Russia based accounts and the alleged UK based accounts in terms of the pro Kremlin propaganda and disinformation that they promote. Examples of some of the Twitter messages posted directly by these accounts in relation to the Skripal case are attached at Appendix U. Accounts generally post in Russian or English and some in a

<sup>65</sup> <https://twitter.com/Malinka1102/status/982771300698591232>

mixture of both. Research suggests that they often re-tweet English speaking posts supportive of their pro-Russian position as a means to get their message across to the English speaking public. Typical UK anti-establishment social media accounts that they like to re-tweet are journalist @NeilClark66, RT News network presenter @georgegalloway and former British Ambassador @CraigMurrayOrg.

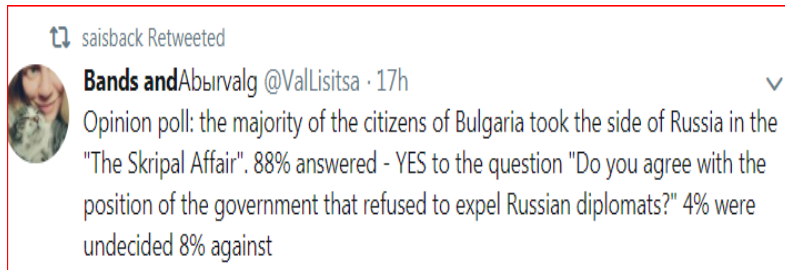
On 7<sup>th</sup> march 2018, the troll account @ValLisitsa re-tweeted a post by Bulgarian journalist @dgaytandzhieva regarding Sarin gas that had gone missing from a US military facility<sup>66</sup>. Whilst this is not particularly significant in itself, it is worth a mention due to the timings, as the original tweet was made on 4<sup>th</sup> March 2018, the same day as the Skripal poisoning. This is interesting as the report itself was from June 2017, reporting on an incident discovered in April 2016 but was not reported until 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018. The tweet was re-tweeted 355 times. On 12<sup>th</sup> March 2018, the Twitter account @dgaytandzhieva again reported on nerve agents, but this time in relation to Porton Down and the Skripal case, stating that the facility was “*accused of nerve agent tests on humans in the past*”.<sup>67</sup> This post received 524 re-tweets, including from identified troll accounts such as @ElenaOxara222, @JewRussophile and @ukgranddad. The tweet instigated a discussion from a mainly British audience about the likelihood of Porton Down being involved, with comments like “*All looking very sus isn't it*” and “*How convenient for them to test their agents on a local #Russia national and his daughter and if something goes wrong....blame...well...#Russia!*” Further analysis of the account of @dgaytandzhieva shows that, in addition to those mentioned above, it is also connected to pro Kremlin troll accounts @Malinka1102, @MarkSleboda1 and @MarcelSardo, a self-confessed pro Russia media sniper.

Other accounts of possible interest are @KissZuriCheese (formerly @NoRussianNoGame) and @\_belka\_strelka, both of which featured in an investigation in January 2018 into the hacking of email accounts belonging to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) by the Russian hack team @FancyBears. Another account that has also featured in the Skripal investigation is @SalsBack, which tweets its own pro Kremlin messages as well as re-tweeting other troll accounts such as @Ian56789 and @UrgIntellegence, @Vityzeva and @ValLisitsa. @SalsBack also re-tweets propaganda posts from Russian mainstream media accounts like RT News and Sputnik. Whilst, at this stage, no direct connection to the @FancyBears Twitter account has been established, the profile picture is very similar, it make references to WADA and links itself to the fancybears.net account.

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<sup>66</sup> <https://twitter.com/dgaytandzhieva/status/970342583904948224>

<sup>67</sup> <https://twitter.com/dgaytandzhieva/status/973217691455623169>



Analysis confirms that pro Kremlin troll accounts regularly re-tweet Russian mainstream media headlines which assist in spreading disinformation. Examples of some of the re-tweeted posts relating to the Skripal case are attached at Appendix V. A more comprehensive list of tweets and re-tweets relevant to a selection of suspected pro Kremlin troll accounts across the research period are detailed in date order on an Excel spreadsheet attached at Appendix W. The posts relevant to this search reached a wide audience, being re-tweeted a total of 173,500 times. A diagram showing the most influential connections (by attribute type) of suspected Russian troll accounts when compared against a “Skripal” keyword search are attached at Appendix X.

Overall, it is assessed that pro Kremlin troll networks would have a significant influence on public sentiment both in Russia and the UK as well as other Western democracies. Due to the disinformation spread by these accounts, this could be significant enough to affect UK voting behaviour in future elections. Whilst mainstream media networks are obliged to follow certain rules, the Kremlin troll networks can post across social media platforms virtually unchallenged. The UK media is able to hold its own in reporting against Russian media outlets, but there are no similar troll networks operating in support of the UK establishment which can counter the statements made by the Kremlin trolls. This gives Russia a significant advantage in spreading its disinformation and propaganda via social media, a medium which is able to influence spectrums of the population possibly not reached through traditional reporting.

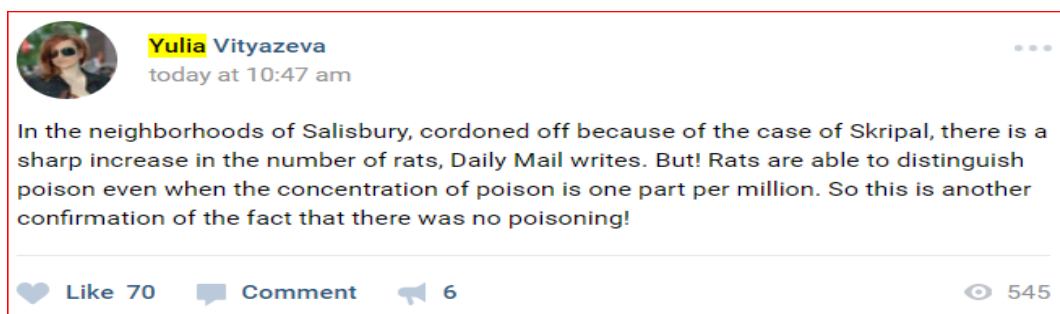
***j. Other Relevant Social Media Platforms***

Whilst Twitter has proved by far and away the biggest social media platform for reporting the Skripal incident both in terms of international mainstream media and pro Kremlin propaganda accounts, other social media platforms have been used as a means to air views on the subject and report the news.



Vkontakte (VK) the Russian based online social media and social networking service is especially popular among Russian-speaking users. Whilst it is probably a good platform for Kremlin indoctrination of the Russian domestic population, it lacks the international audience base necessary to spread effective pro Kremlin propaganda to the populations of Western Europe and the US. The web based mainstream media channel [russia.rt.com](https://vk.com/rt_russian) uses a VK account ([https://vk.com/rt\\_russian](https://vk.com/rt_russian)) which links to its main reports. These are similar in style to their Twitter accounts, but appear to be somewhat more factual and with less overt propaganda. Analysis of keywords relating to the Skripal incident, identify RT News and EuroNews as being 2 of the most influential. However, despite having a significant following, they are only receiving a maximum of 10 shares per post and some as little as 1 or 2. In relation to the Skripal research, there was no obvious evidence of troll activity operating on this platform. Examples of the types of VK media reporting and public comments relating to the Skripal case are attached at Appendix Y.

Yulia Vityazeva, one of the suspected troll accounts using the Twitter handle @vityzeva (different spelling), has a VK profile<sup>68</sup> identifying her as a journalist working for the news channel newsfront.info which itself has a VK account [https://vk.com/newsfront\\_tv](https://vk.com/newsfront_tv). Vityzeva was due to appear on a news front live webcast on 9<sup>th</sup> April at 14:00 Moscow time<sup>69</sup> The online news site is pro Kremlin and reports on international news which is heavily slanted with anti-Western propaganda directed mainly at state enemies like the US, the White Helmets in Syria, Ukraine and the UK through the Skripal case. Vityzeva posts in a similar fashion to that on her Twitter account but, whilst the following post had 545 views, it only had 6 shares, with the comments coming from an exclusively Russian speaking audience.



### ***k. Blogs***

There have been a multitude of blogs written about the Skripal case and how it has been handled with, as expected, differencing views dependant on which of the 2 main protagonists, the UK or Russia, each author believes. A number of blogs and comments have been written in response to

<sup>68</sup> <https://vk.com/turandotTTTT>

<sup>69</sup> <https://news-front.info/2018/04/09/elena-bojko-i-yuliya-vityazeva-v-pryamom-efire-na-news-front/>

earlier blogs and one that has caused a number of reactions is that written by Craig Murray, the historian and former British Ambassador. Murray has been vocal in his criticism of the UK handling of the Skripal affair almost since it started. His blog dated 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018 and entitled “*Boris Johnson A Categorical Liar*”<sup>70</sup>, focusses on Johnson’s earlier statement that the nerve agent used in the assassination attempt against the Skripals was definitely Novichok and was Russian in origin. According to Murray’s blog, the “*sworn Court evidence direct from Porton Down is utterly incompatible with what Boris Johnson has been saying*” which he went on to add was “*irrefutable evidence that the government have been straight out lying.*” There were many comments on this post which, whilst not directly siding with Murray’s views, were generally in agreement that the matter had been handled badly from the start, and that the truth of the matter was still to be unravelled. Two representative examples of responses to the blog are detailed below, with many others available for review on Craig Murray’s Blog page:

**Bayleaf** Reply ↓

*March 30, 2018 at 12:10*

If the Daily Fail and others are now running with this new “limited hangout”, we can be sure that it has already been passed by the Ministry of Truth. Clearly, the last “**Putin** dunnit” line didn’t gain enough traction with the general public, and might have actually backfired on the British government, so they’re scrambling for a Plan B.

**Pyotr Grozny** Reply ↓

*March 30, 2018 at 11:39*

First, it’s open to TM to say to Joe Public that the govt. has evidence which it can’t release on security grounds. She hasn’t come out and said that in any emphatic way. Second why all this ‘of a type developed by Russia’. If you have some secret intelligence which you can’t share come out and say that clearly from the outset and you may have a chance of being believed, if you come out later when the initial story has unraveled you’ve little credibility left.

A blog by Tim Newman entitled “*Resurrection*”<sup>71</sup>, examines the likelihood of UK Government conspiracies and the apportionment of blame before all the facts are known.

An extract from a response to this article from the account “Bloke in Sweden” suggests that the Russian Government is currently taking the moral high ground “*not because they are innocent but because the UK will never be able to present concrete and clearly understandable proof of Russian state involvement to the public, and that they believe the West will not escalate beyond a limp-wristed diplomatic response, which is probably true.*” Tim Newman responds to this with the comment “*There*

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.craigmurray.org.uk/archives/2018/03/boris-johnson-a-categorical-liar/comment-page-14/#comment-729044>

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.desertsun.co.uk/blog/7063/comment-page-1/#comment-410310>

*is a lot more to this than meets the eye. And the UK government does seem to be desperate to pin this on Putin at any price”.*

Many of the blogs researched continue in the same vein, with a significant minority being supportive of the UK Government’s position and its handling of the situation. A paragraph from one that is supportive states that *“The international response to this outrage has been good on the diplomatic front, but lacks real teeth when it comes to tackling the washing of Russian dirty money in the international markets. There is a recognition that Putin has, once again, gone too far, and that he must pay some sort of price for his flagrant flouting of international norms. The man is himself a rogue agent on the world stage”*.<sup>72</sup>

If Russian propaganda is taken out of the equation, blogs assessed in this research are generally reflective of the majority of public opinion expressed across the range of social media platforms, which is that irrespective of who will ultimately be held to account, the UK Government acted too quickly in pointing the finger at Russia, without the necessary evidence to back up its accusations. That, coupled with the fact that statements made by politicians are now perceived to be potentially untrue, is having a major impact on their credibility as further events unfold.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Analysis of the Skripal case from a mainstream and social media perspective has enabled better understanding of how those who can “control” media output by way of mass following and/or the use of propaganda campaigns can have a significant influence on public sentiment. This can be for the better or worse, dependent upon which viewpoint is held on any particular subject.

Irrespective of the truth that may emerge in the coming weeks regarding responsibility for the Skripal assassination attempt, it is assessed that the early accusations of complicity by Russia, spearheaded by the British press both on television and via social media, has done little to assist the UK cause. This media style reporting exacerbated an already fragile situation and was the catalyst for the counter assault on the UK establishment by both the State backed Russian media and the army trolls supportive of Putin and the Kremlin.

From a social media research perspective, comment evidence suggests that the UK cause was not helped by senior UK politicians making accusations against Russia before any hard evidence was available that could be placed into the public domain.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://danoneill.wordpress.com/2018/03/30/russian-nerve-attack-danger-of-bolton-brex-it-tick-tock/>

## PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

General public Twitter account holders appeared confused by the whole situation and the mixed information being relayed through media outlets. Responses to social media articles indicates that there has been a negative impact on sentiment in certain quarters of the UK population who no longer feel they can trust the motives of current government.

This distrust has not only been fuelled by the activities of the pro-Russian lobbyists, but also by left wing socialist groups who have seen the perceived mis-handling of the matter as an opportunity to strengthen their own political agenda. The continued response by Russia that they have had no part to play in the incident has been given some credibility through the rhetoric of public figures like Jeremy Corbyn, Craig Murray, (the former British Ambassador) and Ken Livingstone, all of whom have been critical from the start of the Government's handling of the situation.

Russian State backed news organisations were quick to mount a propaganda campaign against the UK by attacking both the UK press and politicians. As stated earlier, this was made easier by socialist elements within the UK who were already using the incident to support their political agendas.

Kremlin backed pro-Russian trolls appear to have had a big impact in supporting Russia's position by garnering support through an organised campaign of propaganda and disinformation. Analysis of social media patterns in relation to this incident in France, Germany and the US have shown that key troll accounts are able to spread the pro Russia/anti UK message across multiple jurisdictions. Analysis has confirmed that many of the key troll accounts are linked to each other, which allows them to spread the message more widely through their army of followers. Many of the Kremlin backed troll accounts are active on a variety of social and political issues that affect the Russian State. Research has identified that some of the key accounts have spread disinformation on issues such as MH17, the annexation of Crimea and the Russian anti-doping scandal, to name but a few. Some of the troll accounts identified during this research were also active in promoting the activities of the Russian Fancy Bears hack group when they hacked into the email accounts of the World Anti-Doping Agency in January 2018. Using this ripple effect tactic of tweet and re-tweet, as well as bolstering the status of others unconnected to their cause by upgrading the status of a supportive post, it is not difficult to understand how these troll accounts, through the peddling of disinformation and supported by the Russian media machine, can change public sentiment in support of their cause.

Whilst UK media organisations are, to a certain extent, able to match those of its Russian State backed counterparts, the troll accounts add an additional dimension to the Russian propaganda machine which the UK does not appear to possess.

Although it is without any mathematical basis, during the research on this case, the overwhelming feeling has been that anti UK government/pro Russia elements have been in the ascendancy with

little discernible social media activity from pro UK supporters to counter the propaganda and misinformation onslaught. This leads to the belief that the current pervading feeling on social media that the current government has lost some credibility through its handling of the Skripal affair has, in some part, been orchestrated by the activities of the Russian troll network

Whilst the UK may rightly not want to get involved in troll style activity, failure to tackle the troll issue with a coherent strategy of counter measures, does leave it vulnerable to further attack both as this case progresses and when similar issues arise in the future.

## **8. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- To monitor, on a regular basis or as directed, the online activities of the identified pro Kremlin troll accounts and report any surges or changes in sentiment.
- To monitor, on a regular basis or as directed, Russian mainstream media accounts to identify and report any hardening or softening of the Russian Government's position as events unfold.
- The attention of many pro-Russian sources identified is now turning toward developments in Syria. This makes it even more important to continue monitoring of events and accounts.
- To report any additional intelligence gathered that may be of use to the investigation.

## 9. APPENDICES

<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Description</b>
A	Twitter - first reporting by UK networks
B	UK TV network social media reporting during March 2018
C	UK mainstream media data - post-followers chart
D	Russian mainstream media data - post-followers chart
E	UK tabloid media reporting & article responses
F	UK tabloid media data
G	Early reporting by Russian news networks
H	Sputnik online media headlines
I	UK/Russian mainstream media comparison - infographic
J	UK/Russian mainstream media comparison - chart
K	Germany - accounts of interest - pro Russia/anti UK
L	USA - social media timeline from event
M	Country comparison - social media posts - chart and infographic
N	Country comparison - social media re-tweets - infographic
O	List of troll accounts for further monitoring
P	Troll accounts inter connections graph
Q	Troll accounts geolocation graph
R	Ian56789 - example tweets
S	ukgranddad - example tweets
T	Malinka1102 - example tweets
U	Russian based troll accounts - example tweets
V	Russian media troll accounts - example re-tweets
W	Spreadsheet of troll posts and re-tweets
X	Chart showing troll most influential connections by attribute
Y	VK media reporting - example posts

## 10. GLOSSARY

**Blogs** - a regularly updated website or web page, typically one run by an individual or small group, that is written in an informal or conversational style.

**Facebook** - Facebook is a social networking site that makes it easy for you to connect and share with your family and friends online. Facebook is the world's largest social network, with more than 1 billion users worldwide.

**Instagram** - Instagram is a social networking app made for sharing photos and videos from a smartphone.

**Key Influencers** - Key influencers are people, personalities, or businesses that already have the attention of a target audience and drive awareness.

**Likes** – A like is a function where readers can acknowledge agreeable sentiment for a particular post or Tweet

**Main stream media** - traditional forms of mass communication, such as newspapers, television, and radio.

**Novichok** - is a series of nerve agents developed by the Soviet Union and Russia between 1971 and 1993.

**OPCW** - The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons is an intergovernmental organisation and the implementing body for the Chemical Weapons Convention, which entered into force on 29 April 1997.

**Post** - A post is simply placing a message or image on a social media platform, like a Tweet.

**Retweets** - A retweet is a re-post of another user's tweet.

**Social Media** - Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration.

**Social Media Platforms** - A social platform is a web-based technology that enables the development, deployment and management of social media solutions and services. It provides the ability to create social media websites and services with complete social media network functionality.

**Trolls** - Someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community, with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion. They hide behind their computer screens, and actively go out of their way to cause trouble on the internet. The internet troll is angry and disruptive in every possible way.

**Tweets** - A tweet is simply a post on Twitter. Tweets are messages of 280 characters or less.

**Twitter** – A social networking website, which allows users to publish short messages that are visible to other users. These messages are known as tweets. Users have found many different uses for twitter, including basic communication between friends and family, a way to publicize an event, or as a customer relations tool for companies to communicate with their consumers.

**Vkontakte (VK)** - VK is a Russian-based online social media and social networking service. It is available in several languages but it is especially popular among Russian-speaking users.