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# The Long Tail of Influence Operations:

A Case Study  
on News Front

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## About This Briefing

This report provides a glimpse into the inner workings of the disinformation ecosystem and sheds light on the long tail of state-linked online assets. It examines two websites and two blogging accounts which appear to be linked to News Front, a Crimean-based news organisation previously accused of being a source of pro-Kremlin disinformation and influence operations.

While the impact of the site's activity is low, the case study reveals the wide range of tactics and online platforms involved in the promotion of pro-Kremlin disinformation activity online.

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## Introduction

Disinformation has become a thorn in the side for a huge range of online services and platforms. Since 2016, research has started to unpick the sheer breadth and scale of false information and false identities online, across social media, blogging websites, dating apps and beyond. This case study examines two websites, which present themselves as news sites as well as two blogging accounts, all of which appear to be linked to News Front, a Crimean-based news organisation previously accused of being a source of pro-Kremlin disinformation and influence operations. It also examines the use of a cloaking domain connected to News Front France to enable News Front to retain a presence on Facebook despite the platform's efforts to crackdown on News Front in 2020. As such, it provides a window into the tactics and locations that make up the evolving world of online influence operations that seek to promote pro-Kremlin disinformation.

This case study and report is the outcome of an investigation by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) undertaken between 20 November 2020 and 18 January 2021. The findings of this investigation suggest the sites and accounts may be based out of Crimea and run by a team that includes a Crimean postgraduate student. As of 6 December 2020, the blog accounts were abruptly deleted and the sites began displaying error messages. Links to archived versions are included in this case study where possible.

The impact of this activity is likely to be low. ISD's analysis of the spread of these sites and accounts suggests low reach and engagement on major social media platforms. The case study is nonetheless interesting in that it helps to shed light on the broader disinformation ecosystem, highlighting how particular pieces of content and narratives linked to pro-Kremlin influence efforts can spread across the internet using multiple domains and alternative social media platforms such as blogging sites. It also reveals the efforts of pro-Kremlin disinformation producers to target African audiences with anti-American and pro-Kremlin stories online, including those that touch on key issues such as COVID-19 vaccinations. The investigation has found evidence of the continuing use of covert and potentially automated behaviours on sites like Facebook to promote this kind of content. This sprawl of influence operations deserves further attention to better understand the long tail of accounts, sites and other online assets linked to influence operations, and their possible audiences.

## Background

News Front is a media organisation operating out of Crimea that publishes content in Russian, English, Slovak, Georgian, Hungarian, French, Serbian, Spanish, German and Bulgarian. Since its creation in 2015, the organisation has repeatedly been identified as a source of pro-Kremlin disinformation and influence operations, and has allegedly<sup>1</sup> received funding and direction from the Russian government. In a report<sup>2</sup> on Russian disinformation in August 2020, the US State Department described News Front as “one of the most blatant Russian disinformation sites.”

News Front was originally named Crimean Front,<sup>3</sup> and according<sup>4</sup> to its editor-in-chief Konstantin Knyrik, it was intended to provide support for Russia’s annexation of Crimea. News Front continues to support the annexation of Crimea as well as Russian actions in Eastern Ukraine, but now also covers a broader range of topics, including US and European politics and the COVID-19 crisis.

While News Front’s sources of funding are presently unknown, former employees have reportedly<sup>5</sup> told the German newspaper Die Zeit that the organisation is directly funded by Russia’s Federal Security Service (FSB). In a 2018 interview,<sup>6</sup> Konstantin Knyrik denied this and other allegations of direct links to the Russian government.

News Front’s Twitter and YouTube accounts were taken down by those platforms in early 2020. The removal of News Front and other Crimean media organisations’ YouTube channels elicited a direct response<sup>7</sup> from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which described it as “another act of discrimination against Russian-language media resources from US-controlled online platforms”.

In April 2020, Facebook announced<sup>8</sup> that it had dismantled a network of accounts and pages linked to News Front and another Crimean media organisation, South Front, as part of an investigation into coordinated inauthentic behaviour:

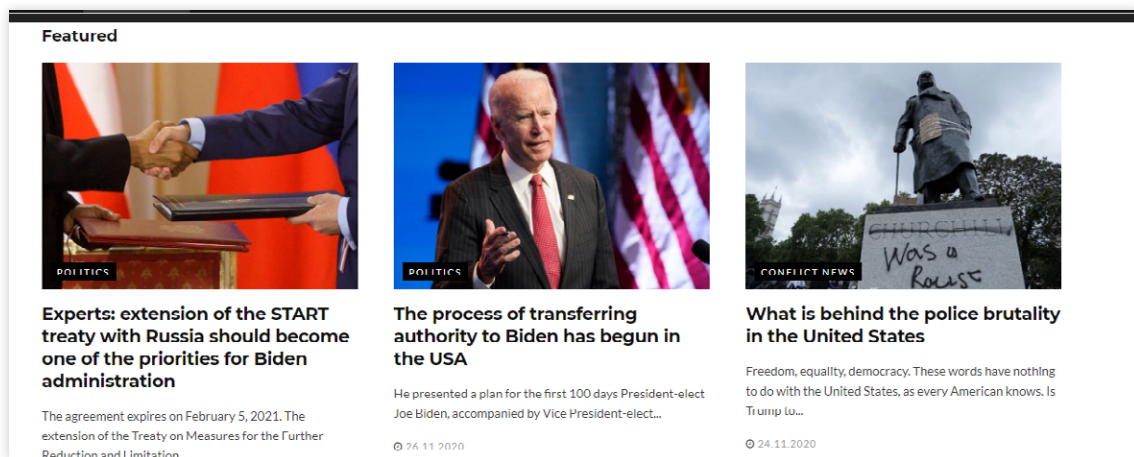
*We removed 46 Pages, 91 Facebook accounts, 2 Groups, and 1 Instagram account for violating our policy against ‘foreign interference’ which is ‘coordinated inauthentic behavior’ on behalf of a foreign entity.... The individuals behind this activity relied on a combination of authentic, duplicate and fake accounts [which they used] to post their content and manage Groups and Pages posing as independent news entities in the regions they targeted. This network posted about geopolitical and local news including topics such as the military conflict in Ukraine, the Syrian civil war, the annexation of Crimea, NATO, US elections, and more recently the coronavirus pandemic.*

The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) also published an analysis<sup>9</sup> of the network.

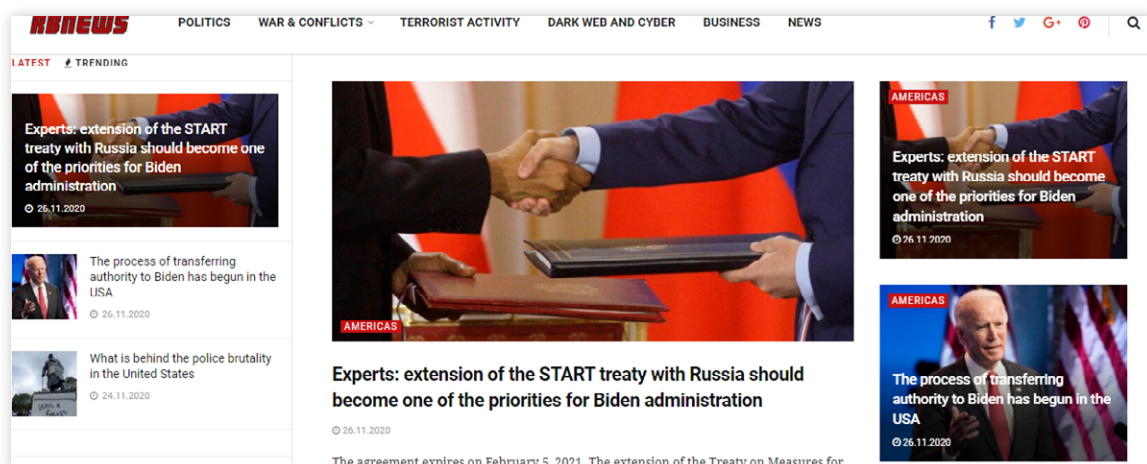
As this ISD investigation demonstrates, however, News Front continues to operate as part of a broader network of digital assets and entities which propagates its content across the internet, despite these takedowns by social media platforms. This case study will focus on two areas: News Front’s content mirrored across other purported news sites; and the use of accounts on blogging platforms to seed News Front’s affiliated content.

## News sites

ISD identified two websites that present themselves as separate news organisations, but whose content is identical to one another and to some (though not all) of News Front’s content. The websites discussed below were discovered incidentally during the course of other research. The blogging accounts (see next section) were identified through subsequent searches to see where the same content was being published online. These sites are Summury News<sup>10</sup> (note spelling: Summury rather than Summary) and Real Bomb<sup>11</sup> (also known as RB News). Both domains were registered on 19 March 2018. They are built on WordPress and had their earliest posts in June 2018. While both sites have the links ‘About’, ‘Advertise’ and ‘Contact’, which presumably came with the WordPress theme, these pages do not exist and the links simply direct to the home page (for example, if you click ‘About’ on RB News, it will send you to realbomb.info). Neither site has linked social media accounts, despite the presence of social media buttons. A manual search on social media revealed no obvious social media assets attached to the names of these sites.



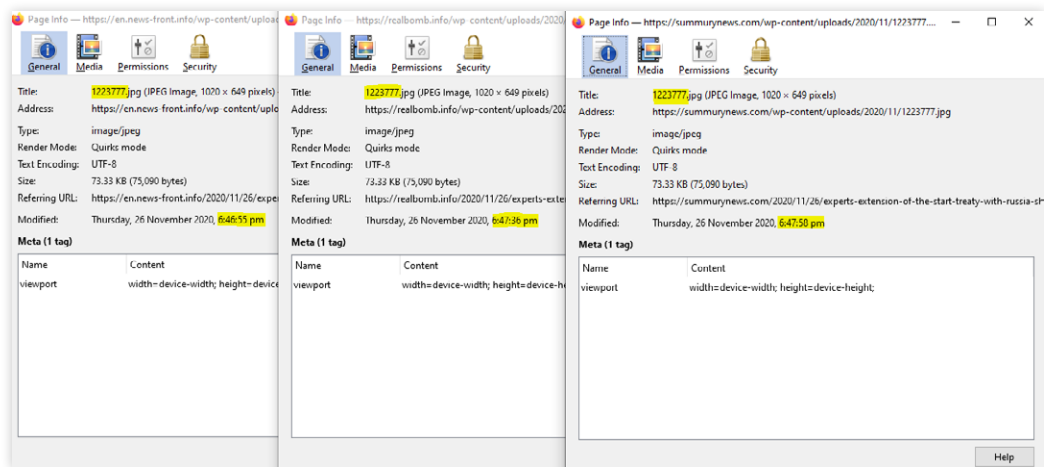
**Figure 1** Screenshot of the Summury News homepage, captured 27 November 2020



**Figure 2** Screenshot of the RB News homepage, captured 27 November 2020

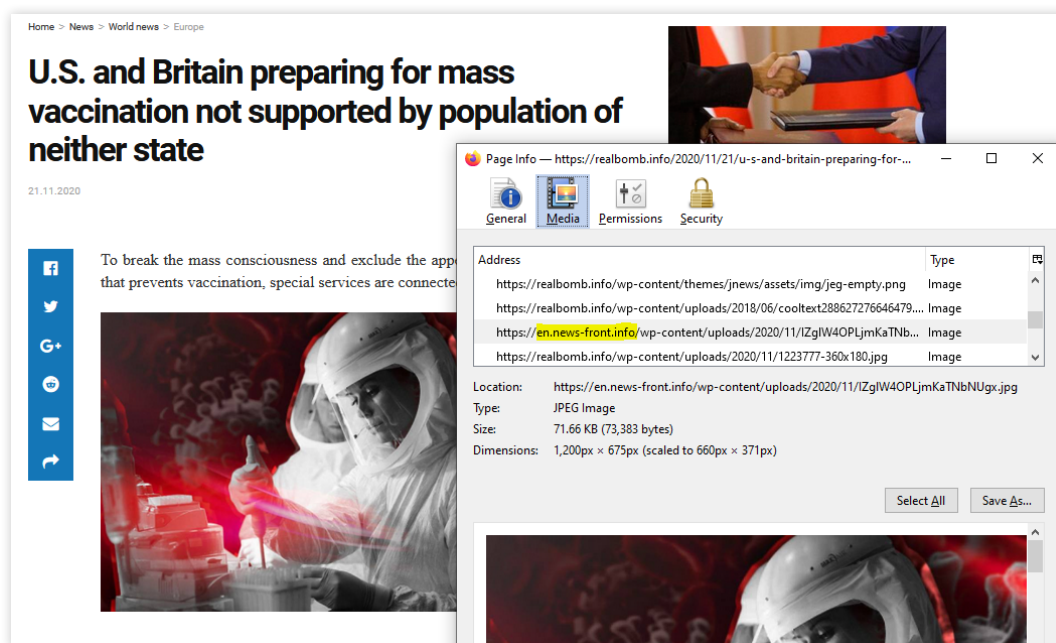
The stories on these sites are almost identical to stories on News Front, save for small differences in punctuation, which will be discussed below. The content traverses a range of topics, with a broad focus on geopolitical issues including US and European politics and the COVID-19 pandemic.

This near-identical content also extends to the images that accompany the stories. All the image files inspected on News Front, Summury News and RB News articles for the purpose of this case study have identical names, and in some cases appear to have been uploaded only minutes apart (Figure 3).



**Figure 3** Screenshot showing tiled info panes for an identical image with identical file names (1223777.jpg) accompanying the story “Experts: extension of the START [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] with Russia should become one of the priorities for Biden administration” published across News Front, Summury News and RB News on 26 November 2020

In some cases, the Summury News and RB News articles simply embed News Front images directly. In the example shown in Figure 4 below, the image accompanying the RB News article is hosted by News Front’s site.



**Figure 4** Screenshot of info pane for story on RB News, captured 27 November 2020

One noteworthy difference between stories on News Front and those on Summury News and RB News is the use of punctuation (see Figures 5 and 6). Whereas stories on News Front use standard quotation marks commonly used in English (“”), the same stories on Summury News and RB News use guillemets, also known as ёлочки or angle quotes («»). This type of punctuation is used in several non-English languages, including Russian.



— Trump headquarters were told about cases when the ballots of people who voted for the president were simply thrown away. And vice versa, there were cases of «stuffing» for Biden.

«We are ready to prove this in a full-fledged court, when considering cases on the merits. Trump won a landslide victory», — said the American president's lawyers.

Tags: the USA

**Figure 5** Screenshot of the story “Trump’s attorneys: election fraud was centralized in Democratic-controlled cities”<sup>12</sup> published 20 November 2020 on Summury News showing use of guillemets

– Trump headquarters were told about cases when the ballots of people who voted for the president were simply thrown away. And vice versa, there were cases of “stuffing” for Biden.



“We are ready to prove this in a full-fledged court, when considering cases on the merits. Trump won a landslide victory,” – said the American president’s lawyers.

**Figure 6** Screenshot of the story “Trump’s attorneys: election fraud was centralized in Democratic-controlled cities”<sup>13</sup> published 20 November 2020 on News Front showing use of quotation marks

This detail suggests that the process of content creation and distribution across the three sites may not be entirely centralised. It is plausible, for example, that content undergoes an additional level of editing before being published on the main News Front site.

Investigating the back-end architecture of the sites further, it is notable that while the content on Summury News and RB News is in English, inspecting the source code of both sites suggests that the WordPress accounts for the sites may be in Russian (see Figures 7 and 8 below).

[illegible]

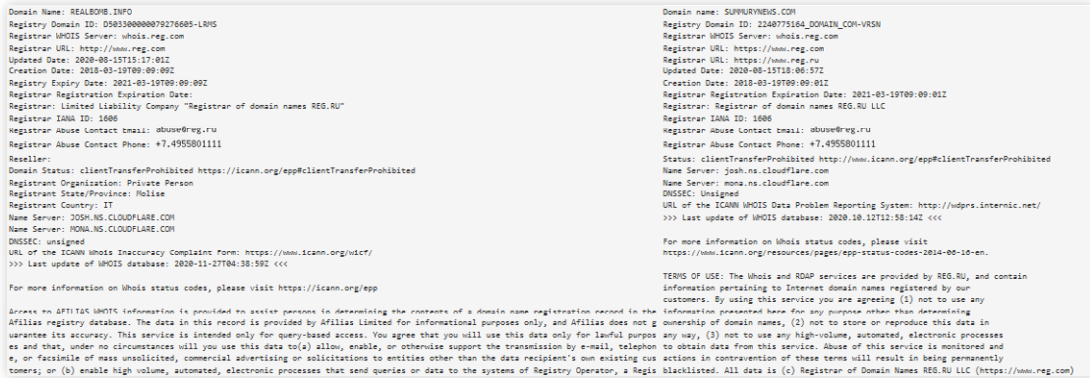
**Figure 7** Screenshot of realbomb.info source code, captured 27 November 2020

view-source:https://summynews.com

```
<!doctype html><!--[if lt IE 7]><html class="no-js lt-ie9 lt-ie8 lt-ie7" lang="ru-RU"><![endif]><!--[if IE 7]><html class="no-js lt-ie9 lt-ie8" lang="ru-RU" IE 8"><html class="no-js lt-ie9" lang="ru-RU"><![endif]><!--[if IE 9]><html class="no-js lt-ie10 lt-ie11" lang="ru-RU"><![endif]><!--[if gt IE 8]><!--<html class="RU"><!--<![endif]><!--><meta http-equiv="Content-Type" content="text/html; charset=UTF-8"><!--<meta name="viewport" content="width=device-width, initial-scale=scalable=yes" /><meta name="cmsmagazine" content="88402ead3007399c921daba80ccdc8bd" /><link rel="profile" href="https://gmpg.org/xfn/1" /><link rel="pingback" h
name="theme-color" content="#020000"><meta name="msapplication-navbutton-color" content="#020000"><meta name="apple-mobile-web-app-status-bar-style" content="#02
title>summynews.com &#8212; Current news summaries about politics, war and business.</title><meta property="og:type" content="website"><meta property="og:title"
content="summynews.com &#8212; Current news summaries about politics, war and business."><meta property="og:site_name" content="summynews.com"><meta property="
content="Current news summaries about politics, war and business."><meta property="og:url" content="https://summynews.com"><meta property="og:locale" content="ru
name="twitter:card" content="summary"><meta name="twitter:title" content="summynews.com &#8212; Current news summaries about politics, war and business."><meta
name="twitter:description" content="Current news summaries about politics, war and business."><meta name="twitter:url" content="https://summynews.com"><meta name
content="https://twitter.com/jegthema"><script type="text/javascript"> var jnews_ajax_url = 'https://summynews.com/ajax-request-jnews';</script><link rel="dn
href="https://fonts.googleapis.com" /><link rel="dns-prefetch" href="https://www.org" /><link rel="alternate" type="application/rss+xml" title="summynews.com &raquo; Лента"
href="https://summynews.com/feed/" /><link rel="alternate" type="application/rss+xml" title="summynews.com &raquo; Лента комментариев"
href="https://summynews.com/comments/feed/" /><script type="text/javascript">window.wpemojiSettings =
```

**Figure 8** Screenshot of summurynews.com source code, captured 27 November 2020

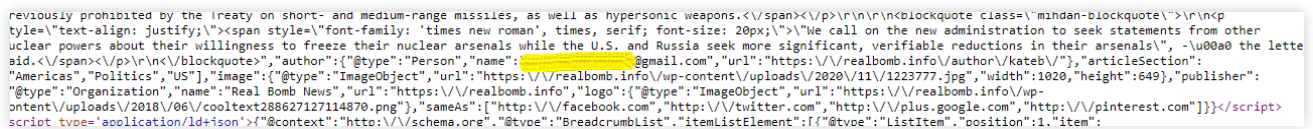
The Summury News and RB News domains both use WHOIS privacy services. This means that while it is possible to see that they were both registered on 19 March 2018, it is not possible to see any details about the individual who registered them using WHOIS records (Figure 9).



**Figure 9** Screenshot of WHOIS records for realbomb.info and summurynews.com

However, both of the sites are built on WordPress, which requires users to have accounts to publish content to the site. Upon close inspection of both sites' source code, ISD was able to identify at least three WordPress accounts, with the usernames 'PhoebosLC', 'Catherine' and 'KateB'.

On RB News (although not on Summury News), 'KateB' has left an email address exposed. The email address has been partially redacted in the screenshot shown in Figure 10 for privacy.



**Figure 10** Screenshot of realbomb.info source code

The same email address is included in documents published in 2018 and 2019 by V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University, in connection with a postgraduate linguistics student.<sup>14</sup> Public reporting and investigations have highlighted<sup>15</sup> the use of students and young people as an educated, cheap, highly flexible workforce for producing Russian content that could be considered propaganda. It is not clear at this stage exactly what role, if any, this postgraduate student and others who may be involved in running RB News and Summury News play in the broader News Front ecosystem.

On both sites, stories are accompanied by supposed social media engagement statistics. However, ISD's data analysis shows that these statistics appear to be entirely fictional. While each article on the sites is accompanied by numbers claiming a relatively high and suspiciously stable range of engagement — usually around 320–330 shares and 2.5k views for each story — ISD's analysis based on CrowdTangle<sup>16</sup> data shows only a handful of shares across public pages and groups on both sites dating back to March 2018. Only one RB News article had been publicly posted on Facebook since March 2018, and we found no public Facebook shares of links to Summury News.

The lack of social media accounts and evidence of any efforts to drive social media engagement for either site may suggest that the operators of the site are paid to produce content rather than to drive social media engagement, and are therefore not motivated to improve their social media engagement statistics.

While the lack of social media engagement or shares suggest that the impact of these sites upon the public is likely to be low, they nonetheless provide an interesting insight into how stories flow across the News Front ecosystem. Further, they highlight that this is likely a broader and more deceptive network of sites and digital properties than it may appear at first glance. ISD will continue to investigate the potential ongoing activities linked to this network.



## Blogging platforms

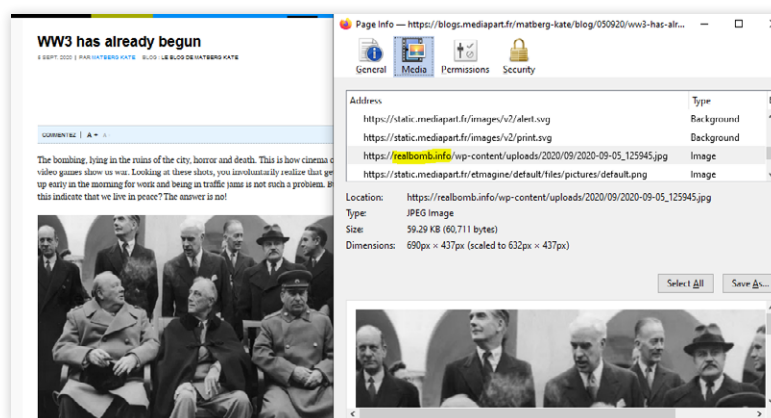
ISD conducted searches to identify any additional places where stories from RB News and Summury News are published and uncovered at least two blogging accounts that have a partial but not complete overlap in posted content. Some identical stories are published across News Front, RB News, Summury News and the blogging accounts; some are published on News Front, RB News and Summury News but not on the blogging accounts; and some are published across RB News and Summury News and the blogging accounts, but not on News Front.

The two blogging accounts are in the names of 'Kate Matberg'<sup>17</sup> on the primarily Francophone site Mediapart,<sup>18</sup> and 'Anastasia Frank'<sup>19</sup> on The Duran, a site that website ranking organisation NewsGuard describes<sup>20</sup> as a "pro-Russia website that has published conspiracy theories and false information to advance its views". Both accounts appear to have been deleted on the same day, 6 December 2020, shortly after the RB News and Summury News domains both began showing error messages. Where possible, we have provided links to archived versions.

Research by Graphika,<sup>21</sup> the Stanford Internet Observatory<sup>22</sup> and others has previously documented the use of blogging platforms in Russia-linked information operations. Perhaps the most significant example of this is the operation investigated by both Graphika and the Atlantic Council's DFR Lab team,<sup>23</sup> dubbed 'Secondary Infektion'.<sup>24</sup> According to their research, this multilingual operation spanned several years and more than 300 smaller platforms and social media networks in addition to the major platforms. Despite this broad sweep, however, it appears the operation had minimal impact on the public and generated little organic engagement. Key topics of the 'Secondary Infektion' operation included the conflict in Ukraine, the role of NATO in international affairs, European divisions or weaknesses, migration, the World Anti-Doping Agency, and elections in the US, the UK and France.

The accounts identified as part of this case study focus on these topics as well, alongside other more recent developments such as the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the incoming Biden administration in the US, the coronavirus pandemic and Nord Stream 2.<sup>25</sup>

The grounds for suspecting a connection between these accounts and the sites analysed above is reinforced not just by the identical content, but also by the image hosting. For example, a story titled "WW3 has already begun", which casts doubt on findings of Russian involvement in the downing of flight MH17 by Ukrainian separatists in 2014, was posted by 'Anastasia Frank'<sup>26</sup> on 4 and on 5 September 2020 by 'Kate Matberg',<sup>27</sup> RB News and Summury News. All four of the stories were accompanied by the same image with the same filename, and a closer inspection shows that the image on the 'Kate Matberg' blog is hosted by RB News (Figures 11 and 12).



**Figure 11** Screenshot of page information pane for post on the 'Kate Matberg' Mediapart blog, captured 4 November 2020

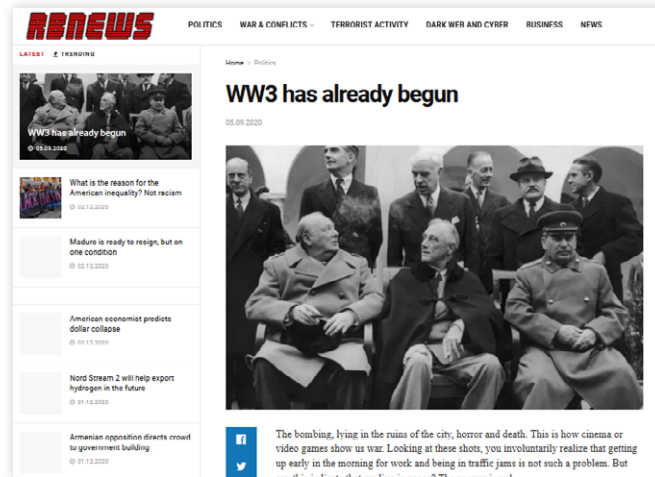


Figure 12 Screenshot of the RB News story “WW3 has already begun”, captured 4 November 2020

### ‘Kate Matberg’ on Mediapart

The ‘Kate Matberg’ blog account has been active since 10 April 2017, predating the creation of RB News and Summury News. The very first post, “Assad’s chemical attack in Syria debunked”,<sup>28</sup> focused on a chemical weapons attack<sup>29</sup> in Syria on 4 April 2017, which was swiftly attributed by many media outlets to the Assad regime.<sup>30</sup> The attack almost immediately became the subject of Russian disinformation efforts<sup>31</sup> intended to muddy the waters around responsibility for the attack. This activity occurred in combination with broader efforts to discredit the Syrian White Helmets<sup>32</sup> group.

The story posted by ‘Matberg’ suggested the attack had been staged and that “the White Helmets activists don’t rescue, but purposefully kill children, so that they can be misrepresented as the victims of the Syrian army”. The story was also published<sup>33</sup> on the same day on News Front, with credit to a different Francophone Mediapart account, ‘Calfine’.<sup>34</sup> The account’s bio identifies ‘Calfine’ as a News Front editor based in Donetsk in Eastern Ukraine.

A day later, a Medium account<sup>35</sup> under the name ‘Zigandurad Arutundar Yarmandip’ published the same story (albeit with different headlines) in English, French, Russian and German (Figure 13). The account has not posted since. It appears likely that this may have been a burner account intended to help spread specific disinformation related to the chemical weapons attack and the role of the White Helmets.

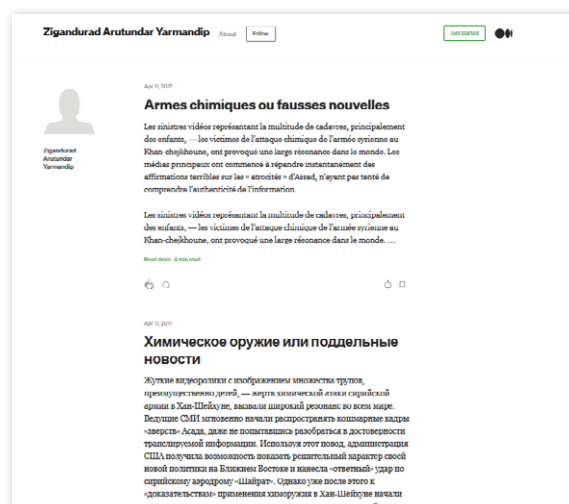


Figure 13 Screenshot of the ‘Zigandurad Arutundar Yarmandip’ Medium account, captured 4 November 2020

Over the course of 2017, the 'Kate Matberg' account was used only three more times: as part of an attempt to disseminate hacked materials belonging to a US State Department official; to spread rumours about supposed US biological laboratories in Ukraine; and to promote a conspiracy theory that targeted Bill Browder.<sup>36</sup>

In the years since 2017, the account has been relatively active, posting every few weeks with stories which also appear on either News Front, RB News and Summury News, or all of the sites. As with the blogging accounts researched as part of the 'Secondary Infektion' investigation, the 'Matberg' account appears to have gained little engagement. Perhaps its greatest success was being cited<sup>37</sup> in a Kyiv Post story, for a post<sup>38</sup> from 17 April 2019 about the alleged involvement of Austrian banks in laundering money from Ukraine. The content in this post had already been published two days earlier on 15 April 2019 on RB News<sup>39</sup> and Summury News,<sup>40</sup> with a byline for 'Kate Matberg'. This format is unusual, as most of the cross-posted stories do not appear with any byline. The image accompanying the story on the 'Kate Matberg' account was again hosted by RB News, as shown in Figure 14. The article was also posted by News Front<sup>41</sup> on the day it appeared on the 'Matberg' blog.

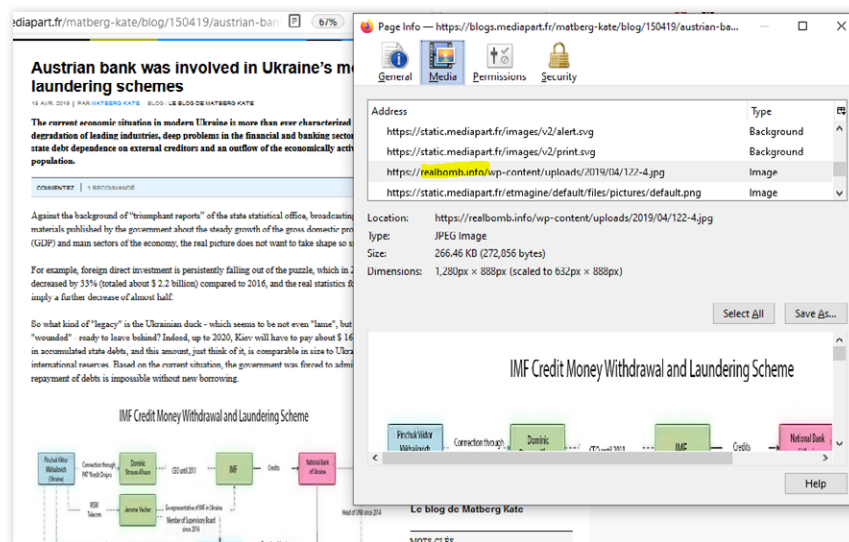


Figure 14 Screenshot of story on the 'Kate Matberg' Mediapart account, captured 4 November 2020

It is unclear at this stage whether the similar names used for the 'Catherine' and 'KateB' user accounts on RB News and Summury News and the 'Kate Matberg' on Mediapart are a coincidence or signify that the same individual may be linked to all three.

## 'Anastasia Frank' on The Duran

The second blog account ISD identified is 'Anastasia Frank'<sup>42</sup> on The Duran, which is a site that presents itself as a news and opinion website. It was founded in 2016 by disbarred attorney and RT commentator Alexander Mercouris,<sup>43</sup> and is directed by RT TV host Peter Lavelle.<sup>44</sup> NewsGuard gives the site a score<sup>45</sup> of 7.5 out of 100, saying that it "severely violates basic standards of credibility and transparency" and has "published conspiracy theories and false information to advance its views, including misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic".

The Duran allows members of the public to create accounts and publish content. The 'Anastasia Frank' account first became active on 5 December 2019, posting a story<sup>46</sup> emphasising strains and tensions among NATO members at the previous day's summit. The story was also published that day by The Saker,<sup>47</sup> another source known for disseminating strongly pro-Kremlin views,<sup>48</sup> and was published the next day on the 'Kate Matberg'<sup>49</sup> blog. None of these three publications credited or made any reference to one another.

In the months since, the 'Anastasia Frank' account has gone on to publish over 40 stories on topics such as US and European politics, in particular Ukraine and the Azerbaijan–Armenian conflict, the World Anti-Doping Agency and the coronavirus crisis. All these stories also appear to have been published on News Front, RB News and Summury News, and in some cases, also appear on the 'Kate Matberg' blog.

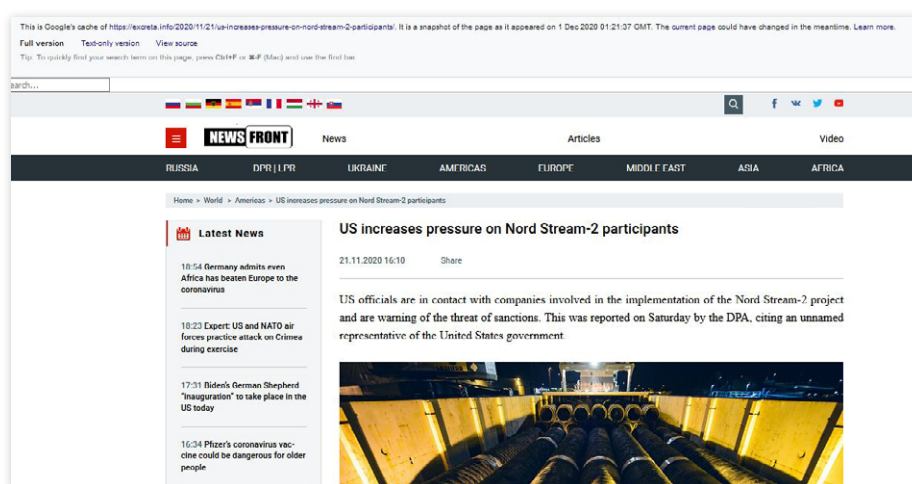
In some instances, the content posted by 'Anastasia Frank' and on RB News and Summury News appears to be translated copy of News Front's content in other languages. For example, an article headlined "Halfway to the end", published on The Duran by 'Frank',<sup>50</sup> RB News and Summury News on 25 March 2020, is credited at the end of a French-language piece<sup>51</sup> published the same day on Agora Vox (a site for bloggers and citizen journalists) by Philippe Khalfine.<sup>52</sup> Khalfine is a French supporter of the separatist Donetsk Republic and a writer for News Front France who will be discussed in more detail below. The similarity between Khalfine's name and the 'Calfine' Mediapart account referenced above is notable, but it was not possible to confirm a link.

While this investigation did not uncover definitive proof that the same individual or group operated the 'Anastasia Frank' and 'Kate Matberg' accounts, the fact that both accounts appear to have been deleted on the same day, 6 December 2020, provides a circumstantial reason to suspect a connection between them.

## Cloaking domains

A third component of the long tail of News Front's activities is the use of domain cloaking. Domain cloaking is a method for obscuring the true destination of a link, by loading the original site's content in a frame on another domain. This is a relatively common method for evading bans imposed by social media platforms and other services, because when the links are posted on the platform they appear innocuous and are therefore not blocked or deleted.

Since being banned by Facebook in early 2020, News Front appears to have made at least two forays into domain cloaking. On 10 October 2020, two domains were registered: [excreta.info](https://excreta.info), which loaded the English-language version of News Front, and [ambassadeur.info](https://ambassadeur.info)<sup>53</sup> which loads the French-language version of News Front. Domains loading the other News Front languages have not been uncovered at this stage. [Excreta.info](https://excreta.info) appears to have been deleted in December 2020 and does not appear to have been replaced as of 18 January 2021, though articles from the site remained available<sup>54</sup> in Google's cache as of that date.



**Figure 15** Screenshot of Google cache dated 1 December 2020 of News Front content loading on the [excreta.info](https://excreta.info) domain, captured 18 January 2021

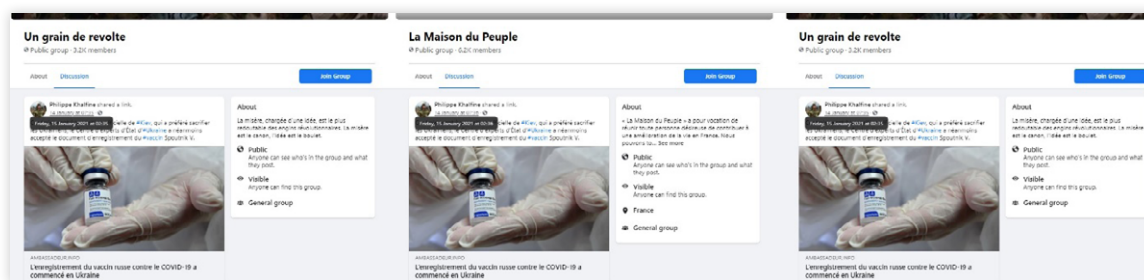
It is unclear why the domain was deleted. It may be the operators of the domain had realised that the wording used in the URL "[excreta.info](https://excreta.info)", could itself pose a problem for social media content moderation. There have been other documented examples of obscenities<sup>55</sup> as apparent inside jokes in Russian disinformation operations.

The Francophone [ambassadeur.info](https://ambassadeur.info) cloaking domain, however, continues to operate and has been in regular use on Facebook. ISD's analysis found that links to [ambassadeur.info](https://ambassadeur.info) had been posted at least 6,172 times in 161 different Facebook groups and pages as of 15 January 2021.

The scale of this activity appears to reflect a sustained effort to promote News Front France's content to a range of audiences across Facebook. This includes posting links to News Front France's official Facebook page (which seems to have escaped being removed in Facebook's ban) and into the group it manages, *Monde Russe*.<sup>56</sup> In addition, it appears that News Front France editor Philippe Khalfine (whose other activities on behalf of News Front have been discussed above) and another account named 'Alfonso Gabriel' have been systematically sharing [ambassadeur.info](https://ambassadeur.info) links into a large number of Facebook groups.

'Alfonso Gabriel's' account appears to have been created in April 2020 (the same month in which Facebook dismantled<sup>57</sup> a network of inauthentic accounts linked to News Front). Its public activity consists entirely of sharing [ambassadeur.info](https://ambassadeur.info) links; it has no personal photographs or other indications of authentic, human activity. For example, the article "L'enregistrement du vaccin russe contre le COVID-19 a commencé en Ukraine"<sup>58</sup> was published on News Front and [ambassadeur.info](https://ambassadeur.info) on 14 January 2021. ISD's analysis of CrowdTangle data found that between 14:33:32 and 14:36:47 AEDT, Philippe Khalfine shared the [ambassadeur.info](https://ambassadeur.info) link for the story into 16 different Facebook groups alongside identical text.





**Figure 16** Screenshot showing Khalfine’s account sharing the article into three Facebook groups in the space of two minutes on 14 January, captured 18 January 2021

The groups and pages targeted by Khalfine and Gabriel with News Front’s Francophone content include a mix of Putin and Russia fan groups, conspiracy groups, anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist groups and groups with a regional focus on Francophone Africa. After the News Front France Officiel page, the top ten groups and pages onto which ambassadeur.info links were shared between 12 October 2020 and 15 January 2021 are<sup>59</sup>:

Group or Page	Number of shares
1. La Grande Russie de Poutine	318
2. Actualités planétaire (a group fighting against the Illuminati and 'Zionist Anglo-Saxon world order')	302
3. Euro-Rus France - Франция	290
4. Mort a l'Empire et son systeme maléfique	279
5. Les pro russe	259
6. LES AMIS DE LA RUSSIE	258
7. Editions “Alliance Russe”	257
=8. Contre l'Oligarchie Mondiale	236
=8. Antimaïdan France	236
10. Un grain de revolte	235

Several of these pro-Russia and Putin fan groups appear to be largely comprised of Facebook users in (primarily Francophone) African countries. In the groups, Khalfine and Gabriel’s shares of News Front content via ambassadeur.info links appear alongside other pro-Russian posts and content, but also alongside content relating to African politics and local conflicts. Over the past several years, a number of Russian disinformation and influence efforts<sup>60</sup> targeting African countries have been exposed, particularly countries such as the Central African Republic,<sup>61</sup> Libya<sup>62</sup> and Sudan<sup>63</sup> where Russia has both significant interests and political influence.

The top two ambassadeur.info links that received the highest numbers of shares on Facebook as of 15 January 2021 cover alleged negative reactions to American COVID-19 vaccines. The article “Un Israélien est mort du vaccin américain contre le COVID-19”<sup>64</sup> (“An Israeli has died from the American vaccine against COVID-19”) was shared 147 times, while the article “L’Allemagne a suspendu son traitement anti-covid en raison de problèmes avec le vaccin américain”<sup>65</sup> (“Germany has suspended their anti-COVID treatment campaign due to problems with the American vaccine”) was shared 100 times. These are significantly higher than the next most shared article, “Les États-Unis ont ouvert une enquête contre Biden pour ses affaires en Ukraine”<sup>66</sup> (“The United States has opened an inquiry against Biden over his actions in Ukraine”) which was shared 67 times. The high number of shares appear to reflect a higher level of organic sharing – that is, more Facebook users sharing the articles of their own accord, in addition to shares by Khalfine and Gabriel.



## Conclusion

This case study has examined a small network of accounts and domains which appear to have links with the pro-Kremlin site News Front. At least part of this network appears to be operated by a student based in Crimea, where News Front is located. It has also examined the use of a cloaking domain by a part of the News Front network, News Front France, as a means to remain active on Facebook despite being banned. This domain is being used in what appears to be a systematic effort to seed News Front France content through multiple Facebook groups, in particular Putin fan groups, conspiracy groups and Francophone African groups.

While the impact of this activity is likely to be low, the case highlights how pro-Kremlin content and narratives can move across a broad network of platforms and domains, which can be independent of one another or be partially or fully centralised. News Front itself has been publicly identified as a known source of pro-Russian disinformation and influence efforts, leading to some reactive steps from social media platforms to limit its reach. However, the same content is proliferating unchecked across a variety of other forums on the internet and retains some presence on Facebook through relatively simple workarounds.

This finding has implications for how to respond to such networks. It underscores the point that actions against specific organisations or domains, while potentially useful, are not likely to be completely effective in stopping the spread of disinformation or covert influence efforts. Instead, it is a constant game of whack-a-mole. Recognising this underscores the importance of fostering resilience to these kinds of influence efforts within societies themselves, as opposed to simply focusing on trying to remove or restrict content. It also reinforces the need to understand the wider internet ecosystem — beyond major social platforms like Facebook and Twitter — in order to effectively respond to disinformation and influence operations.

## Endnotes

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