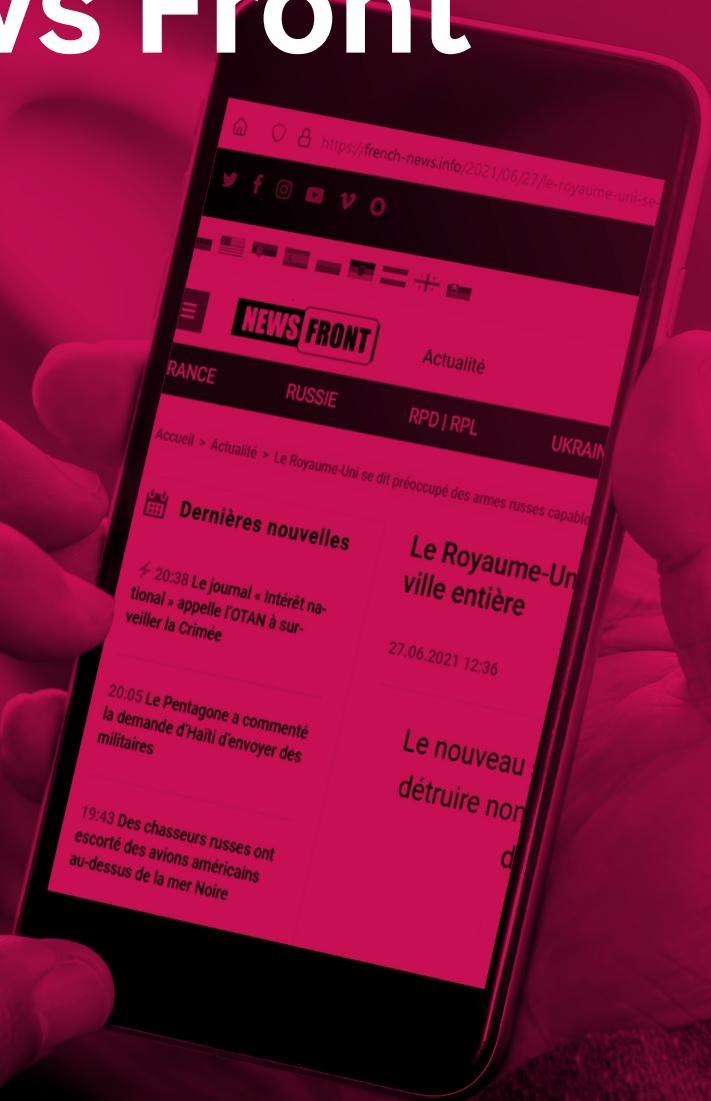


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What's new (and what's not) with News Front

Elise Thomas





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Executive summary

News Front is a Crimea-based organisation that publishes articles in multiple languages. It has been repeatedly identified as a source of pro-Russian disinformation, and networks of inauthentic accounts linked to News Front have been taken down by social media platforms since at least May 2020.¹

Previous reports including ISD's *The Long Tail of Influence Operations: A Case Study on News Front*² and others by the Alliance for Securing Democracy³ and EUvsDisinfo⁴ have highlighted the use of deceptive tactics by actors connected to News Front to launder its content into the information cycle and to evade bans on social media platforms. These efforts include the creation of a number of mirror sites and suspicious social media accounts and networks.

Shortly after the aforementioned reports were published, the networks and accounts identified were removed by Facebook. The mirror sites identified at that time are no longer active.

In April 2021 the US Treasury announced sanctions against four organisations linked to Russian government influence efforts, including News Front. The Treasury described News Front as a "disinformation and propaganda outlet that worked with FSB officers to coordinate a narrative that undermined the credibility of a news website advocating for human rights".⁵

An investigation by ISD found that the various accounts and domains which were earlier removed were replaced within weeks. News Front continues to operate multiple mirror domains and has active accounts on Facebook, Telegram, Gab and the Russian social media platform VKontakte.

News Front's strategy for disseminating its content on Facebook appears to be consistent with its previous activity, including the use of mirror domains to systematically share News Front content into Facebook groups for conspiracy theorists, fringe political movements and fan groups for Russia and Vladimir Putin.

However, the specificity of the content and narratives shared into these groups demonstrates a level of regional targeting. For example, News Front content targeted at Francophone Facebook audiences often relates to the topics of Ukraine, NATO and European politics, while Spanish-language News Front content seems to be targeted primarily at South American audiences and focuses more on Chinese-Russian cooperation and support for Syrian President Bashar al Assad. The unifying narrative in News Front content across these regions is fervent anti-American sentiment.

Notably, while News Front has created English and German language mirror domains, these do not appear to have been shared in a systematic fashion on Facebook. This may reflect a difference in Facebook's capacity for content moderation across languages. Content posted in English, in particular, is more likely to attract attention from moderators. Facebook has also said it will be closely watching for interference in advance of the German election. As speculation, this may have been a factor in News Front's decision to hold off on promoting its German-language content.⁶

This report is not intended to serve as a full analysis of News Front or its content, as this has been well covered by previous research and reporting. Instead, it presents an update to the outlet's ongoing efforts to reach audiences on Facebook, with some discussion of French and Spanish language activity. ISD would welcome collaborative analysis of News Front's Georgian, Serbian and Bulgarian content.

The core finding of this research is that despite discussion of "sophisticated actors" in the study of influence operations, innovation is not always necessary— even for actors whose tactics are well-known—to maintain a presence on Facebook. Using a set of relatively simple techniques, almost identical to their previous operations, News Front has successfully re-established a foothold on Facebook for at least the second time, not long after being removed. This suggests that persistence may in some cases be more important than sophistication.

Key Findings

- Despite being removed from mainstream social media platforms several times since May 2020, content shared by the outlet News Front — which shares pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda — has resurfaced on Facebook and Twitter.
 - The strategy used by accounts associated with News Front to spread its content across these platforms appear largely consistent with previous efforts. The tactics noted in this report include a set of eight mirror domains operating in different languages, created on the same day. These appear to have been generated for the purpose of 'link cloaking', which allows outlets to circumnavigate bans on sharing its previous domain addresses.
 - ISD found that content from these eight sites was shared 6,423 times on Facebook between 1st January 2021 and 11th July 2021, with a particular focus on articles in French, Bulgarian and Georgian language content.
 - Facebook pages associated with News Front in French and Spanish had varying degrees of success with attracting engagement from their respective audiences. The content shared potentially indicates a regional targeting strategy that attempts to capitalise on localised grievances.
 - Personal Facebook profiles (some of which belong to figures that have been previously tied to News Front France) were responsible for the systematic sharing of its content into groups focused on topics like anti-government conspiracies or admiration for Vladimir Putin.
 - News Front content in Spanish was shared in a similarly coordinated manner into specific pro-Russia, Assad and Maduro fan groups on Facebook. There was also a focus on sharing content related to Chinese-Russian cooperation. Most of the groups targeted appear to be organic online communities based largely in South America.
 - Despite differences in the subjects covered in different languages, a consistent theme across the set is anti-American sentiment, including protesting sanctions placed on News Front and other outlets by the US Treasury in April 2021.
 - The resurfacing of this network just months after being removed from mainstream platforms, using very similar tactics as in previous efforts, raises questions about the effectiveness of moderation efforts to prohibit recurrent influence operations.
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Mirror domains

The main News Front site is blocked from being shared on Facebook and Twitter. However, ISD's investigation found that News Front content is still accessible on both platforms, using a set of mirror domains. In this report, the term mirror domain is used to describe a site that posts News Front content onto a different site. As such, these sites are effectively copying or mirroring News Front but present the content via a different URL.

This technique is used by many dubious actors to circumvent bans on sharing their domain on social media platforms (amongst other purposes).

Previous investigations into News Front by ISD and the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) identified multiple domains which were mirroring the outlet's main site. The primary purpose of this is to allow News Front's operators to continue to share links onto social media platforms, in a technique known as 'link cloaking'. When users click on the links and are directed to the mirror domain, they are presented with content that has been reposted from the main News Front site. More information about News Front's use of this technique is available in ISD's previous report.⁷

Figure 1 Screenshots of attempt to share News Front link on Facebook.

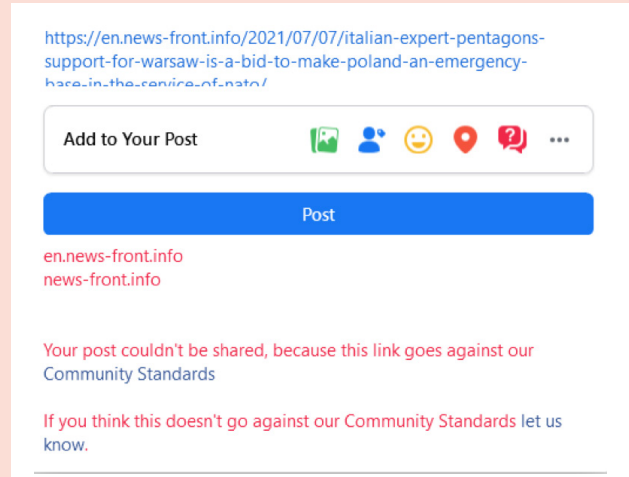


Figure 2 Screenshots of attempt to share News Front link on Twitter.

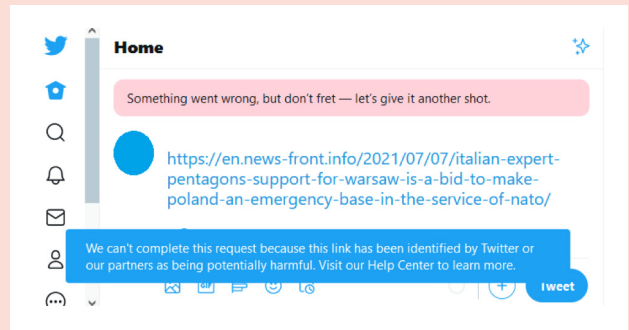
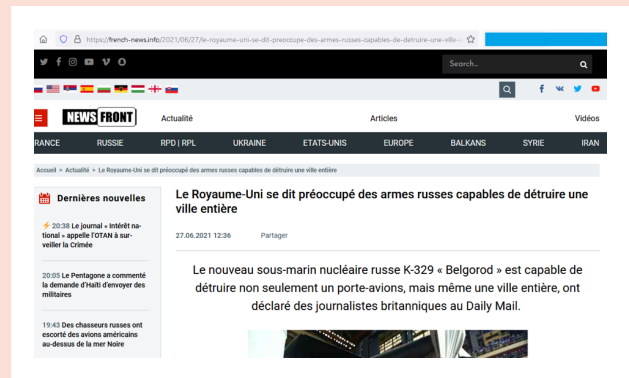


Figure 3 Screenshot showing News Front content on mirror domain french-news.info.



The domains identified in February (listed below) were inactive as of July 2021. These domains are likely to have been blocked by Facebook at the same time as the previous network of News Front accounts was removed, making the domains useless for link cloaking. However, ISD's investigation has uncovered new mirror domains which are only slight variations on these domain names.

As ISD's February investigation found with the earlier mirror domains, the current generation of mirror domains are utilising Whois privacy protection provided by a Russian-based company. They are all using the same Netherlands-based IP address and were all created on 18th March 2021, with security certificates generated on 19th March 2021. These commonalities often indicate that the domains have been created in a batch.

Figure 4 Table adapted from ASD's report⁸ to include domains identified by ISD in July 2021.

Language	Original News Front Domain	Mirror Domain identified by the ASD in February	Mirror Domain identified by ISD in July
Russian	news-front.info	smi7.info	smi7-news.info
English	en.news-front.info	helloworldnews.info	eng-news.info
Spanish	es-news-front.info	novedad.info	novedad-news.info
French	fr.news-front.info	ambassadeur.info	french-news.info
German	de.news-front.info	chaptera.info	chaptera-news.info
Georgian	ge.news-front.info	georgie.su	georgia-news.info
Bulgarian	bgr.news-front.info	zapisna.info	zapisnanews.info
Slovak	sk.news-front.info	newsk.info ⁹	
Serbian	srb.news-front.info	provesti.info	provesti-news.info

Social media activity

The primary use of these mirror domains appears to be, as before, to enable News Front to continue to share its content on social media platforms via link cloaking. Based on CrowdTangle data,¹⁰ ISD's analysis found that links to the mirror domains had been shared 6,423 times on Facebook between 1st January 2021 and 11th July 2021. This activity was not evenly distributed between the mirror domains; the Bulgarian, French and Georgian sites were shared over a thousand times each, while the English and German domains do not appear to have been shared publicly on Facebook at all.

This disparity is likely to reflect the degree of decentralisation in News Front's model, in which the editors for each language appear to be at least partially responsible for promoting their content on social media. It is also possible that the lack of shares for the English language mirror domain may reflect a concern on the part of News Front that English language activity is more likely to be identified, given that the majority of investigations into News Front's activity to this point have been conducted predominantly in English.

News Front France

As was the case in ISD's previous investigation,¹¹ News Front France's promoters have been particularly active in creating Facebook groups and attempting to generate interest for the outlet's content. According to CrowdTangle data the mirror domain links for News Front France received only 1,814 interactions between 25th June and 20th July in spite of these efforts.

On 30th March, a Facebook page was created for the News Front France mirror domain. The profile picture for the page includes the words 'News-Front'.

At the time of writing, the page had only 32 followers and almost no engagement on its posts. The exceptions were where the same Facebook user, 'Alain Cafni', had shared posts dozens of times into various Francophone Facebook groups. ISD researchers have not been able to verify whether 'Alain Cafni' is a private individual or pseudonym, and so will refer to the account only as 'Cafni' throughout this report. In the screenshotted example, 'Cafni' has shared a single post 33 times to different groups.

The groups targeted include Francophone conspiracy groups, fringe political groups and Russia and Putin fan

Figure 5 Screenshot of the French-News Facebook page, captured 14th July 2021. Red box added to highlight 'News Front' in profile image.

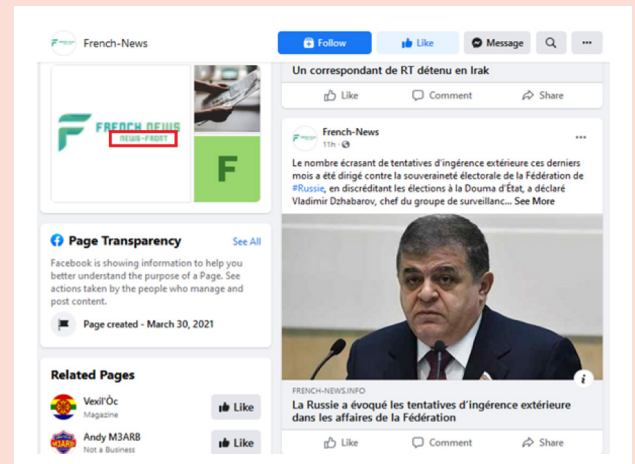


Figure 6 Screenshot showing 33 shares of a single French-News Facebook post by 'Alain Cafni', captured 14th July 2021.

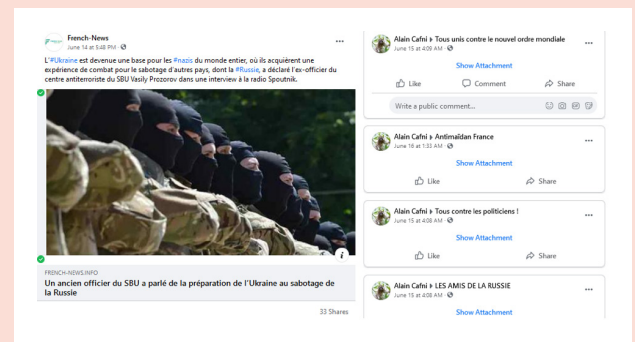


Figure 7 Screenshot showing shares of a French-news.info link into public groups taking place seconds apart.



groups. This is the same behaviour, and indeed even some of the same specific groups, as noted in ISD's previous investigation.

In February, ISD found that News Front France was systematically sharing content into a multitude of Facebook groups, in particular Francophone Russian and Putin fan groups, anti-imperialist and conspiracy groups. This was channelled through the personal but public Facebook account of its editor Philippe Khalfine and another recently created, likely inauthentic, account named 'Alfonso Gabriel'.¹² These individuals systematically shared content into a multitude of Facebook groups, particularly Francophone Russian and Putin fan groups, anti-imperialist and conspiracy groups.¹³

The 'Cafni' account, which was primarily responsible for the sharing of News Front France content into these groups, appears to have existed since at least 2017, but has either deleted earlier activity or only became active on 28th March 2021. This is ten days after the creation of the new mirror domains and two days before the creation of the French-News Facebook group. Cafni's first public post was a share of an article from the new News Front France mirror domain. There is no personal content on the profile to suggest that the account is an authentic user.

On 16th April, 'Cafni' posted about US sanctions against News Front and the other organisations. The text of the post reads, "D'après le département du trésor américain, je travaille directement pour le FSB, ils sont trop drôles ces ricains". ("According to the US Treasury Department, I work directly for the FSB, these Americans are too funny".)

In addition to the French-News Facebook page, since 24th June the 'Cafni' account has moderated a small Facebook group titled Contre l'occupation américaine de l'Ukraine¹⁴ ("Against the American occupation of Ukraine"). The cover image of the group reads "USA Arm Ukrainian Neo-Nazis". The narrative that the US-supported Ukrainian government is fascist, antisemitic or Nazis has been a core component of Russian propaganda campaigns since Ukraine's 2013 Maidan uprising.¹⁵

As of 23rd August, the group had 54 members. Its description read "Pour Ukraine libérée de l'occupation américaine. Contre la désinformation des médias occidentaux pour justifier cette occupation.

Figure 8 Screenshot of 16th April post by 'Alain Cafni' relating to the US sanctions against News Front and other organisations.

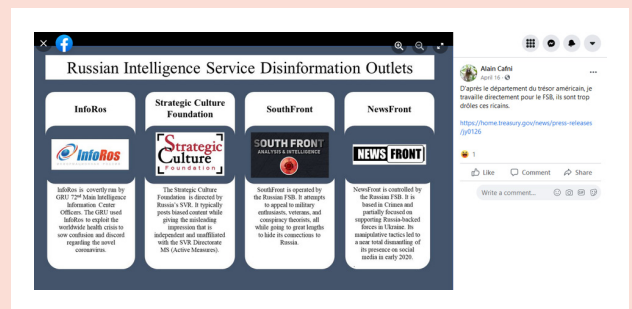
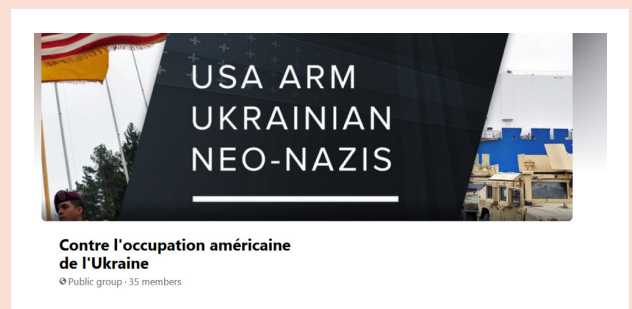


Figure 9 Screenshot of banner image of News Front France-related Facebook group.



Pour le respect des peuples à s'autodéterminer". ("For liberating Ukraine from the American occupation. Against the western media disinformation for justifying this occupation. For respecting the people's rights to self-determination".)

Initially, activity in the group consisted entirely of 'Cafni' sharing links to the News Front France mirror domain. As of late August, however, some apparently organic activity has begun taking place as other users have shared links and posts into the group.

As mentioned, there have been efforts to localise the narratives which News Front promotes to each language audience. While the aforementioned group remains small, it unsubtly illustrates the two major themes which dominate News Front France's Facebook content: opposition to the United States and opposition to Ukraine.

News Front Spanish

The Spanish mirror domain received over 14,900 Facebook interactions between 13th June and 20th July, according to CrowdTangle data. Shares for the Spanish News Front mirror domain demonstrate a similar targeting strategy to News Front France (albeit more successful), with coordinated shares into pro-Russia, Assad, and Maduro fan groups, conspiracy and fringe political Spanish-language groups. Most of these groups appear to be organic and based in South America.

News Front Spanish focused less on Ukraine than News Front France; instead, the Spanish mirror domains appears to have targeted fan groups for China. In particular, content regularly promoted the idea of Chinese-Russia cooperation against the West and the US. This may reflect a strategy of selectively amplifying the most regionally relevant narratives.

The majority of the 1,884 public shares of this mirror domain in the period between 13th June and 2nd August period appear to have come from just two Facebook profiles. One is the personal profile of a seemingly real user based in Mexico. However, as previously noted, News Front France's editor Philippe Khalfine also used his personal Facebook profile to promote News Front content and share it into groups before his account was removed. It is possible that this profile may itself be, or may be connected to, a News Front Spanish editor.

The second profile to share this content at high volume appears to have been created or become active in March 2021. The account has 32 friends, one of which states that they work at News Front.

Multiple studies of information operations have noted the employment of individuals outside of the government and political spheres, such as students, actors and freelance journalists to produce and disseminate content.¹⁶ ISD's previous investigation identified a post-graduate student in Crimea as a likely employee of News Front involved in producing and disseminating its content. It is possible that there is a similar group of young Spanish speakers, perhaps also students, involved with News Front's Spanish content and that this may be an account owned by one such employee.

Figure 10 Screenshot of shares of News Front Spanish mirror domain into Latin American Facebook groups, with content promoting Russian-Chinese cooperation against the West.

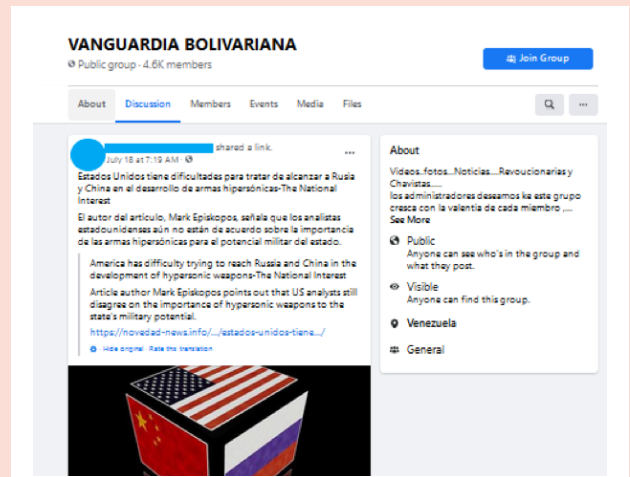


Figure 11 Screenshot of friends list, redacted for privacy. Red box added to highlight 'Works at News Front'.



Discussion

This report underscores that exposure is not the same as enforcement when it comes to influence actors. News Front's operation has been exposed, analysed and responded to by Facebook multiple times since May 2020. The outlet's tactics to circumnavigate bans and smuggle content onto mainstream social media have not changed substantially from late 2020 and early 2021. This research demonstrates that a simple strategy of persistence and repetition has proved fruitful enough for News Front to re-establish a presence on Facebook.

In its regular reports on coordinated inauthentic behaviour, Facebook says that it engages in what it terms "continuous enforcement", stating "We monitor for efforts to re-establish a presence on Facebook by networks we previously removed. Using both automated and manual detection, we continuously remove accounts and Pages connected to networks we took down in the past".¹⁷

It is not clear what measures Facebook had in place to attempt to prevent News Front from returning to the platform. What is clear is that News Front has been able to return, using almost identical tactics as used previously, not long after being removed in early 2021 and being sanctioned by the US Treasury.

This case study therefore raises broader questions about where the focus lies in content moderation and recurrent influence operations. Discovery and exposure are obviously essential parts of the picture. However, if bans are to be meaningful, then effective monitoring and enforcement is also needed well after the spotlight of the public gaze moves on.

Endnotes

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