

"Russian Interference in U.S. Presidential Elections"

13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign



Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel investigating Russian interference in the 2016 election, at the Capitol in June. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times.

Matt Apuzzo and Sharon LaFraniere, *The New York Times* Online Edition, February 16, 2018.

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department charged 13 Russians and three companies on Friday in a sprawling indictment that unveiled a sophisticated network designed to subvert the 2016 election and to support the Trump campaign. It stretched from an office in St. Petersburg, Russia, into the social feeds of Americans and ultimately reached the streets of election battleground states.

The Russians stole the identities of American citizens, posed as political activists and used the flash points of immigration, religion and race to manipulate a campaign in which those issues were already particularly divisive, prosecutors said.

Some of the Russians were also in contact with “unwitting individuals associated with the Trump campaign,” according to court papers. Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel leading the investigation, made no accusation that President Trump or his associates were knowingly part of the conspiracy.

“The indictment alleges that the Russian conspirators want to promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy,” Rod J. Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general overseeing the inquiry, said in a brief news conference. “We must not allow them to succeed.”

The 37-page indictment — handed up by a federal grand jury in Washington — amounted to a detailed rebuttal of Mr. Trump, who has sowed doubts that Russia interfered in the election and dismissed questions about its meddling as “fake news.”

The Justice Department said Mr. Mueller’s work was not complete. The indictment does not address the hacking of Democratic email systems or whether Mr. Trump tried to obstruct the F.B.I. investigation into Russian interference. Mr. Mueller is negotiating with the president’s lawyers over the terms of a possible interview.

The Russian operation began four years ago, well before Mr. Trump entered the presidential race, a fact that he quickly seized on in his defense. “Russia started their anti-US campaign in 2014, long before I announced that I would run for President,” [he wrote on Twitter](#). “The results of the election were not impacted. The Trump campaign did nothing wrong - no collusion!”



The Propaganda Tools Used by Russians to Influence the 2016 Election

Thirteen Russian nationals have been charged with illegally trying to disrupt the American political process through inflammatory social media posts and organized political rallies.

But Mr. Trump's statement ignored the government's conclusion that, by 2016, the Russians were "supporting the presidential campaign of then-candidate Donald J. Trump" and disparaging Hillary Clinton, his opponent. Working out of the office in St. Petersburg, the Russians described waging "information warfare against the United States of America," according to court documents.

Mr. Mueller has gathered extensive evidence of contacts between Russia and the Trump campaign: [Mr. Trump's eldest son met with a Russian lawyer](#) in hopes of receiving political dirt on Mrs. Clinton; one adviser has admitted being tipped off in advance to Russian hacking of Democratic emails; another was in contact with a Twitter account used by Russian hackers; a federal judge found probable cause that a third adviser was an unlawful Russian agent. And the Trump campaign repeatedly and falsely denied any contacts with Russia.

Whether any of that violated federal law is the weightiest question facing Mr. Mueller, and Friday's indictment did not answer it. But it painted a picture of a Russian operation that was multipronged, well financed and relentless.

Russian operatives traveled across the United States to gather intelligence and foment political discord. They worked with an unidentified American who advised them to focus their efforts on what they viewed as "purple" election battleground states, including Colorado, Virginia and Florida, the indictment said.

In August 2016, prosecutors said, Russians posed as Americans and coordinated with Trump campaign staff to organize rallies in Florida.

Such anecdotes are rare examples of how intelligence agencies work covertly to influence political outcomes abroad. The C.I.A. has conducted such operations for decades, but both Mr. Mueller's indictment and an intelligence assessment last year present a startling example — unprecedented in its scope and audacity — of a foreign government working to help elect an American president.

The indictment does not explicitly say the Russian government sponsored the effort, but American intelligence officials have publicly said that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia directed and oversaw it. The indictment notes that two of the Russian firms involved hold Russian government contracts.

"This is clearly a message document," Robert S. Litt, the former general counsel to the director of national intelligence, said of the indictment. "Mueller wants to end the debate over whether there was Russian interference in the election."

The Russian nationals were accused of working with the Internet Research Agency, which had a budget of millions of dollars and was designed to reach millions of Americans. The defendants were charged with carrying out a massive fraud against the American government and conspiring to obstruct enforcement of federal laws.

None of the defendants were arrested — Russia does not generally extradite its citizens to the United States. But prosecutors use such indictments to name and shame operatives, making it harder for them to work undetected in the future. If they travel abroad, they risk capture and extradition.

Russian computer specialists, divided into day teams and night teams, created hundreds of social media accounts that eventually attracted hundreds of thousands of online followers. They posed as Christian activists, anti-immigration groups and supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement. One account posed as the Tennessee Republican Party and generated hundreds of thousands of followers, prosecutors said.

Separate divisions of the Internet Research Agency were in charge of graphics, data analysis and information technology, according to the indictment.

“I created all these pictures and posts, and the Americans believed that it was written by their people,” one of the Russians, Irina Viktorovna Kaverzina, wrote as the operation was being unmasked.

Their tasks included undermining Mrs. Clinton by supporting her Democratic primary campaign rival, Bernie Sanders, prosecutors said. Those instructions were detailed in internal documents: “Use any opportunity to criticize Hillary and the rest (except Sanders and Trump — we support them).” Mr. Mueller identified 13 digital advertisements paid for by the Russian operation. All of them attacked Mrs. Clinton or promoted Mr. Trump.

TRANSCRIPT

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Inside Russia’s Network of Bots and Trolls

How do bots and trolls work to infiltrate social media platforms and influence U.S. elections? We take a closer look at these insidious online pests to explain how they work.

They hide behind Twitter hashtags, Facebook ads and fake news stories. They’re the work of bots and trolls, and one of the most skilled countries at deploying them is Russia. So how do these entities actually work to spread disinformation? We asked two experts. This is St. Petersburg-based activist Ludmila Savchuk. She has tracked disinformation campaigns and even gone undercover to learn how they work. And this is Ben Nimmo, a London-based analyst who focuses on information warfare. Let’s define what’s what. A bot is short for robot. It’s an automated social media account that operates without human intervention. During the 2016 presidential election, suspected Russian operators created bots on Twitter to promote hashtags like #WarAgainstDemocrats. A troll is an actual human being, motivated by

passion or a paycheck to write social media posts that push an agenda. In 2015, Savchuk worked undercover for over two months at a troll factory in Russia that has gone by many names, including Glavset and the Internet Research Agency. Troll accounts are usually anonymous or pretend to be someone else, like hipsters or car repairmen. But it can even get stranger. Trolls can also set up bots to amplify a message. Facebook is one common platform for Russian trolls and bots, which, in 2016, used fake accounts to influence U.S. elections. Here's how some experts think that played out. American officials suspect Russian intelligence agents of using phishing attacks to obtain emails damaging to the Hillary Clinton campaign. They then, allegedly, created a site called DCLeaks.com to publish them. A troll on Facebook, using the name Melvin Redick, was one of the first to hype the site, saying it contained the "hidden truth about Hillary Clinton." An army of bots on Twitter then promoted the DC Leaks, and in one case, even drove a #HillaryDown hashtag into a trending topic. Facebook believes that ads on divisive issues created by Russian trolls were shown to Americans over four million times before the elections. Russian-linked trolls and bots also tried to exploit divisive issues and undermine faith in public institutions. Federal investigators and experts believed Russian trolls created Facebook groups like Blacktivist, which reposted videos of police beatings, or another, Secured Borders, which organized anti-immigrant rallies in real life. "Today, Russia hopes to win the second Cold War through the force of politics as opposed to the politics of force." How can you stop them? You can't. Even Vladimir Putin seems to agree. But ID'ing their tactics helps contain their influence. If a suspicious account is active during the workday in St. Petersburg or posting dozens of items a day, those are red flags. Decode the anonymity. Look for alphanumeric scrambles in a user's name, and try Googling its profile picture. Look at the language. If an account makes grammar mistakes typical for Russian speakers, or changes behavior during times of strained Russian-U.S. relations, then congratulations. You might have caught a bot or pro-Kremlin troll.

How do bots and trolls work to infiltrate social media platforms and influence U.S. elections? We take a closer look at these insidious online pests to explain how they work.

“Hillary is a Satan, and her crimes and lies had proved just how evil she is,” one advertisement stated.

In summer 2016, as Mrs. Clinton appeared headed for a decisive general election victory, Russian operatives promoted allegations of Democratic voter fraud. That echoed Mr. Trump’s own message that he was the victim of a rigged political system.

After the election, the Russians kept up their efforts to foment dissent. In November, they staged two rallies in New York on the same day. One had the theme, “Show your support for President-Elect Trump.” The other was called, “Trump is NOT my President.”

The indictment does not say that Russia changed the outcome of the election, a fact that Mr. Rosenstein noted repeatedly. American intelligence officials have said they have no way of calculating the effect of the Russian influence.

The Federal Election Commission started its own inquiry into the Internet Research Agency last year, according to [documents obtained by The New York Times](#), after Facebook revealed that the firm had paid more than \$100,000 for politically themed ads, including ones promoting “Down With Hillary” rallies.

The commission’s inquiry was prompted by a [complaint filed](#) by the government watchdog group Common Cause that claimed that the Facebook ads violated the prohibition on foreign spending, as well as requirements mandating the disclosure of campaign spending.

The Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, told the RBC news website that Russian officials have not familiarized themselves with the document yet.

Mr. Mueller also revealed Friday that [Richard Pinedo](#), of Santa Paula, Calif., had pleaded guilty to identity fraud in a case involving the sale of bank accounts over the internet. According to court papers, some of Mr. Pinedo’s customers are foreigners who are targets of Mr. Mueller’s inquiry. Mr. Pinedo has pleaded guilty and is cooperating with Mr. Mueller, court documents show.

Scott Shane and Kenneth P. Vogel contributed reporting from Washington, Michael Schwirtz from New York, and Ivan Nechepurenko from Moscow.

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 17, 2018, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Indictment Bares Russian Network To Twist 2016 Vote.

Russia's Fake Journalist Web

As the Ukraine war grinds on, the Kremlin has created increasingly complex fabrications online to discredit Ukraine's leader and undercut aid. Some have a Hollywood-style plot

Steven Lee Myers, *The New York Times* National Edition, Published March 18, 2024; Updated, March 21, 2024, March 22, 2024.

A young man calling himself Mohamed al-Alawi appeared in a YouTube video in August. He described himself as an investigative journalist in Egypt with a big scoop: The mother-in-law of Ukraine's president had purchased a villa near Angelina Jolie's in El Gouna, a resort town on the Red Sea.

The story, it turned out, was not true. Ukraine denied it, and the owner of the villa refuted it. Also disconnected from reality: Alawi's claim to being a journalist.

Still, his story caromed through social media and news outlets from Egypt to Nigeria and ultimately to Russia — which, according to researchers, is where the story all began.

The story seemed to fade, but not for long. Four months later, two new videos appeared on YouTube. They said Mohamed al-Alawi had been beaten to death in Hurghada, a town about 20 miles south of El Gouna. The suspected killers, according to the videos: Ukraine's secret service agents.

These claims were no more factual than the first, but they gave new life to the old lie. Another round of posts and news reports ultimately reached millions of internet users around the world, elevating the narrative so much that it was even echoed by members of the U.S. Congress while debating continued military assistance to Ukraine.

Ever since its forces [invaded two years ago](#), Russia has unleashed a torrent of disinformation to try to discredit Ukraine's leader, Volodymyr Zelensky, and undermine the country's support in the West.

This saga, though, introduced a new gambit: a protracted and elaborately constructed narrative built online around a fictitious character and embellished with seemingly realistic detail and a plot twist worthy of Netflix.

“They never brought back a character before,” said Darren Linvill, a professor and director of the Media Forensics Hub at Clemson University, who has extensively studied Russian disinformation.

The campaign shows how deftly Russia's information warriors have shifted to new tactics and targets as the war in Ukraine has dragged on, just as Russian forces on the ground in Ukraine have adjusted tactics after devastating battlefield losses.

Groups with ties to the Kremlin continue to float new narratives when old ones fail to stick or grow stale, using fake or altered videos or recordings and finding or creating new outlets to spread disinformation, including [ones purporting to be American news sites](#).

A video appeared on TikTok last month claiming to show a Ukrainian doctor working for Pfizer accusing the company of conducting unlawful tests on children. On the social network X, a man claiming to be an associate producer for Paramount Pictures spun a tale about a Hollywood biopic on Mr. Zelensky's life.

The tale attributed to Mohamed al-Alawi is not even the only baseless allegation that Mr. Zelensky had secretly purchased properties abroad using Western financial assistance. Other versions — each seemingly tailored for a specific geographic audience — have detailed a mansion in Vero Beach, Fla., and a retreat in Germany once used by Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi minister of propaganda.

The Russians have “demonstrated adaptability through the war on Ukraine,” Microsoft wrote in a recent report that disclosed Russia's [fraudulent use of recorded messages](#) by famous actors and celebrities on the Cameo app to try to smear Mr. Zelensky as a drug addict.

Even when debunked, fabrications like these have proved exceedingly difficult to extinguish entirely.

YouTube took down the initial video of the character Mohamed al-Alawi, linking it to two other accounts that had previously violated the company's policies. The accusation still circulates, however, especially on platforms, like X and Telegram, that experts say do little to block accounts generating inauthentic or automated activity. Some of the posts about the video appear to have used text or audio created with artificial intelligence tools; many are amplified by networks of bots intended to create the impression that the content is popular.

What links the narratives to Russia is not only the content disparaging Ukraine but also the networks that circulate them. They include news outlets and social media accounts that private and government researchers have linked to previous Kremlin campaigns.

“They're trolling for a susceptible (and seemingly abundant) slice of citizens who amplify their garbage enough to muddy the waters of our discourse, and from there our policies,” said Rita Katz, the director of the SITE Intelligence Group, an American company that tracks extremist activity online and investigated the false claims about the villa.

The Making of a Fake Journalist

The video first appeared on Aug. 20 on a newly created YouTube account that had no previous activity and almost no followers, according to the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, a global nonprofit research organization in London, which traced the video's spread.



Credit... Devin Oktar Yalkin for The New York Times

The man appeared in a poorly lit room reading from his computer screen, which was reflected in his thick glasses. He appeared to be a real person, but it has not been possible to verify his actual identity. No one by the name of Mohamed al-Alawi appears to have produced any previous articles or videos, as would be expected of a journalist. According to ActiveFence, an internet security company, the character has no educational or work history, and no network of friends or social connections online.

The video, though, showed what purported to be photographs of a purchase contract and of the villa itself, creating a veneer of authenticity for credulous viewers. The property is, in fact, part of a resort owned by Orascom Development, whose [website](#) highlights El Gouna's "year-round sunshine, shimmering lagoons, sandy beaches and azure waters."

An article about the video's claim appeared two days later as a paid advertisement, or [branded content](#), on Punch, a news outlet in Nigeria, as well as three other Nigerian websites that aggregate news and entertainment content.

The article had the byline of Arthur Nkono, who according to internet searches does not appear to have written any other articles. The article quoted a political scientist, Abdurrahman Alabassy, who likewise appears not to exist except in accounts linking the villa to the corrupt use of Western financial aid to Ukraine. (Punch, which later removed the post, did not respond to requests for comment.)

A day later, the claim made its first appearance on X in a post by Sonja van den Ende, an activist in the Netherlands, whose articles have previously appeared on propaganda

outlets linked to the Russian government, according to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. (She also served as an election observer in an occupied territory of Ukraine during Russian parliamentary elections in September.)

Within days, reports about the villa appeared on X in French and Romanian, and in English on three different Reddit forums.

According to Roberta Duffield, director of intelligence for Blackbird.AI, an internet security company, nearly 29 percent of the accounts amplifying the reports appeared to be inauthentic bots, an unusually high number that would normally indicate a coordinated campaign.

Eight days after the video appeared, Russia state television networks like Channel One, Rossiya 24 and RT (in Arabic and German) reported it as a major revelation uncovered by a renowned Egyptian investigative journalist.

The story seemed to stall there. Naguib Sawiris, the scion of the Egyptian family that owned the development, curtly denied the sale in [a reply](#) on X.

And no more was heard from or about the character called Mohamed al-Alawi — until late December.

That was when two new videos emerged on a YouTube channel called “Egypt News,” claiming that he was dead.

The channel had been created the day before. One video showed a man identified as Alawi’s brother, Ahmed, answering questions from another man.

The police, he said, told him that they suspected his brother had been beaten to death by “Ukrainian special forces who acted on behalf of President Zelensky or another high-ranking official.”

He spoke with his hand cupped over his face to obscure his identity. The other video showed what was said to be the site of an attack, though the images were indistinct. “I can’t tell you anything else,” he said in the video, which YouTube later removed. “I’m afraid for my family.”

The video also tried to explain away some of the obvious holes in the initial story, including why there was no evidence online of Alawi’s previous work. “It was his first big assignment,” the man said.

The new episode spread as the first video had. A day later, an article about the death appeared on an obscure website created last year called El Mostaqbal, a name similar to but unrelated to the [actual news organization](#) in Lebanon.

“A reporter who announced that Zelensky’s mother-in-law brought a luxury villa has died under mysterious circumstances,” the headline read. Other reports that followed dropped any uncertainty and began referring to his “murder.”

In fact, Egypt’s Ministry of the Interior said there were no reports or evidence that anyone resembling the man in the video had been “subjected to harm.” The statement went on to note that the property itself had not been sold.

Still, according to the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, posts about the supposed killing were viewed a million times on X on Dec. 25.

It also appeared on the website of the Middle East Monitor, or MEMO, operated by a well-known nonprofit organization in London and financed by the government of Qatar. A journalist who once reported from Moscow for The Telegraph of London, Ben Aris, cited it at length on the platform, though, when challenged, he said he had just made note of the rumor. “I don’t have time to check all this stuff myself,” he wrote.

It appeared in English on a site, Clear Story News, that Mr. Linvill of Clemson’s Media Forensics Hub had previously linked to Russia’s disinformation efforts. (The site lists no contact information)

Mr. Linvill described the process as a form of “narrative laundering” — moving false claims from unknown or not credible sources to ones that, to the unwitting at least, seem more legitimate.

More Elaborate Narratives



Credit... Devin Oktar Yalkin for The New York Times

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue studied three other complex narratives about Ukraine, as well.

One featured a French journalist who claimed that the son of George Soros — a regular target of Russian and far-right political attacks — had secretly acquired land for a toxic waste dump in Ukraine. An unnamed doctor in Africa said in another that an American medical charity, the Global Surgical and Medical Support Group, was harvesting the organs of wounded Ukrainian soldiers for transplants for NATO officers.

Then there was the case of a man calling himself Shahzad Nasir, whose profile on X identifies him as a journalist with Emirates 24/7, an English-language news outlet in Dubai, though he has no apparent bylines on the site.

In November, he claimed that cronies of Mr. Zelensky bought two yachts — Lucky Me and My Legacy — for \$75 million. His evidence, like Mohamed al-Alawi's, includes photographs of the vessels and purported purchase agreements.

In fact, as the BBC [documented](#) in December, the yachts had not been purchased and remained for sale. Despite numerous efforts by fact checkers to dispel it as rumor, the claim circulated extensively.

Last month, the character Nasir reappeared in another video. This time he had a new version of the tale, claiming that the purchases had been scuttled after he exposed the secret deal.

The ramifications of these campaigns are difficult to measure precisely. There are signs, though, that they resonate even when proved false.

Senator J.D. Vance, a Republican of Ohio and an outspoken critic of Ukraine aid, seemed to embrace the claim in December during an interview on “War Room,” the podcast hosted by Stephen K. Bannon, the onetime adviser to former President Donald J. Trump.

“There are people who would cut Social Security — throw our grandparents into poverty — why?” Mr. Vance said. “So that one of Zelensky’s ministers can buy a bigger yacht?”

That prompted a public rebuke this month from a Republican colleague, Senator Thom Tillis of North Carolina, who ridiculed those who repeat unproven allegations.

“They’ve heard somebody say that if we pass this bill, that we’re all going to go ride to Kyiv with buckets full of money and let oligarchs buy yachts!” he said of critics of the assistance to Ukraine, in what he later called a reference to Mr. Vance’s comments. “I wonder how the spouses of the estimated 25,000 soldiers in Ukraine who have died feel about that? I mean, really, guys?”

Karoun Demirjian contributed reporting. Audio produced by Parin Behrooz.

*A correction was made on
March 19, 2024*

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An earlier version of this article misstated, in one reference, the name of a group at Clemson University that studies disinformation. It is the Media Forensics Hub, not the Digital Media Hub.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

Steven Lee Myers covers misinformation for The Times. He has worked in Washington, Moscow, Baghdad and Beijing, where he contributed to the articles that won the Pulitzer Prize for public service in 2021. He is also the author of “The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin.” [More about Steven Lee Myers](#)

U.S. Announces Plan to Counter Russian Influence Ahead of 2024 Election

American spy agencies have assessed that the Kremlin favors former President Donald J. Trump, seeing him as skeptical of U.S. support for Ukraine.



Attorney General Merrick B. Garland with Christopher A. Wray, the F.B.I. director, and Lisa O. Monaco, the deputy attorney general, at a meeting of the Justice Department's Election Threats Task Force in Washington on Wednesday. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

Julian E. Barnes, Glenn Thrush and Steven Lee Myers, **The New York Times** Online Edition, September 4, 2024.

The United States on Wednesday announced a broad effort to push back on Russian influence campaigns in the 2024 election, as it tries to curb the Kremlin's use of state-run media and fake news sites to sway American voters.

The actions include sanctions, indictments and seizing of web domains that U.S. officials say the Kremlin uses to spread propaganda and disinformation about Ukraine, which Russia invaded more than two years ago.

Attorney General Merrick B. Garland detailed the actions taken by the Justice Department. They include the indictment of two Russian employees of RT, the state-owned broadcaster, who used a company in Tennessee to spread content, and the takedown of a Russian malign influence campaign known as Doppelgänger.

“The American people are entitled to know when a foreign power engages in political activities or seeks to influence public discourse,” Mr. Garland said.

The Treasury Department imposed sanctions on ANO Dialog, a Russian nonprofit that helps run the Doppelgänger network, as well as the editor in chief of RT, Margarita S. Simonyan, and her deputies.

The State Department has offered a \$10 million reward for information pertaining to foreign interference in an American election. The department specifically said it was seeking information on a group known as Russian Angry Hackers Did It, or RaHDit.

The State Department also said it would designate five Russian state-funded news outlets, including RT, Ruptly and Sputnik, as foreign government missions and restrict the issuance of visas to people working for Kremlin-supported media institutions.

American officials have stepped up their warnings about Russian election influence efforts. American spy agencies have assessed that the Kremlin favors former President Donald J. Trump over Vice President Kamala Harris in the November contest, seeing him as more skeptical of U.S. support for Ukraine.



An RT broadcast in Moscow in 2019. The United States has said that Russian intelligence agencies have been using the state-owned broadcaster to spread disinformation. Credit...Misha Friedman/Getty Images

The United States was caught flat-footed in 2016 as its spy agencies learned about Russian efforts to influence the vote on behalf of Mr. Trump and were late in warning the public. In subsequent elections, U.S. intelligence officials more aggressively called out Russian, Chinese and Iranian efforts to influence American elections.

Officials say that fighting election interference has been more difficult this year. Some Americans, particularly Mr. Trump's supporters, see accusations that Russia is spreading disinformation as efforts to undermine their views.

Mr. Garland said the charges announced on Wednesday were not the end of the case: "The investigation is ongoing."

The Justice Department and the F.B.I. have also been [investigating a handful of Americans](#) accused of knowingly spreading false Kremlin narratives. But officials have emphasized that they are not aiming to curb free speech. Americans who merely repeat or spread stories they see on Russian state media are not being investigated as part of the efforts, officials said.

The officials say that RT has [spread disinformation through bots](#) and other means, but that they are looking more closely at how the Kremlin and its spy agencies influence the election.

As news of the indictments broke, [RT posted a sarcastic response on its website](#) from Anna Belkina, its deputy editor in chief. "There are three certainties in life: death, taxes and RT's interference in the American elections," the response read in part.

The indictments on Wednesday [charged two Russian employees of RT](#), Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afanasyeva, with conspiracy to violate the Foreign Agents Registration Act. They are accused of spending \$10 million to secretly pay the unnamed Tennessee company to spread nearly 2,000 English-language videos on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and X.

Disinformation experts have long struggled to measure the effectiveness of Russian influence campaigns, but Justice Department officials said the videos, most of which support the goals of the Russian government, have gained 16 million views on YouTube.

Mr. Garland said the videos were "often consistent with Russia's interest in amplifying U.S. domestic divisions in order to weaken U.S. opposition to core Russian interests, particularly its ongoing war in Ukraine." The Tennessee company, he said, never disclosed its ties to the Russian government.

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After a [terrorist attack on a concert venue](#) in Moscow in March, Ms. Afanasyeva directed the company to focus on the false narrative that Ukraine was responsible.

Justice Department officials declined to identify the firm, but the one in the indictment uses the same slogan as Tenet Media, a company registered in Tennessee that publishes videos and other content broadly supportive of Mr. Trump. The company — and its most prominent commentators — did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The indictment does not directly accuse the company of wrongdoing but said that it had ties to RT and that its founders referred to their sponsor as "the Russians."

Critics of the U.S. moves said the indictments raised free speech issues and the possibility that the Biden administration was trying to censor pro-Russian commentary.



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Margarita Simonyan, the editor in chief of RT, was among those hit with sanctions. Credit...Nanna Heitmann for The New York Times

Paul M. Barrett, the deputy director of the Stern Center for Business and Human Rights at New York University, said the government had to tread carefully to distinguish between foreign election interference and First Amendment protections of free speech.

“The dividing line is when you identify activity, particularly concealed activity, that is circumventing established regulations for how we try to prevent foreign interference in our elections,” he said. If that line is crossed, he added, “that’s a complication, but it’s not a reason to just run up the free speech flag and throw up your hands and we’re helpless in the face of Vladimir Putin’s very clever operatives.”

The United States has already taken action against Russian organizations it believes are trying to influence American politics. In March, the [Treasury Department imposed sanctions on a Russian group](#) that has aided efforts to create fake news sites that spread misinformation, and in July it seized two internet domains that it also linked to RT and the Federal Security Service, a successor of the Soviet K.G.B.

The Justice Department action builds on that, saying it was seizing 32 more domains that were used to covertly spread Russian propaganda. According to the government affidavit, the Doppelgänger campaign is run by Sergei Kiriyenko, a former prime minister who is now President Vladimir V. Putin’s first deputy chief of staff.

Christopher A. Wray, the F.B.I. director, said the fake news sites had been seized by the government as of noon.

“When we learn that adversaries overseas are trying to hide who they are and where their propaganda is coming from, as part of campaigns to deliberately sow discord, we’re

going to continue to do everything we can to expose their hidden hand and disrupt their efforts,” Mr. Wray said.

Mr. Garland said a Russian internal planning document stated that “the aim of the campaign is securing Russia’s preferred outcome in the election.”

The document, produced for the Social Design Agency, outlined plans to influence U.S. voters without identifying that the content was coming from the Russian government.

It lays out a plan to target voters in swing states (as determined by The New York Times’s polling efforts), as well as voters in conservative states like Alabama, Texas and Kansas. The document says U.S. citizens of Hispanic descent, Jews and video gamers would also be targeted.

The goal, according to the document and the indictment, was to push Americans to support the idea that the United States should focus on “addressing its domestic issues instead of wasting money in Ukraine.”

The Justice Department blocks out the names of the candidates the Russians support, but the document says that “it makes sense for Russia to put a maximum effort” into ensuring that the Republican Party’s view, and in particular the opinions of Mr. Trump’s supporters, “wins over U.S. public opinion.”

The Doppelgänger network used sites that impersonated legitimate news entities and fake social media profiles impersonating Americans.

The fake news sites targeted specific audiences in the United States by mimicking sites like Fox News and The Washington Post. The posts on the fake Post site had a pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine viewpoint, according to the court papers.

Reporting was contributed by Edward Wong, Alan Feuer and Zolan Kanno-Youngs from Washington, and Paul Sonne from Berlin.

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Russian Cash, And Influence On Influencers

Federal prosecutors say Russia paid an American media company to push pro-Kremlin messages from social media influencers including Benny Johnson, Tim Pool and Dave Rubin.



Lauren Chen and her husband, Liam Donovan, founded Tenet Media in Tennessee in 2022. Russian money has accounted for most of the company's revenue in recent months, the Justice Department said. Credit...Jason Davis/Getty Images

Steven Lee Myers, Ken Bensinger and Jim Rutenberg, *The New York Times* National Edition, September 8, 2024, 1, 19.

In early 2022, a young couple from Canada, Lauren Chen and Liam Donovan, registered a new company in Tennessee that went on to create a social media outlet called Tenet Media.

By November 2023, they had assembled a lineup of major conservative social media stars, including Benny Johnson, Tim Pool and Dave Rubin, to post original content on Tenet's platform. The site then began posting hundreds of videos — trafficking in pointed political commentary as well as conspiracy theories about election fraud, Covid-19, immigrants and Russia's war with Ukraine — that were then promoted across the spectrum of social media, from YouTube to TikTok, X, Facebook, Instagram and Rumble.

It was all, federal prosecutors now say, a covert Russian influence operation. On Wednesday, the Justice Department accused two Russians of helping orchestrate \$10

million in payments to Tenet in a scheme to use those stars to spread Kremlin-friendly messages.

The disclosures reflect the growing sophistication of the Kremlin's longstanding efforts to shape American public opinion and advance Russia's geopolitical goals, which include, according to [American intelligence assessments](#), the election of former President Donald J. Trump in November.



The Justice Department, led by Attorney General Merrick B. Garland, center, accused two Russians of helping finance a Tennessee media company's pro-Kremlin programming. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

In 2016 and 2020, Russia employed armies of internet trolls, fake accounts and bot farms to try to reach American audiences, with debatable success. The operation that prosecutors described this week shows a pivot to exploiting already established social media influencers, who, in this case, generated as many as 16 million views on Tenet's YouTube channel alone.

Most viewers were presumably unaware, as the influencers themselves said they were, that Russia was paying for it all.

“Influencers already have a level of trust with their audience,” said Jo Lukito, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin's journalism school who studies Russian disinformation. “So, if a piece of information can come through the mouth of an existing influencer, it comes across as more authentic.”

The indictment — which landed like a bombshell in the country's conservative media ecosystem — also underscored the growing ideological convergence between President Vladimir V. Putin's Russia and a significant portion of the Republican Party since Mr. Trump's rise to political power.

The Kremlin has long sought to exploit divisions on both sides of the American political spectrum, but contentious conservative voices provide ample fodder for its own propaganda, especially when it involves criticism of the Biden administration or, more broadly, of the country's foreign policy, including support for Ukraine in its war against Russia.

The federal investigation that led to the indictment unsealed on Wednesday is part of [a broader government effort](#), first reported in The New York Times, to combat Russian disinformation, election interference and cyberattacks. Administration officials have said the effort could lead to more [charges](#).

The indictment detailed the lengths Russia went to try to make Tenet a player in the country's political discourse, while obfuscating the fact that it was footing the bill.

That included transferring at least \$9.7 million from Russia through shell companies in countries like Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Mauritius. Those payments accounted for 90 percent of the company's revenue from last October to August, the indictment said.

Prosecutors have not, so far, charged Ms. Chen and Mr. Donovan. It is unclear where they are, and they did not respond to requests for comment. The indictment did note that neither they nor Tenet had registered as a representative of a foreign government, a requirement of the Foreign Agents Registration Act, known as FARA.

Tenet's influencers all described themselves as victims of the Russian ruse, and at times disparaged the federal investigation. They emphasized that they took no direction from Russians, though the indictment details various efforts by the company's sponsors to sow specific narratives, some of which appeared in the content they posted.

In one instance, Mr. Johnson, a former journalist with 2.4 million subscribers on YouTube, suggested on his own show that Ukraine might have been responsible for a deadly attack at a concert hall in Moscow in March, reflecting a [since-debunked Russian claim](#). (A branch of the Islamic State claimed responsibility.)

Another influencer on Tenet's roster, Lauren Southern, a far-right Canadian commentator with more than 1.2 million followers between YouTube and X, produced a video mocking the Summer Olympics in Paris in July, echoing [Russia's efforts](#) to denigrate the Games and their French hosts.

The Russians even pushed Tenet to highlight a video from Tucker Carlson, the former Fox News star who now produces his own online show. He made it during a [visit](#) to Moscow this year, marveling about the abundance on display in a supermarket in the city.

A producer working for Tenet, in a message cited in the indictment, thought Mr. Carlson's video "just feels like overt shilling" but, after being pressured by Tenet's owners, agreed to post the clip in any case.



A building in Nashville that, according to Tennessee state records, houses the office of Tenet Media. Credit...Seth Herald/Reuters

Nina Jankowicz, a co-founder of the American Sunlight Project, an advocacy group in Washington that fights disinformation online, said that “this is a classic case of information laundering.”

“The Russians and other foreign actors have used it for decades to obscure the source of influence operations,” she went on. “In this case, they chose influencers who were already engaging in rage bait, exploiting the pre-existing fissures in our society for clicks.”

Flush with Russian cash, Tenet certainly compensated some of its influencers well. It paid at least \$8.7 million to the top three influencers, who were not named but who appear to be Mr. Rubin, Mr. Pool and Mr. Johnson based on details in the indictment, such as the number of followers on social media.

According to the indictment, Mr. Rubin received \$400,000 a month, plus a \$100,000 signing bonus, to produce four videos a week on Tenet’s YouTube channel. Mr. Pool was paid \$100,000 per video, which he produced weekly.

The contracts put those three on the same pay scale as some of those [on Forbes’s](#) “Top Creators 2023” list, though Mr. Pool portrayed his payment as standard in an interview on “The Ben Shapiro Show” on Friday.

Under terms of their arrangements, the influencers could keep producing other content separate from the work they did for Tenet.

A representative of Mr. Johnson declined to comment but provided details of the timeline and nature of his contract with Tenet. On X, however, Mr. Johnson said he had

acted “as an independent contractor” under what he termed “a standard, arms-length deal which was later terminated.”

Mr. Rubin, who is the creator and host of “The Rubin Report,” a political talk show on YouTube and Blaze Media, a conservative media company, said in a post online that he had no knowledge of connections between Tenet and Russia.

So did Mr. Pool, who has promoted Mr. Trump’s election fraud conspiracies and portrayed Ukraine as an [“enemy”](#) on his popular online show. In his response on X, he directed a crude insult to Mr. Putin. On Thursday, he said that the F.B.I. had invited him to a “voluntary interview” and that he would cooperate with the investigation.

Prosecutors said the two Russians charged on Wednesday, Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afanasyeva, had violated FARA and laws against money laundering. The pair are employees of RT, the Russian global television network.

In a response to a request for comment about the indictment, the network replied sarcastically. “We eat U.S. D.O.J. indictments for breakfast,” its statement said. “With lots of sour cream, usually.”

Mr. Donovan, 30, Tenet’s co-founder, appears on corporate records in Tennessee as a founder of Roaming USA Corporation, the company that later created Tenet. His account on X, which has not posted any messages since July, describes him as Tenet’s president. Among those who shared his posts, along with the company’s, was the owner of X, Elon Musk.

Tenet appears to have ceased operations since Wednesday. YouTube, in a statement on Thursday evening, said it had taken down its account on the platform, along with four others associated with Ms. Chen.

Ms. Chen, who is married to Mr. Donovan and is also 30, worked for RT from March 2021 until February 2022. RT’s website still [describes her](#) as a YouTuber who was “most passionate” about topics that “include dating culture, family values, individual liberty, gender equality and issues surrounding race.”

She also produced podcasts on Blaze Media and served as a contributor to Turning Point USA, the conservative organization run by Charlie Kirk. Her [profiles on Mr. Kirk’s site](#) and [on Blaze Media’s](#) disappeared this week. Her account on X, which remains active, has nearly 600,000 followers.

In a statement, Blaze Media’s chief executive, Tyler Cardon, said, “Lauren Chen was an independent contractor, whose contract has been terminated.”

For at least two of the influencers, the offer to join Tenet appeared to raise concerns about the origins of such generous contracts.

The indictment detailed how they questioned the company’s backers. In response, Mr. Kalashnikov and Ms. Afanasyeva, along with Ms. Chen and Mr. Donovan, provided a profile page of a fictitious European banker, Eduard Grigoriann.

They also arranged a phone call with someone purporting to be the banker. That was enough, apparently, to assuage any concerns.

“It’s lamentable that these influencers conducted so little due diligence,” Ms. Jankowicz said. “When something seems too good to be true — in this case, getting paid \$100,000 per video for content you were already making — it probably is.”

Another of those who worked for Tenet was Tayler Hansen, who is perhaps best known for filming the [shooting of Ashli Babbitt](#) in the U.S. Capitol during the violence on Jan. 6, 2021.

For years, he scraped by financially by licensing his footage, selling branded merchandise and soliciting donations from supporters as he gradually built a following of more than 170,000 on X.

When Tenet approached him last year and offered the opportunity to work for a biweekly salary, he jumped at the chance, he said in an interview. Tenet also hired Mr. Hansen’s producer and covered his travel expenses.

“I had full autonomy, and there’s really no point in not working with a company that grants you full autonomy,” Mr. Hansen said. “I’ve never had as much freedom.”

Asked how he thought Tenet made money, he said simply, “Donors.”

Martin J. Riedl, a journalism professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, who studies the spread of misinformation on social media, said the case of Tenet spotlighted gaping regulatory holes when it came to the American political system.

While the Federal Election Commission has strict disclosure rules for television and radio advertisements, it has no such restrictions for paid social media influencers.

The result is an enormous loophole — one that the Russians appeared to exploit.

“Influencers have been around for a while,” Mr. Riedl said, “but there are few rules around their communication, and political speech is not regulated at all.”

Nico Grant and Kitty Bennett contributed reporting

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