

RUSSIAN 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION INTERFERENCE

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POLITICS

13 Russians Indicted as Mueller Reveals Effort to Aid Trump Campaign

By MATT APUZZO and SHARON LaFRANIERE FEB. 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!"

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.

“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 Schwartz from New York, and Ivan Nechepurenko from Moscow.

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POLITICS

Inside a 3-Year Russian Campaign to Influence U.S. Voters

By SCOTT SHANE and MARK MAZZETTI FEB. 16, 2018

WASHINGTON — In September, as the first detailed evidence surfaced of Russia’s hijacking of social media in the 2016 election, Irina V. Kaverzina, one of about 80 Russians working on the project in St. Petersburg, emailed a family member with some news.

“We had a slight crisis here at work: the F.B.I. busted our activity (not a joke),” she wrote of the project in Russia. “So, I got preoccupied with covering tracks together with the colleagues.” She added, “I created all these pictures and posts, and the Americans believed that it was written by their people.”

A 37-page indictment, handed up on Friday by a Washington grand jury and charging Ms. Kaverzina and 12 other people with an elaborate conspiracy, showed that she and her colleagues did not, in fact, hide their tracks so well from United States investigators. The charges, brought by Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel, introduced hard facts to a polarized political debate over Russia’s intervention in American democracy, while not yet implicating President Trump or his associates.

The indictment presented in astonishing detail a carefully planned, three-year Russian scheme to incite political discord in the United States, damage Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign and later bolster the candidacy of Donald J. Trump, along with those of Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein. The precise description of the

operation suggested that F.B.I. investigators had intercepted communications, found a cooperating insider or both.

The Russians overseeing the operation, which they named the Translator Project, had a goal to “spread distrust toward the candidates and the political system in general.” They used a cluster of companies linked to one called the Internet Research Agency, and called their campaign “information warfare.”

The field research to guide the attack appears to have begun in earnest in June 2014. Two Russian women, Aleksandra Y. Krylova and Anna V. Bogacheva, obtained visas for what turned out to be a three-week reconnaissance tour of the United States, including to key electoral states like Colorado, Michigan, Nevada and New Mexico. The visa application of a third Russian, Robert S. Bovda, was rejected.

The two women bought cameras, SIM cards and disposable cellphones for the trip and devised “evacuation scenarios” in case their real purpose was detected. In all, they visited nine states — California, Illinois, Louisiana, New York and Texas, in addition to the others — “to gather intelligence” on American politics, the indictment says. Ms. Krylova sent a report about their findings to one of her bosses in St. Petersburg.

Another Russian operative visited Atlanta in November 2014 on a similar mission, the indictment says. It does not name that operative, a possible indication that he or she is cooperating with the investigation, legal experts said.

The operation also included the creation of hundreds of email, PayPal and bank accounts and even fraudulent drivers’ licenses issued to fictitious Americans. The Russians also used the identities of real Americans from stolen Social Security numbers.

At the height of the 2016 campaign, the effort employed more than 80 people, who used secure virtual private network connections to computer servers leased in the United States to hide the fact that they were in Russia. From there, they posed as American activists, emailing, advising and making payments to real Americans who were duped into believing that they were part of the same cause.

The playing field was mainly social media, where the Russians splashed catchy memes and hash tags. Facebook has estimated that the fraudulent Russian posts reached 126 million Americans on its platforms alone.

The Russian operatives contacted, among others, a real Texas activist who, evidently assuming they were Americans, advised them to focus on “purple states like Colorado, Virginia & Florida.” After that, F.B.I. agents found that the phrase “purple states” became a mantra for the Russian operation.

Clinton Watts, a former F.B.I. agent who has tracked the Russian campaign closely, said that he had no doubt that President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia was behind the effort, which was carried out by companies controlled by his friend and ally, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin. But he noted that the so-called trolls employed by Mr. Prigozhin took elaborate steps to obscure their identities and locations and to avoid leaving government fingerprints.

“From the beginning, they built this so it could be plausibly denied,” Mr. Watts said. Mr. Putin has repeatedly denied any government role in hacking and disinformation aimed at the United States, while coyly allowing that patriotic Russians may have carried out such attacks on their own.

Andrew S. Weiss, a Russia specialist at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, called the reported origin of the effort in April 2014 “crucially important.”

“That’s a little more than a month after the annexation of Crimea and the launch of Russia’s covert war in eastern Ukraine,” Mr. Weiss said. The resulting crisis “vaporized U.S.-Russian relations overnight,” he said, setting off multiple Russian efforts “to undermine the United States, both in terms of our leading role in the world, but also via our own domestic political vulnerabilities.”

Mr. Weiss said the fact that private companies conducted the social media campaign simply made it cheaper and more difficult to trace.

Mr. Putin has been angry with Mrs. Clinton since at least 2011, when she was secretary of state and he accused her of inciting unrest in Russia as he faced large-

scale political protests. Mrs. Clinton, he said, had sent “a signal” to “some actors in our country” after elections that were condemned as fraudulent by both international and Russian observers.

Mr. Mueller’s indictment does not present evidence that the campaign overseen by Mr. Prigozhin was ordered by Mr. Putin. American officials have traced other elements of the Russian meddling, notably the hacking and leaking of leading Democrats’ emails, to Russian intelligence agencies carrying out Mr. Putin’s orders.

While the indictment certainly undermines Mr. Trump’s blanket assertions that the Russian interference is a political “hoax,” it does not accuse anyone from his campaign or any other American of knowingly aiding in the effort.

By the beginning of 2016, the Russian strategy was in place, and the conspirators began their campaign to sow conflict. An internal message circulated through the Internet Research Agency telling operatives to post content online that focused on “politics in the USA.”

“Use any opportunity to criticize Hillary and the rest (except Sanders and Trump—we support them),” the message read.

The scope of the operation was sweeping. The Russians assumed their fake identities to communicate with campaign volunteers for Mr. Trump and grass-roots groups supporting his candidacy. They bought pro-Trump and anti-Clinton political advertisements on Facebook and other social media. They used an Instagram account to try to suppress turnout of minority voters and campaign for Ms. Stein, the Green Party candidate.

Applying nearly two years’ worth of political research, the Russians used all of these tactics to target voters in swing states, notably Florida, according to the indictment.

By summer 2016, the Russian operatives were mobilizing efforts for coming “Florida Goes Trump” rallies across the state, all planned for Aug. 20. Using false identities, they contacted Trump campaign staff in Florida to offer their services.

One operative sent a message to a campaign official saying that the group Being Patriotic was organizing a statewide rally “to support Mr. Trump.”

“You know, simple yelling on the internet is not enough,” the message read, according to the indictment. “There should be real action. We organized rallies in New York before. Now we’re focusing on purple states such as Florida.”

Taking to Facebook, the Russians used the pseudonym Matt Skiber to advertise the rally. “If we lose Florida, we lose America. We can’t let it happen, right? What about organizing a YUGE pro-Trump flash mob in every Florida town?” the message read, using one of Mr. Trump’s favorite verbal flourishes.

They reached out to local organizations to build momentum for the coming rallies and assign specific tasks.

They paid one unwitting Trump supporter to build a cage on a flatbed truck that housed another person wearing a costume that portrayed Mrs. Clinton in a prison uniform.

After the rallies in Florida, the group applied similar tactics to organize rallies in Pennsylvania, New York and elsewhere.

Weeks before the election, the Russians ratcheted up social media activity aimed at dampening support for Mrs. Clinton.

In mid-October, Woke Blacks, an Instagram account run by the Internet Research Agency, carried the message “hatred for Trump is misleading the people and forcing Blacks to vote Killary. We cannot resort to the lesser of two devils. Then we’d surely be better off without voting AT ALL.”

Then, just days before Americans went to the polls, another Instagram account controlled by the Russians — called Blacktivist — urged its followers to “choose peace” and vote for Ms. Stein, who was expected to siphon support from Mrs. Clinton’s campaign.

“Trust me,” the message read, “it’s not a wasted vote.”

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EUROPE

Inside the Russian Troll Factory: Zombies and a Breakneck Pace

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR FEB. 18, 2018

MOSCOW — At first, new recruits to the Internet Research Agency, the notorious Russian troll factory, were thrilled by the better-than-average salaries they earned simply for posting on the internet. But one says he eventually realized that the work hid a darker reality: both they and their audience were meant to turn into zombies.

“They were just giving me money for writing,” said the former troll, a St. Petersburg resident who wanted to get into marketing or journalism but was drawn by the hard-to-match \$1,400 weekly paycheck. “I was much younger and did not think about the moral side. I simply wrote because I loved writing. I was not trying to change the world.”

On Friday, the United States Department of Justice accused the Internet Research Agency and its senior employees of working illegally to meddle in the 2016 American presidential election, indicting 13 Russians and the companies linked to it.

In recent interviews conducted before the indictments, two former trolls spoke about their experiences. Neither man wanted his full name used, citing the threats and intimidation others have been subjected to for speaking out.

Both left the agency for different reasons — one troubled by the substance of the work, the other struggling with the breakneck pace to create fake content.

Aleksei, the troll from St. Petersburg, said he was among the first 25 employees hired. To get the job, he said, he had to write an essay on the “Dulles Doctrine,” a

Soviet-era conspiracy theory that may seem obscure to Westerners but is well known to Russians.

That was a significant clue about what was to come. The Dulles Doctrine — born in a 1971 novel, and gaining new life after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 — was a supposed plot by Allen Dulles, the C.I.A. director from 1953 to 1961, to destroy the Soviet Union by corrupting its moral values and cultural heritage.

That, as the West has learned in the last couple of years, is precisely what the Kremlin and the troll factory set out to do to the United States, undermining faith in its electoral system by encouraging or even establishing groups that would sow domestic discord. Troll factory tactics included applauding Donald Trump's candidacy while trying to undermine Hillary Clinton's.

As the factory got going, Aleksei said, the first task assigned to all new employees was to create three identities on Live Journal, a popular blogging platform. One was to be of very high quality in writing and content, the other two "marginal."

They worked in 12-hour shifts, either day or night, and the assigned topics popped up in their email: President Vladimir V. Putin, or President Barack Obama, or often the two together; Ukraine; the heroism of Russia's Defense Ministry; the war in Syria; Russian opposition figures; the American role in spreading the Ebola virus.

The key words and subject line were always assigned. At the time, the removal of chemical weapons from Syria negotiated under Russian auspices was a favorite topic. Aleksei recalled writing seven or eight blog posts about it.

"You had to write that 30 percent of the weapons had been removed, and the next day we would say that 32 percent had been taken out," he said, adding that he had no idea if any had been removed.

Aleksei wrote for the Russian-speaking audience. The English-speaking trolls were kept apart, he said, but from their loud conversations in the communal smoking room, it seemed like they were engaged in similar work.

The English speakers discussed the best time to post commentary to attract an American audience, he remembered, and bragged about creating thousands of fake social media accounts.

Aleksei was interviewed before the indictments were handed up and he cut off contact within days of the interview. He had said that he did not know much about the company management and that he had never seen Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, the man the United States accused of creating the agency and nicknamed “Putin’s cook” because he got his start in the restaurant and catering business.

The former troll did identify Dzheykhun N. O. Aslanov — called “Jay” around the firm — as the head of the trolls running the coverage of the American elections, an assertion that Mr. Aslanov has denied.

Aleksei said that two departments generated articles and tweets in English. On the Russian side of things, he said, the main thread running through the blog posts and the commentary was that “life was good in Russia under Putin and it was bad in the U.S. under Obama.”

On domestic issues, the opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny was a favorite target. The Russian annexation of Crimea was always presented as an historical achievement for Mr. Putin that opened new horizons for Russia.

“If things were not great before, now we would start living really well,” was the general theme, he said.

Once a blog post was created, the troll exclaimed, “Then the magic began!”

The computers were designed to forward the post to the agency’s countless fake accounts, opening and closing the post to create huge numbers of fake page views.

After the initial excitement of his new job wore off, Aleksei began to realize that much of the commentary was garbage, with the same themes repeated endlessly. “It was like turning people into zombies by repeating: ‘Everything is good, everything is good. Putin is good, Putin is good,’” he said.

In his nearly two years the staff around him had mushroomed from a few dozen to over 1,000, but by the middle of 2015 he had decided to leave.

The work began to trouble him. “If I went first because they paid a lot of money for nothing, when I left I started to understand what I was doing and it was bad,” he said

Not everyone had the same reaction, he noted. Some seemed brainwashed by the material. “They became cheerleaders for the regime,” he said.

Sergei, 30, now a furniture salesman, was one of those.

With only a high school education, he was thrilled to discover that he could earn good money — he said he was actually handed cash in an envelope for part of his weekly salary — without much effort.

“I was 25 years old and knew nothing about politics,” said Sergei, who arranged for a rendezvous in a St. Petersburg food court so that he could confirm from afar that the meeting was with a foreign journalist.

Working in a room with about 40 other people, he received a stream of blog posts by other agency writers. His job was to add comments and to share the posts on other social media platforms. He said everyone had a quota of at least 80 comments and 20 shares a day.

“The main idea was to work on people’s thinking, to raise patriotism among the Russian people and to portray the U.S. negatively,” Sergei said.

The comments were supposed to be original, something he struggled with, particularly as the articles all began to sound identical even if written by different authors. He had a hard time fulfilling his quota, he said. Hired in October 2013, he left in March 2014, he said.

The job changed him.

“Of course I became more patriotic,” he said. He realized, he said, just how much Russia had to struggle against foreign powers, mostly the United States, who

sought to control its natural resources.

From the blog posts, Sergei said he learned that just a few families like the Rockefellers, the Morgans and the Rothschilds controlled much of the wealth in the United States, and that their banks charged rapacious interest rates.

“I began to be more aware of the reasons for the world’s problems,” he said. “I now believe that the world evil is the top elite who control the Federal Reserve system in the United States.”

Reached by telephone after the indictments were announced, Sergei said he had not heard about them.

Aleksei said that ultimately, the managers demanded that the trolls do more and more by rote, even as the audience seemed to grow more jaded and paid less attention to what they wrote.

“If there was some creativity at the beginning,” he said, “by the end that creative part was gone and we were all like robots.”

Follow Neil MacFarquhar on Twitter: @NeilMacFarquhar

Oleg Matsnev and Sophia Kishkovsky contributed reporting from Moscow, and Ivan Nechepurenko from St. Petersburg

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Opinion | EDITORIAL

Stop Letting the Russians Get Away With It, Mr. Trump

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD FEB. 16, 2018

Are you sure you still want to call it fake news, Mr. President?

For the past year, Donald Trump has repeatedly denied the existence of a profound national security threat: Russia’s attempt to interfere in the 2016 election on his behalf. He dismissed the Russian subversion effort as a hoax by his opponents and the media despite voluminous evidence to the contrary — including the consensus of the American intelligence community — that it did in fact happen, and is sure to happen again.

Now come the indictments. On Friday, Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating Russia’s role in the 2016 election, filed criminal charges of fraud and identity theft against 13 Russian citizens and three Russian organizations, all alleged to have operated a sophisticated influence campaign intended to “sow discord in the U.S. political system.”

One organization, the Internet Research Agency — which the indictment says is funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the “go-to oligarch” of Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin — began its efforts as early as 2014, according to the indictment. Its staffers, known as “specialists,” posed as Americans and created false identities to set up social media pages and groups aimed at attracting American audiences. The broad outlines of this interference have been known publicly for a while, but the sheer scope of the deception detailed in Friday’s indictments is breathtaking.

By the spring of 2016, the operation had zeroed in on supporting Mr. Trump and disparaging Hillary Clinton. The Internet Research Agency alone had a staff of 80 and a monthly budget of \$1.25 million. On the advice of a real, unnamed grass-roots activist from Texas, it had focused its efforts on swing states like Colorado, Virginia and Florida.

Staffers bought ads with messages like “Hillary is a Satan,” “Ohio Wants Hillary 4 Prison” and “Vote Republican, Vote Trump, and support the Second Amendment!”

They created hundreds of social media accounts on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and other sites to confuse and anger people about sensitive issues like immigration, religion and the Black Lives Matter movement — in some cases gaining hundreds of thousands of followers.

They staged rallies while pretending to be American grass-roots organizations. A poster at one “pro-Clinton” rally in July 2016 read “Support Hillary. Save American Muslims,” along with a fabricated quote attributed to Mrs. Clinton: “I think Sharia Law will be a powerful new direction of freedom.”

As the election drew nearer, they tried to suppress minority turnout and promoted false allegations of Democratic voter fraud. The specialist running one of the organization’s Facebook accounts, called “Secured Borders,” was criticized for not publishing enough posts and was told that “it is imperative to intensify criticizing Hillary Clinton.”

After the election, they continued to spread confusion and chaos, staging rallies both for and against Mr. Trump, in one case on the same day and in the same city.

All along, they took steps to cover their tracks by stealing the identities of real Americans, opening accounts on American-based servers and lying about what their money was being used for. Last September, after Facebook turned over information about Russian ad purchases to the special counsel, a specialist named Irina Kaverzina emailed a family member: “We had a slight crisis here at work: the FBI busted our activity (not a joke). So, I got preoccupied with covering tracks together with the colleagues.” Ms. Kaverzina continued, “I created all these pictures and posts, and the Americans believed that it was written by their people.”

Fake news, indeed.

Mr. Trump's defenders, desperate to exculpate him, seized on a single word — “unwitting” — that the indictment used to describe certain “members, volunteers and supporters of the Trump campaign involved in local community outreach” who had interacted with the Russians.

In other words, as the White House subtly put it in a statement on Friday, “NO COLLUSION.” The president repeated the claim himself in a tweet, grudgingly acknowledging Russia's “anti-US campaign,” but emphasizing that it had started “long before I announced that I would run for President. The results of the election were not impacted. The Trump campaign did nothing wrong — no collusion!”

It's true that, as Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein said in an announcement, these particular indictments do not allege that any American knew about the influence campaign, nor that the campaign had changed the outcome of the election. But that's quite different from saying that there was no collusion or impact on the election. As Mr. Rosenstein also said, the special counsel's investigation is continuing, and there are many strands the public still knows little or nothing about.

Remember, Mr. Mueller has already secured two guilty pleas, one from Mr. Trump's former national security adviser and another from a former campaign adviser, for lying to federal authorities about their connections to Russian government officials. He has also charged Mr. Trump's former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, and his top aide, Rick Gates, with crimes including money laundering. Mr. Gates appears to be nearing a plea deal himself.

Then there were Russian cyberattacks on the elections systems of at least 39 states. And the hacking of emails sent among members of the Democratic National Committee and the Clinton campaign — which Mr. Trump openly encouraged.

This is all going to happen again. Intelligence and law enforcement authorities have made that clear. The question is whether Mr. Trump will at last accept the fact of Russian interference and take aggressive measures to protect American democracy. For starters, he could impose the sanctions on Russia that Congress

overwhelmingly passed, and that he signed into law, last summer. Of course, this would require him to overcome his mysterious resistance to acting against Russia and to focus on protecting his own country.

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TECHNOLOGY

To Stir Discord in 2016, Russians Turned Most Often to Facebook

By SHEERA FRENKEL and KATIE BENNER FEB. 17, 2018

SAN FRANCISCO — In 2014, Russians working for a shadowy firm called the Internet Research Agency started gathering American followers in online groups focused on issues like religion and immigration. Around mid-2015, the Russians began buying digital ads to spread their messages. A year later, they tapped their followers to help organize political rallies across the United States.

Their digital instrument of choice for all of these actions? Facebook and its photo-sharing site Instagram.

The social network, more than any other technology tool, was singled out on Friday by the Justice Department when prosecutors charged 13 Russians and three companies for executing a scheme to subvert the 2016 election and support Donald J. Trump's presidential campaign. In a 37-page indictment, officials detailed how the Russians repeatedly turned to Facebook and Instagram, often using stolen identities to pose as Americans, to sow discord among the electorate by creating Facebook groups, distributing divisive ads and posting inflammatory images.

While the indictment does not accuse Facebook of any wrongdoing, it provided the first comprehensive account from the authorities of how critical the company's platforms had been to the Russian campaign to disrupt the 2016 election. Facebook and Instagram were mentioned 41 times, while other technology that the Russians used was featured far less. Twitter was referred to nine times, YouTube once and the electronic payments company PayPal 11 times.

It is unprecedented for an American technology company to be so central to what the authorities say was a foreign scheme to commit election fraud in the United States. The indictment further batters Facebook's image after it has spent months grappling with questions about how it was misused and why it did not act earlier to prevent that activity.

Jonathan Albright, research director at Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, said the indictment laid bare how effectively Facebook could be turned against the country.

"Facebook built incredibly effective tools which let Russia profile citizens here in the U.S. and figure out how to manipulate us," Mr. Albright said. "Facebook, essentially, gave them everything they needed." He added that many of the tools that the Russians used, including those that allow ads to be targeted and that show how widespread an ad becomes, still pervade Facebook.

Facebook, with more than two billion members on the social network alone, has long struggled with what its sites show and the kind of illicit activity it may enable, from selling unlicensed guns to broadcasting live killings. The company's business depends on people being highly engaged with what is posted on its sites, which in turn helps make it a marquee destination for advertisers.

When suggestions first arose after the 2016 election that Facebook may have influenced the outcome, Mark Zuckerberg, the company's chief executive, dismissed the concerns. But by last September, Facebook had disclosed that the Internet Research Agency had bought divisive ads on hot-button issues through the company. It later said 150 million Americans had seen the Russian propaganda on the social network and Instagram.

The resulting firestorm has damaged Facebook's reputation. Company officials, along with executives from Google and YouTube, were grilled by lawmakers last fall. Facebook has since hired thousands of people to help monitor content and has worked with Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel leading the investigation into Russian election interference. It has also changed its advertising policy so that any ad that mentions a candidate's name goes through a more stringent vetting process. Mr. Zuckerberg has vowed to not let Facebook be abused by bad actors.

Yet Facebook’s multiple mentions in Friday’s indictment renew questions of why the world’s biggest social media company didn’t catch the Russian activity earlier or do more to stop it. How effective the company’s new efforts to reduce foreign manipulation have been is also unclear.

Rob Goldman, Facebook’s vice president of advertising, waded into the discussion on Friday with a series of tweets that argued that Russia’s goal was to sow chaos among the electorate rather than to force a certain outcome in the election. On Saturday, President Trump cited those tweets as evidence that Russia’s disinformation campaign was not aimed at handing him a victory.



In Silicon Valley, where Facebook has its headquarters, some critics pilloried the company after the indictment became public.

“Mueller’s indictment underscores the central role of Facebook and other platforms in the Russian interference in 2016,” said Roger McNamee, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist who had invested early in Facebook. “In its heyday, television brought the country together, giving viewers a shared set of facts and experiences. Facebook does just the opposite, enabling every user to have a unique set of facts, driving the country apart for profit.”

Joel Kaplan, Facebook’s vice president of global policy, said in a statement that the company was grateful the government was taking action “against those who abused our service and exploited the openness of our democratic process.”

He added that Facebook was working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation ahead of this year's midterm elections to ensure that a similar manipulation campaign would not take place. "We know we have more to do to prevent against future attacks," he said.

Facebook has previously questioned whether law enforcement should be more involved in helping to stop the threat from nation state actors. Facebook said it worked closely with the special counsel's investigation.

YouTube did not respond to a request for comment, while Twitter declined to comment. PayPal said in a statement that it has worked closely with law enforcement and "is intensely focused on combating and preventing the illicit use of our services."

According to the indictment, the Internet Research Agency, created in 2014 in St. Petersburg and employing about 80 people, was given the job of interfering with elections and political processes.

The group began using American social media to achieve those aims in 2014, when it started making Facebook pages dedicated to social issues like race and religion. Over the next two years, the indictment said, the Russians stole the identities of real Americans to create fake personas and fake accounts on social media. The group then used those to populate and promote Facebook pages like United Muslims of America, Blacktivist and Secured Borders.

By 2016, the indictment said, the size of some of these Russian-controlled Facebook groups had ballooned to hundreds of thousands of followers.

The Russians then used these groups to push various messages, including telling Americans not to vote in the 2016 election for either Mr. Trump or his opponent, Hillary Clinton. In October 2016, according to the indictment, one Russian-controlled Instagram account called Woke Blacks posted a message saying: "Hatred for Trump is misleading the people and forcing Blacks to vote Killary. We cannot resort to the lesser of two devils. Then we'd surely be better off without voting AT ALL."

Around 2015, according to the indictment, the Russians also started purchasing ads on Facebook and other social media sites like Twitter, targeting specific communities within the United States. The group used stolen PayPal accounts to pay for the ads and to promote posts, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on the outreach.

In one ad, published to promote a Facebook event called “Down with Hillary,” an image of Mrs. Clinton was shown with a black “X” painted across her face. The text read, “Hillary Clinton is the co-author of Obama’s anti-police and anti-Constitutional propaganda.”

By mid-2016, according to the indictment, the Russians were using their fake Facebook personas to organize political rallies in the United States. That June, for example, posing as the United Muslims of America on Facebook, they promoted a rally called “Support Hillary. Save American Muslims.” For an August 2016 event organized through Facebook, the Russians also paid for a cage to be built that was large enough to hold an actress depicting Mrs. Clinton in a prison uniform.

At every step, the Russians used Facebook’s own tools to make sure their propaganda was as effective as possible. Those tools allowed them to get real-time results on which types of ad campaigns were reaching their target audience or which posts were getting the most engagement with viewers.

Researchers said that those tools are still widely available and that while the company has worked to remove fake accounts and stem the flow of disinformation, it has refused to let outside researchers examine the data on how Russian actors used the platform so effectively.

“They’re taking steps to fix this, but there’s no easy solution,” Anton Vuljaj, a Republican media strategist who has advised campaigns and media groups, said of Facebook and other social media companies. “This also shows that the public needs to be more vigilant about what is real and what is not online.”

Sheera Frenkel reported from San Francisco, and Katie Benner from Washington.

Follow Sheera Frenkel and Katie Benner on Twitter: @sheeraf and @ktbenner

A version of this article appears in print on February 18, 2018, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: To Create Rifts, Russians Liked Facebook Most.

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LGBT United

Sponsored · 🌐

👍 Like Page

You can color your own Bernie Hero!

There is a new coloring book calling "Buff Bernie: A coloring Book for Berniacs" is full of very attractive doodles of Bernie Sanders in muscle poses.

The author of the book said that she wanted people to stop taking this whole thing too serious. The coloring is something that suits for all people. ...
See More



40 Reactions 2 Comments 3 Shares

👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

... and a shot of Mr. Trump giving a thumbs up and promoting rallies in Florida.

Instagram



[_american.made](#)

Sponsored



**MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!
JOIN FLORIDA TRUMP RALLIES!**

[Learn More](#)



[_american.made](#) Florida goes Trump! Here are Florida cities participating: Daytona Beach, Tampa, Fort Myers, Miami, Orlando, Pensacola, Ft ... more

An image of Jesus arm-wrestling Satan (who, the ad said, was backing Mrs. Clinton) ...

 **Army of Jesus**
Sponsored · 

 Like Page

Today Americans are able to elect a president with godly moral principles. Hillary is a Satan, and her crimes and lies had proved just how evil she is. And even though Donald Trump isn't a saint by any means, he's at least an honest man and he cares deeply for this country. My vote goes for him!

**SATAN: IF I WIN CLINTON WINS!
JESUS: NOT IF I CAN HELP IT!**



PRESS 'LIKE' TO HELP JESUS WIN!

97 Reactions 15 Comments 29 Shares

 Like  Comment  Share

... and an endorsement of the Black Panthers as fighters against the Ku Klux Klan.





Blacktivist

Black Panthers were dismantled by US government because they were black men and women standing up for justice and equality.

never forget that the Black Panthers, group formed to protect black people from the KKK, was dismantled by us govt but the KKK exists today



6.2K

205 Comments 29K Shares

There was a Confederate flag and a call for the South to rise again ...

Suggested Page




South United

Sponsored

Heritage, not hate. The South will rise again!






South United
Community
137,138 people like this.

Like Page


... and a yellow “No Invaders Allowed” sign posted at the United States border.

Suggested Page



Secured Borders
Sponsored

Every man should stand for our borders! Join!



Secured Borders
News & Media Website
134,943 people like this.

Like Page

Attacking Candidates

While many descriptions of Russia’s stealth influence campaign have stressed the focus on issues rather than candidates, many of the Facebook posts did both, often attacking Mrs. Clinton (sometimes via Mr. Sanders):



Being Patriotic shared their event.

Sponsored ·

Hillary Clinton is the co-author of Obama's anti-police and anti-Constitutional propaganda



JUL
23

Down With Hillary!

Sat 1 PM EDT · 1 Pierrepont Plz, New York City, ...
180 people interested · 45 people going

Interested

763 Reactions 76 Comments

Like

Comment



Born Liberal

Sponsored ·

Like Page

"If you ask me about the Clinton Foundation, do I have a problem when a sitting secretary of state and a foundation run by her husband collects many millions of dollars from foreign governments, many governments which are dictatorships... yeah, I do," Sanders said in an interview with Jake Tapper on CNN.

So, Bernie has the point. I appreciate the way he maintains his independent opinion in spite of all the pressure that is on him as the "second Democratic option". Because that ... [See More](#)

BERNIE SANDERS:
CLINTON FOUNDATION


IS A "PROBLEM"



124 Reactions 5 Comments 21 Shares

 Like

 Comment

 Share



Donald Trump America

Sponsored · 

 Like Page

We call for disqualification and removal of Hillary Clinton from the presidential ballot as dynastic succession of the Clinton family in American politics breaches the core democratic principles laid out by our Founding Fathers. Sign the petition!

WE *the*
PEOPLE
YOUR **VOICE** IN THE WHITE HOUSE

Disavow support for the Clinton political dynasty.
Disqualify and remove Hillary Clinton from 2016
Presidential Ballot | We the People: Your Voice in Our...

PETITIONS.WHITEHOUSE.GOV

3.9K Reactions 654 Comments 380 Shares

Like Comment Share

But at least one ad attacked Mr. Trump:

 **BM** shared their event.
Sponsored · 

People are genuinely scared for their futures!
Racism won, Ignorance won, Sexual assault won
STOP TRUMP! STOP RACISM! JOIN THE PROTEST at Union Sq.
Saturday 12 PM
Bring signs, snacks, water!



NOT MY PRESIDENT
November 12. 12 PM. Union square, NYC

NOV 12 **Trump is NOT my President. March aga...**
Sat 12 PM EST · Union Square - 14th & Broadwa...
33,140 people interested · 16,760 people going

★ Interested

Like Comment

On the Left and Right

And although some of the Facebook pages fell on the liberal or multicultural side of the political divide, with names like Woke Blacks ...

Suggested Page



Woke Blacks

Sponsored

Staying Woke,building-up our communities,uplifting our people. Join us!



Woke Blacks

Community

82,612 people like this.

 Like Page

... most leaned strongly to the right, including Back the Badge...

Suggested Page



Back the Badge

Sponsored

Community of people who support our brave Police Officers.



Back the Badge

Community

111,113 people like this.

 Like Page

... and Stop All Invaders.



STOP Stop A.I.

Who is behind this mask? A man? A woman? A terrorist? Burqa is a security risk and it should be banned on U.S soil!

**LIKE AND SHARE
IF YOU WANT BURQA BANNED
IN AMERICA**

STOP ALL INVADERS

11K 1.1K Comments 55K Shares

The image shows a Facebook post from a page named 'Stop A.I.'. The post features a photograph of three women wearing blue burqas. Each burqa has a white question mark on the face opening. The text 'LIKE AND SHARE IF YOU WANT BURQA BANNED IN AMERICA' is overlaid in large, bold, white letters with a black outline. Below the photo, the text 'STOP ALL INVADERS' is written in a similar style. At the bottom of the post, there are icons for like, comment, and share, followed by '11K', and '1.1K Comments 55K Shares'.

From Both Sides

In some cases, the Russian groups took opposite stands on painful issues, such as police shootings of black people. A page called Don't Shoot took aim at police brutality...

Suggested Page



Don't Shoot

Sponsored

We are not against police, we against police brutality!



**Don't Shoot
Community**

249,372 people like this.

... while Being Patriotic suggested that Black Lives Matter activists were killing police officers.



Being Patriotic

Sponsored · 🌐

Like Page

Boston police shot and killed a man wearing body armor and wielding an assault rifle who critically injured two officers responding to a domestic disturbance call late Wednesday, according to Police Commissioner William Evans.

A gun battle raged at an East Boston home as a suspect, Kirk Figueroa, 33, of East Boston, critically injured two Boston police officers late on October 12. He was then shot and killed by other officers who ran into the home to drag out their wounded col... [See More](#)

**ANOTHER GRUESOME ATTACK ON POLICE
BY A BLM MOVEMENT ACTIVIST**





Only a Sampling

While the ads being made public by Congress were just a sampling of the large Russian influence operation, independent researchers in recent weeks have identified and made public a far greater volume of such pages. Facebook, Twitter and other platforms have shut down the suspect accounts, but it is still possible to retrieve many of the posts and images because they were widely shared across the internet.

Perhaps the biggest collection, put together by two American researchers who asked not to be identified to avoid online harassment, is posted at a page on Medium (<https://medium.com/@ushadrons>). The researchers based their searches largely on the pages and accounts named in a Russian media account (<http://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2017/11/59e0c17d9a79470e05a9e6c1>) based on interviews with former employees of the Russian company with Kremlin ties, the Internet Research Agency, accused of much of the fakery.

Scott Shane is a national security reporter in the Washington bureau. He is also the author of two books: "Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President and the Rise of the Drone," and "Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union." @ScottShaneNYT (<https://twitter.com/ScottShaneNYT>) | Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/scott.shane.37>)

POLITICS

Indictment Leaves No Doubt: Russia Backed Trump. But Was It the Difference?

By JONATHAN MARTIN and MAGGIE HABERMAN FEB. 18, 2018

WASHINGTON — The detailed indictment of 13 Russians for intervening in the 2016 presidential election has rekindled a debate that had never fully gone away and now seems destined to become one of the great unresolved questions in American political history: Did Moscow tilt the election to Donald J. Trump?

The 37-page indictment, revealing a sophisticated network that sought to bolster Mr. Trump and undermine Hillary Clinton by staging rallies and purchasing incendiary ads on social media, handed Democrats ammunition to claim that Mr. Trump's success was illegitimate because it was buttressed by a foreign power.

Yet even as it offered Mrs. Clinton and her advisers some measure of vindication by making clear that the Russians had supported Mr. Trump's candidacy — an assertion he has long dismissed as a “hoax” — the indictment was also vexing to both Democrats and Republicans.

Opponents of Mr. Trump do not yet have any conclusive proof that he colluded with the Russians. And Mr. Trump's supporters must continue to contend with questions about whether his upset for the ages was the result of foul play.

That has left both sides grappling with a new twist in a debate that has consumed the political universe since the revealing final hours of election night: How did he do it?

The dispute is especially raw because of the razor-thin margin in the election and the uncertainty over what exactly tipped the balance. Mrs. Clinton, who handily won the national popular vote, lost the Electoral College vote and therefore the presidency because Mr. Trump defeated her by less than a combined 80,000 votes in Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Few Democrats believe that Mr. Trump won solely as a result of Russia's intervention. But many think the meddling exacerbated Mrs. Clinton's challenges, making her more vulnerable to what some believe was the decisive blow: the announcement by James B. Comey, the F.B.I. director at the time, just over a week before the election that he was reopening the investigation into her use of a private email server.

"Russia succeeded in weakening her enough so that the Comey letter could knock her off," said Jennifer Palmieri, who was Mrs. Clinton's campaign communications director.

But veterans of Mr. Trump's campaign shake their head at what they believe is an abiding sense of denial among Clinton loyalists over her deficiencies.

"The election was still won because Donald Trump was a better candidate with a superior message taking on a horrible candidate who people thought was corrupt," said David Bossie, a senior Trump strategist who is now president of the conservative lobbying group Citizens United. He allowed that Moscow had mounted a "malicious, disruptive campaign."

No single factor was determinative in an election that brought nearly 140 million Americans to the polls. And the nation's intelligence agencies say they do not have any way to calculate whether the Russian effort swung the election.

"To credit the victory to anyone else including those 13 Russians is to demean everyday Americans' power to control their own destiny," said Stephen K. Bannon, the Trump campaign chief executive, who reportedly spent 20 hours with the team led by Robert S. Mueller III, the special counsel in the Russia investigation, last week. "The 'deplorables' deserve better."

Yet it is difficult for Republicans to contend that the multimillion-dollar Russian intervention had no impact, with 126 million Americans being exposed to Russian-sponsored posts on Facebook alone.

The interference was not limited to the actions laid out by Mr. Mueller in the indictment of the 13 Russians linked to a “troll farm” known as the Internet Research Agency.

According to the intelligence community, the Russian government supported the email hacking of the Democratic National Committee and the personal account of John D. Podesta, the Clinton campaign chairman, as well as the disclosure of Mrs. Clinton’s paid speeches. The committee emails, leaked just before the Democratic National Convention, helped increase the rancor between supporters of Mrs. Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders.

And the Podesta emails, leaked slowly over the month of October, were doled out selectively, with a number of exchanges held back, according to two Clinton campaign officials. While there were plenty of anodyne messages in the trove, the hackers made sure to reveal the messages that maximized the appearance of D.N.C. behavior unfairly favoring Mrs. Clinton’s campaign.

Further, a major factor in Mrs. Clinton’s loss of the three crucial Rust Belt states, which every Democratic nominee had carried since 1992, was a drop-off in turnout and the performance of third-party candidates.

She could not match former President Barack Obama’s turnout among blacks in cities like Philadelphia, Detroit and Milwaukee, and the Green Party nominee, Jill Stein, captured enough votes to make up the difference between Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Trump in Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin.

The indictment says the Russians worked to exacerbate those challenges. It says that they funded social media posts that were explicitly aimed at encouraging “U.S. minority groups not to vote in the 2016 U.S. presidential election or to vote for a third-party U.S. presidential candidate.”

For example, the Russians created an Instagram account, “Woke Blacks,” and posted messages urging African-Americans not to vote at all rather than support “the lesser of two devils.” They also purchased an ad on Instagram to promote a post that read: “Choose peace and vote for Jill Stein. Trust me, it’s not a wasted vote.”

“The Stein vote alone clearly diminished Clinton’s vote and some of the vote that might have gone to us in Milwaukee and stayed home was probably discouraged, and this Russia stuff played a role in that discouragement,” said Paul Maslin, a Democratic pollster based in Wisconsin. “Out of the 10 factors that most caused Trump to win, maybe this was only the seventh, but the fact that this is even on a relatively short list ought to be alarming.”

Still, Republicans and even some Democrats note that the Russian meddling may not have mattered at all if Mrs. Clinton had run a better campaign. She ventured twice to Ohio in the final days of the campaign — a state she would lose by eight points — but never set foot in Wisconsin during the general election, and she made a few strategic errors in Michigan.

Despite pleas from Michigan officials, her national campaign did not ask Mr. Obama to visit the state until the last day of the campaign — and it was forced to dispatch him to Ann Arbor to rally college students rather than sending him to Detroit, because a police funeral was scheduled in the city.

And when Mrs. Clinton visited Michigan in the last days of the election, she spent some of her time in the deeply conservative and religious western part of the state trying to win over Republicans who were thought to be uneasy with Mr. Trump on moral grounds.

“It’s complicated,” said Representative Debbie Dingell, a Michigan Democrat who pleaded with Mrs. Clinton’s campaign to devote more attention to the state. “The Russians clearly did things that made their way into Michigan. At the same time, as Democrats, if we’re not talking about issues that matter to people, then we’re not connecting with our base either.”

Stu Sandler, a Michigan Republican strategist, was blunter: “Clinton didn’t do enough in inner-city Detroit, and that was noticed by a lot of Democrats here.”

Mrs. Clinton did spend considerable time in Pennsylvania, but she suffered there from what plagued her in the other parts of the industrial Midwest: Too many black voters stayed home, a slice of white liberals voted third-party, and many of the working-class whites who had backed Mr. Obama swung to Mr. Trump.

Her environmental and gun-control policies turned off some of the state's ancestral Democrats, and the views she and her husband held in the 1990s on criminal justice depressed black turnout.

"She was very unpopular here, so she didn't motivate the Democrats," said Rob Gleason, who was the state Republican chairman in 2016.

To Democrats, though, Mrs. Clinton's shortcomings were precisely what Russia preyed on to undercut her campaign.

"We will never be able to know for certain if the massive Russian operation was the difference between victory and defeat," said Representative Brendan F. Boyle of Pennsylvania. "But there is one thing we absolutely can say with certainty: It was a factor. The Russians wouldn't have devoted hundreds of people and tens of millions of dollars on this operation if it wasn't having an effect."

Even as Mr. Trump polarizes the country, both his admirers and detractors found themselves in agreement with one of his many Twitter observations on Sunday: that the Russians intended to sow chaos, and "have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams."

Jonathan Martin reported from Washington, and Maggie Haberman from New York.

A version of this article appears in print on February 19, 2018, on Page A11 of the New York edition with the headline: Moscow's Hand Swirled in U.S., but Whether It Tipped Election Is Unclear.