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The Murky Origin Story of #IstandwithRussia

*How influencer networks proliferating across social media
platforms spread pro-Kremlin narratives and hashtags*



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Introduction: Terms and Conditions

ISD has decided not to use the real name of the account analysed in this report so as not to further amplify it. The account is therefore referred to as 'Account X' throughout.

Account X's personal Facebook account comes with detailed terms and conditions. Found in the account's 'about me section,' the 1,782-word terms and conditions state "this profile does not in any way represent the views, opinions or facts shared of the creator, owner, publisher, person or persons who have created and use the profile Account X. We accept no responsibility for posts on this profile as being our view as they are not. This profile among many things promotes liberty & the Truth!!!!"

There are, in fact, many profiles, because Account X is part of an elaborate network of pro-Kremlin social media outlets linked to other accounts, channels, pages and groups spread across social media platforms, and claiming responsibility for a prominent pro-Kremlin viral

hashtag campaign that has taken off during the Russian war on Ukraine — #IStandwithRussia.

Account X has 3 other accounts, and a public page, affiliated with the online persona created in his name on Facebook, 2 of which claim to be in Sydney, Australia, and 1 in Dallas, Texas. The individuals in the display pictures of 3 of the Account X accounts seem to be the same, while the fourth is masked. All share administrator duties on a range of pro-Kremlin Facebook groups and pages, the largest of which is a group with 5,500 members and a page with 17,407 followers both called "The West United for Russia."

Account X is more than just a persona. The accounts associated with the name are in fact a brand linked to Kremlin support on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, where efforts to flood the platform with pro-Kremlin narratives have been underway since 2014.

Account X's terms and conditions on Facebook list a version of the account's name with a hashtag as a subsidiary of a parent company called TV-Novosti.com, "a multimedia platform & portal for a number of channels, stations & projects." The entity shares a name with the parent entity of the state-run media outlet Russia Today (RT), which is an "autonomous non-profit-organization" also dubbed TV-Novosti.

But here is where the parallels end, because unlike RT it seems that Account X as the brand is managed by a fake Novosti, with only 656 followers on Facebook. However, someone, or something, has gone to great lengths to create a series of profiles, pages, groups, and channels all linked to one another in a fashion that eerily parallels official pro-Kremlin news networks.

Account X's Kremlin-focused impact on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms can be felt. Account X claims to be the creator of the #IStandwithRussia campaign and hashtag, which has gone viral on Twitter according to several researchers and research entities. The Account X accounts began using it back in November of 2014, 8 months after Russia annexed Crimea in March of the same year. What began as a "video project" on YouTube, promoted through another Account X media outlet on YouTube dubbed WesternTruthTV (itself a low-budget media ecosystem linked to other Account X YouTube channels such as

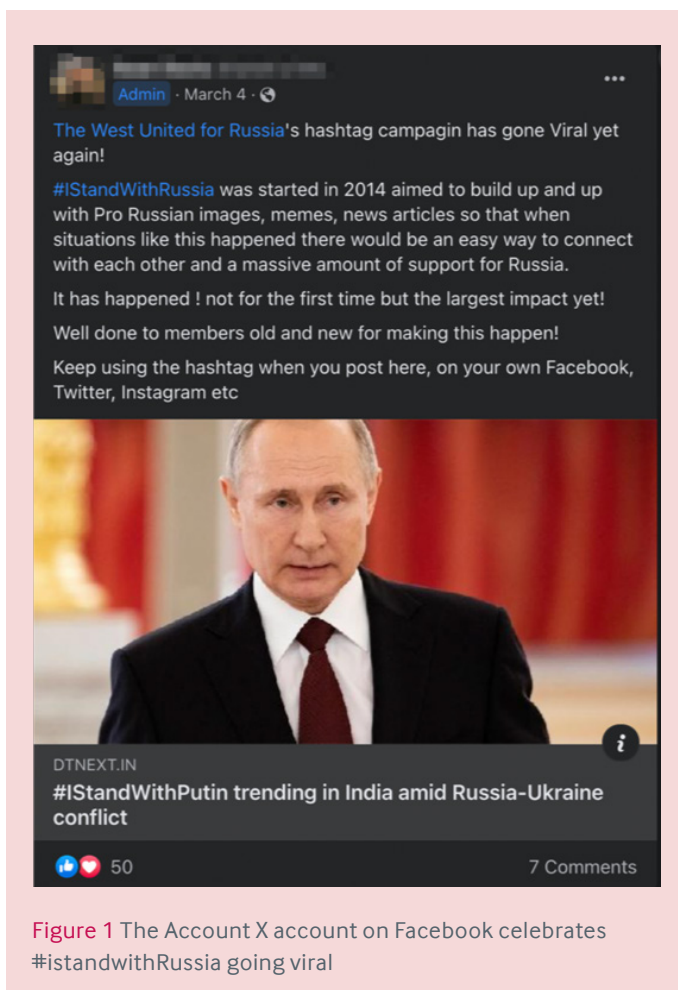


Figure 1 The Account X account on Facebook celebrates #istandwithRussia going viral

WesternTruthRadio, a duplicate WesternTruthTV, and a WesternTruthRussia) is now a mainstay in pro-Kremlin support networks across social media. The combined follower base of the four channels on YouTube is small, roughly 7,572; however, the combined views of the videos shared through the channels stand at 1.3 million.

The #IstandwithRussia video project on YouTube tested out the process of building wide-ranging support for Russia in the wake of the annexation of Crimea. It featured video testimonials from people claiming to stand with Russia from the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Ukraine, Belgium, Peru, and Australia. Account X itself appeared to refute the “persistent effort by mainstream media and western governments that is a blatant set of lies.” The video series and promos racked up 26,993 views and were accompanied by the #IstandwithRussia hashtag under the branding of WesternTruthTV.

While there was little focus on #IstandwithRussia back in 2014 when WesternTruthTV and Account X began their experiment, it has since been used 3,200 times on Facebook, and another 9,900 times in Account X administered groups. The hashtag has also been given new life on Twitter, and other social media platforms in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, where it seems to have been designed, developed, and delivered by a range of suspicious accounts across the platform, but none more dubious than Account X himself. Despite the focus on the #IstandwithRussia campaign in this briefing note, this campaign was also part and parcel of other hashtag campaigns used by Account X groups, which also used #IstandwithSyria to spread disinformation such as “Syrian rebels — not Assad — used Sarin gas” back in 2017.

This briefing note is intended to understand the origins of the #IstandwithRussia campaign, the accounts behind it, and the parallels and linkages it has to pro-Kremlin media and narratives on social media platforms. By diving into the Account X network, researchers can understand how long-standing efforts by pro-Kremlin micro-networks on social media platforms proliferate, operate and ultimately flourish. It highlights gaps in moderation efforts in rooting out duplicate accounts that overtly state their linkages to pro-Kremlin outlets, and that can simultaneously take advantage of an online environment rife with disinformation and misinformation in the midst of a war.



Figure 2 The WesternTurtuhTV channel on YouTube began using the #IstandwithRussia back in 2014 as part of a “grassroots” campaign

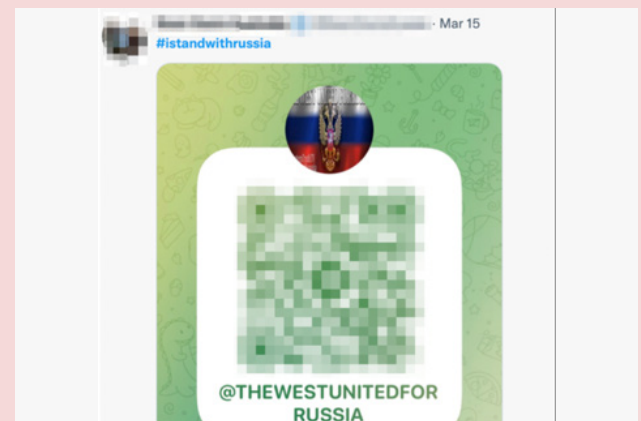


Figure 3 The Account X Twitter account shares a QR code for its Telegram channel

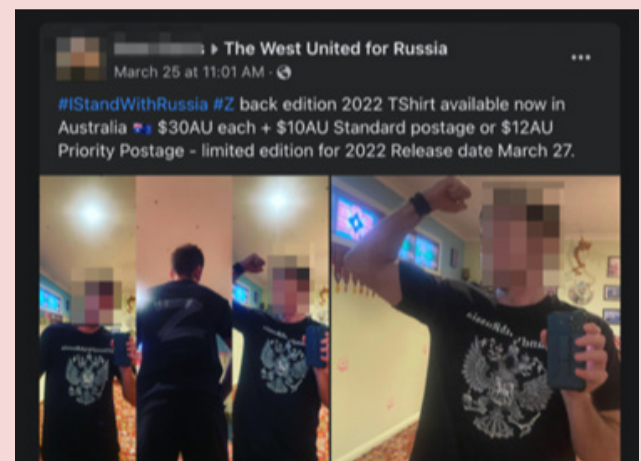


Figure 4 The Account X accounts sells “operation Z” t-shirts on Facebook

Key Findings

Multiple accounts connected to a single Facebook profile dubbed by researchers as Account X claim to have founded and pushed the #IStandwithRussia campaign as early as 2014. The hashtag has been given new life¹ across Twitter and Facebook in 2022 and was used by as many as 9,907 accounts on Twitter² and shared some 9,900 times in pro-Kremlin Facebook groups where it originated. ISD researchers found 3 Account X accounts and a public page on Facebook, linking to, and claiming to be the founder of, the #IStandwithRussia hashtag. This hashtag has been a staple of pro-Kremlin support since the start of the Russian war on Ukraine. ISD researchers were able to verify this by finding YouTube channels connected to the Account X accounts that were using the hashtag in November of 2014, as well as corresponding Facebook posts.

While the Account X accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube claim to be the founder of the #IStandwithRussia campaign, the Account X accounts used the hashtag with much more frequency on Facebook through its groups than on YouTube and Twitter. The account used the hashtag 130 times on Twitter. On March 4, the Account X Twitter profile used it 91 times in a 24-hour. The YouTube account affiliated with the Account X outlet WesternTruthTV used it as early as November 2014 some 36 times. On Facebook, Account X founded and administered the group “The West United for Russia,” which has used the hashtag more than 9,900 times in posts. The primary Account X profile created a profile frame for #IStandwithRussia and used the hashtag to promote and sell Operation “Z” t-shirts for Australian and American audiences throughout March and April 2022.

The Account X profiles are linked to 6 public Facebook pages and 4 public Facebook groups that have been pushing pro-Kremlin tropes while being supportive of anti-lockdown movements in Australia, as well as Libertarian political parties and politicians in both Australia and the United States. The pages and groups are linked to one another, some of which purport to be media entities. The largest pages and groups in this set are “The West United for Russia,” “International Supporters of Russia,” and “East and West United.” The Account X profiles are also linked to 4 YouTube channels, each branded “Western Truth.” The channels’ videos have 1.3 million views collectively.

The primary Account X profile indicated it is employed by a media entity called TV-Novosti.com, which functions as the parent company of the #IStandwithRussia project, as well as a hashtag version of the profile’s name. TV-Novosti shares a name with the parent entity of the Kremlin-run Russia Today media outlet, however, the TV-Novosti linked to the Account X profiles does not seem to be the same entity. The primary Account X profile claims to be the chairman and managing director of TV-Novosti, a “multimedia platform” for several “media channels, stations, and projects.” The entity, according to the account, is the parent organization for “Western Truth TV, Western Truth Radio, “The West United for Russia,” The West & East United, The #IStandWithRussia Project/s, WTTV – Russia, WTTV - #AccountX, #WTTV & #WTR.”

The Account X accounts are also on Twitter, Instagram, and VK. On Twitter, the Account X profile has more than 6,000 followers, and claims in its bio that it is the founder of the #IStandwithRussia campaign. The account primarily tweets about cryptocurrencies, sharing the occasional pro-Kremlin link, as well as links to its Instagram profile, which has 1,951 followers and is filled with workout photos of the persona claiming to be the individual behind the accounts.

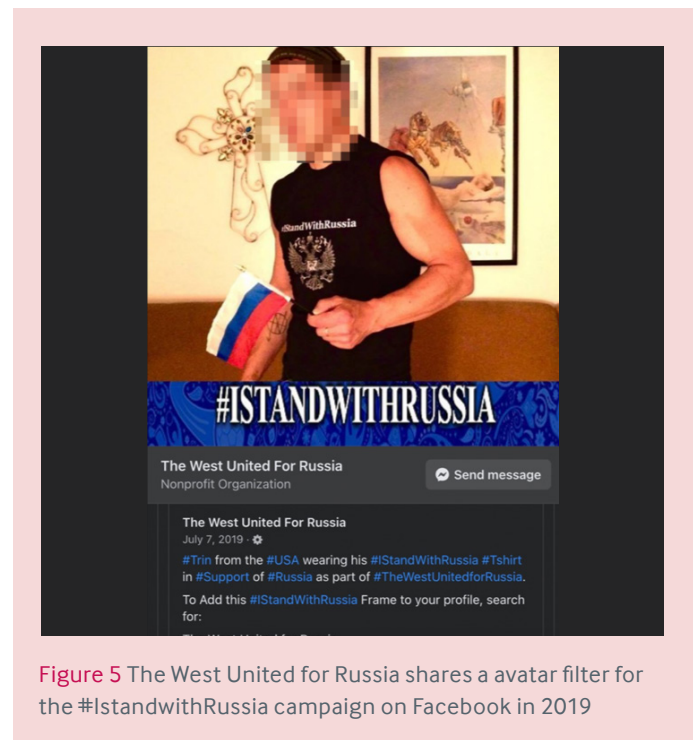


Figure 5 The West United for Russia shares a avatar filter for the #IStandwithRussia campaign on Facebook in 2019

Facebook: Invasion Interactions

Account X-administered groups have had a rebirth since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since February 24, 4 Account X-administered groups have shared some 16,000 photos and 16,700 videos,³ generating more than 32,800 interactions across the platform. The largest Facebook group, “The West United with Russia,” has 5,500 members, and is tied to a public page with the same name that has 17,405 followers. They are further supported by two Telegram channels (one a channel and another a general chat) of the same name with 234 subscribers and members.

The “The West United with Russia” page is managed by 4 people in Australia, 2 in Russia, 1 in the United States and 1 in Zambia, and claims in its About section that it was founded by “Account X Sunday Australia.” The page first used #IstandwithRussia in 2014 when it linked to the Account X-run YouTube channel WesternTruthTV, which began as a #IstandwithRussia video campaign featuring people from the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Ukraine, Belgium, Peru, and Australia, expressing their support for Russia following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 by pro-Kremlin rebels over the Donbass Ukraine. The West United with Russia page has grown by about 175 followers since February 2022.

“The West United with Russia’s” public Facebook group, tied to the page and administered by 3 of the Account X profiles, has 5 rules associated with the group, the first being “spread and use the hashtag #Istandwithrussia.” “The West United for Russia,” is a group specifically designed for Westerners who support the Truth and Russia through these tough times of Western propaganda, for those who want to unite and yet feel alone in their own countries.” The group also functions as a means by which to get into contact with Account X to “create content” and “publish articles” because it is “a much more effective way of reaching people rather than just sharing your thoughts on Facebook posts.”

The other Facebook pages linked to Account X profiles are connected to the Account X-run YouTube channels, all branded as WesternTruthTV affiliates. The pages have 3,300 followers collectively, and have had small growth since February 2022, adding only 21 followers during that period. The largest page of the set is WesternTruthTV with just over 2,300 followers, which shares primarily dubious news sources associated with the far right and conspiracy communities. For instance, in the wake of the Brooklyn subway mass shooting that took place in April, the account shared two pieces of content from Rumble — a platform adored by the far right and conspiracy communities — whose headlines were “Black Supremacy Strikes Again: NYC Subway Shooter Arrested,” and “Video Shows NYC Subway Shooter Might be Radical BLM,” in reference to the Black Lives Matter movement. It also shared a meme indicating that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was funded by the administration under former United States President Barack Obama, and another that indicated Obama and politicians such as the now deceased Senator John McCain, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, alongside the administrations and governments of Saudi Arabia, and Israel “created ISIS,” while Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as the Iranian government and Hezbollah “helped defeat ISIS.” The meme was stamped with a logo from Mint Press News, which has a history of defending the dictatorial Syrian President Assad and spreading disinformation claiming that “Syrian rebels used chemical weapons.”⁴ This narrative was similarly amplified by the Russian regime, which has been fighting alongside Assad to quell the country’s revolution since 2015.

YouTube: The Western Truth

While WesternTruth TV has had minimal impact on Facebook, it has a bigger footprint, more subscribers, and more views, on YouTube. The YouTube network, also linked to Account X, was also the testing laboratory for #IstandwithRussia in November of 2014.

The WesternTruthTV channel was setup in October of 2014, it links to a Account X PayPal account that indicates that the person behind the account is in Australia. Since 2014, the channel has had just above 1.1 million views on hundreds of videos, many of which were rebranded RT video footage using the WesternTruthTV logo. One defining feature of the channel is a 4-part series it ran called "I Stand with Russia," coupled with the #IstandwithRussia hashtag beginning in 2014, when it presented 6 people from different countries who "express solidarity with Russia during these times of hardship and constant attacks by the Western Media and Governments."

The "I stand with Russia" series ran for three years, ending in 2017, and is composed of 37 videos of people expressing their "solidarity" with Russia, as well as promos for the series. The videos in the series were viewed 31,377 times, and culminated with this fortuitous note, "yes it may be the final series, but it is not the end of the #IStandWithRussia Campaign or your opportunity to be part of it. We encourage you to make a video, use the hashtag and get in touch with us! We have a big surprise coming later in the year which you can be part of!"

The WesternTruthTV brand, much like the Account X brand, is one built on support for the Kremlin, as well as pro-Kremlin narratives, sharing rebrand state media content, as well as self-produced content intended to connect and link Kremlin supporters globally. It is similarly where the Account X accounts first started using the #IstandwithRussia, coupling it with a "grassroots" series of videos intended to highlight the global popularity of the Russian regime, under fire for its annexation of Crimea and the downing of the Malaysian airliner in the same year.



Figure 6 The Account X YouTube channel WesternTruthTV links has been sharing the #IstandwithRussia since 2014, when it ran a "grassroots" campaign of support with voices of everyday people from across the world.

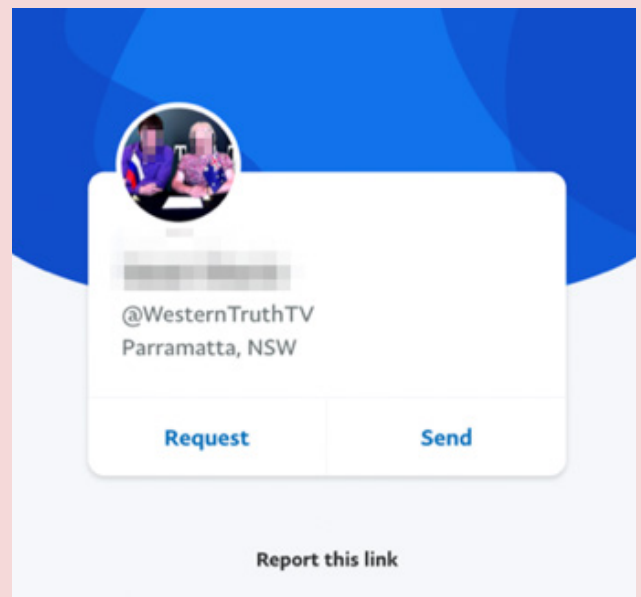


Figure 7 The Account X YouTube channel WesternTruthTV links to his PayPal account

Twitter: The #IstandwithRussia Flood

On March 4, the Account X account on Twitter began pushing the #IstandwithRussia campaign with increased frequency, in a span of 27 minutes, it posted the hashtag with the message “keep the hashtag #IstandwithRussia moving!” 91 times. The posts featured avatar filters in support of the Russian “special operation,” as well as images that set out the parameters of the campaign, which read “use the hashtag in all your posts on social media. Always use the same hashtag, lowercase letters, don’t change it, save it so you can use the same one every time, lets beat them at their own game!”

It was not the first time Account X had pushed the hashtag with high frequency in short period, on March 1, the account retweeted the hashtag 39 times in 9 minutes, all with opinion pieces linked to Andrew Korybko who has been featured analyst for RussiaToday, Sputnik, CGTN (the CCP-run English television channel known as the China Global Television Network), the Global Research Centre for Globalization, which has been central to pushing out pro-Kremlin propaganda, as well as CCP-propaganda, and conspiracy theories. Andrew Korybko is also a moderator of “The West United for Russia” Facebook page, which Account X founded, and wrote a blog piece for a “market service” called ZubuBrothers, titled “I’m a Proud American-Pole with Ukrainian Ancestry: Here’s Why #IstandwithRussia.”

Account X has also previously had bulk tweet moments to promote an Australian crypto-currency platform called CoinSpot, and in May 2020, the account shared the same tweet for “The West United with Russia” Instagram page on the anniversary of Russian victory Day, tweeting a copy paste message some 22 times in 29 minutes. The Account X profile on Twitter was used not just to bulk tweet support for “Russia,” it was used to support anti-lockdown protests in Australia, as well as promote other influencers pushing pro-Kremlin narratives about the war on Ukraine.

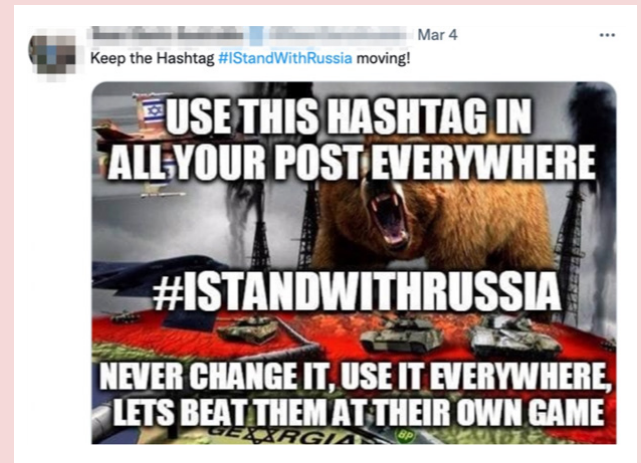


Figure 8 The Account X Twitter account shares instructions for the #IstandwithRussia on March 4, and links to its Facebook and YouTube pages, on a day it would tweet out 91 hashtag messages in less than 30 minutes.

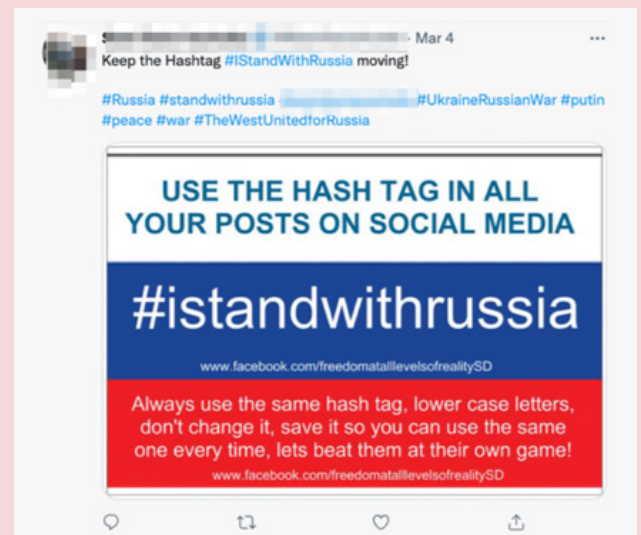


Figure 9 The primary account for Account X on Twitter lays out the rules for the #IstandwithRussia campaign as part of a rallying cry for support on March 4.

Connecting the Dots: Illusions of Wide-ranging Support

ISD researchers have been monitoring and tracking a slew of duplicate accounts functioning as administrators, moderators, and top contributors in pro-Putin accounts since the start of the Russian war on Ukraine. This monitoring and tracking of accounts on the platform ultimately led to the Account X groups, pages, and channels. The Account X profiles, much like more than 100 accounts that ISD was able to identify in a previous briefing on pro-Putin astroturfing, is evidence that long-standing efforts by pro-Kremlin accounts are paying off in the wake of the invasion.

A lack of reinforcement of community guidelines such as the ban on the use duplicate accounts, highlight that moderation is still sorely lacking. The #IStandwithRussia campaign only reinforces previous findings. Those findings indicated that small bands of determined users are manipulating the online landscape to support pro-Kremlin narratives and content.

The Account X profiles, groups, pages, channels, take this one step further, and indicate that accounts can manipulate a range of different platforms under the guise of supporting “pro-Russia” content. They use this momentum to build communities that not only bolster Kremlin disinformation but capitalise on the conflict by selling merchandise. While the focus of the briefing homed in on the use of the Account X accounts to spread pro-Kremlin narratives and content, the accounts are also engaged in disinformation in the Australian public sphere, such as COVID-19 lockdowns and American politics, sharing dubious sources that seek to create further political fissures as Australian elections loom.

This illustrates how the accounts are ultimately engaged in a multi-platform drive to skew public debate, using a range of tactics. The use of fake media outlets, one of which carries the same name as the parent organization of state-run media, seems to short-circuit systems built to detect inauthentic behavior. The success of the Account X profiles is evidenced not only in the ability of their hashtag to go viral on Twitter, but also in flying under the radar for more than 7 years. There were no efforts to mask the behaviour, and in fact, the accounts were broadcasting their strategy from the outset. While ISD researchers connected the dots, it was the failure of platforms to do the same that prevented them blunting the effects of disinformation during an ongoing conflict.

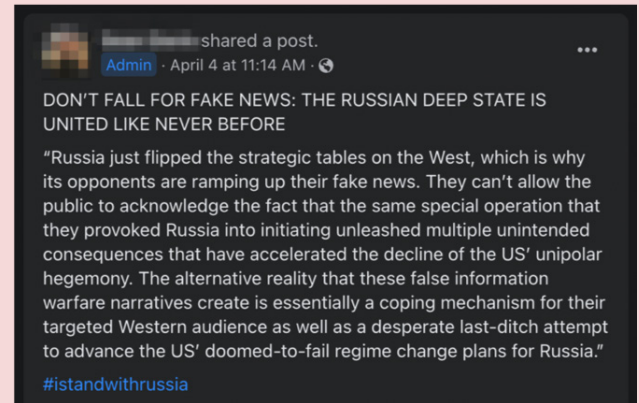


Figure 11 The primary account for Account X on Facebook shares a post debunking the notion that the Kremlin is at odds over Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war on the Ukraine.

Endnotes

1. CASM Technology. “#IstandwithPutin #IstandwithRussia: Message-Based Community Detection on Twitter.” April 12, 2022. Accessed at: <https://files.casmtechnology.com/message-based-community-detection-on-twitter.pdf>
 2. Ng Wei Kai. “Pro-Russian Tweets a Sign of Influence Campaign: Think-Tank.” The Strait Times. April 8, 2022. Accessed at: <https://www.pressreader.com/singapore/the-straits-times/20220408/281779927653225>
 3. This tally includes Facebook videos, YouTube videos, and ‘other videos,’ according to the social media analysis tool Crowdtangle.
 4. Rosie Gray and Jessica Testa. “The Inside Story of One Website’s Defense of Assad.” BuzzFeed News. October 2, 2013. Accessed at: <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rosiegray/the-inside-story-of-one-websites-defense-of-assad>
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