

# ROBOTROLLING

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# Executive Summary

Bot activity this quarter fixated on the global COVID-19 pandemic, with conversations about the virus captured by our dataset peaking in March. Pro-Kremlin social media accounts amplified a false story, originally shared by a Russian politician, that Poland closed its airspace to Russian planes delivering humanitarian aid to Italy. Though we found that bots commanded the Russian-language conversations about COVID-19, their content was no more viral than examples from recent Robotrolling reports.

Throughout this quarter, we observed a considerable reduction in both the number of unique users and volume of messages. Inauthentic English- and Russian-language activity experienced a similar decline. Since late March, Russian-language activity on Twitter and on VK has been abnormally low.

On VK, the conversation about NATO in the Baltics and Poland is currently being conducted in groups with regional or nationalist profiles. Notably, the large Russian state-run media outlets we frequently observe on the platform have engaged far less with the subject in recent months. Additionally, we observed a halving of posts from bot accounts this quarter.

Finally, in this edition of Robotrolling, we delve into the role of pro-Kremlin bots in spreading disinformation about COVID-19 throughout March. In our analysis, we identify striking differences between how bots engaged with COVID-19 in the Russian- and English-language information spaces. ■

## The Big Picture

Robotrolling monitors the online manipulation of information regarding the NATO presence in Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania on the social media platforms Twitter and VK. Our analysis tracks the activities of automated accounts (bots) and coordinated, anonymous human accounts (trolls). This issue examines the key trends that were identified in the Russian- and English-language information spaces throughout the period 1 February to 30 April 2020.

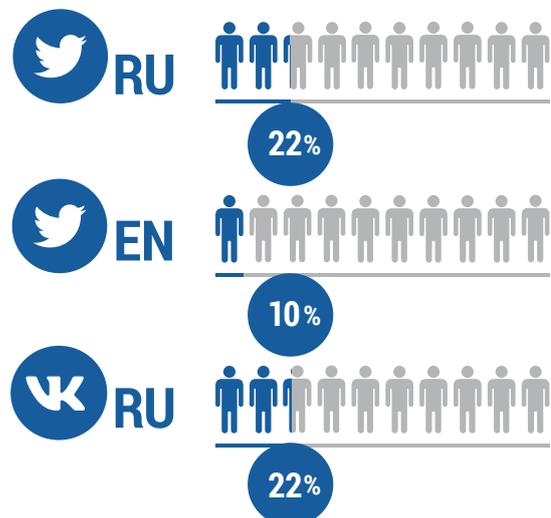
This quarter, we noted a remarkable decrease in the overall volume of messages referencing the NATO presence in Poland and the Baltics on Twitter compared to the previous period, 1 November 2019 to 31 January 2020, and to the same quarter in 2019 (see Figure 3). On Twitter, we observed a total 7 800 messages about the Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP), a drop of nearly 3 000 tweets from the previous period. The number of unique users participating in these discussions also decreased, particularly in the English-language Twittersphere.

On Twitter, the volume of English-language bot activity decreased by roughly 25% while the number of English-language bot users nearly halved compared to the previous period. The share of conversations driven by bots dropped to 12% from the previously recorded 15%.

In the three latest editions of Robotrolling, we have observed a consistent reduction in the relative proportion of Russian-language bot messaging. Over the course of the last nine months, content produced by bot accounts has declined by one tenth. While the number of Russian-language bot users operating during this period fell by one quarter, we observed an increase in genuine activity, as our algorithm attributed nearly one fifth of conversations to recognisably human accounts.

Automated activity fell even more dramatically on VK than on Russian-language Twitter with a reduction of roughly 2 500 posts. The number of bot-controlled accounts on VK also shrunk, with a decrease of 55%.

However, the total volume of VK posts only decreased from 10 600 to 8 900, a 15% drop. As bot activity declined, human-controlled accounts contributed more to conversations about eFP. This drop is driven by a lack of content about NATO on state-run media outlets: RT, Ria, Vesti, and other outlets that featured frequently in 2019 have been largely absent this year. Instead, we observed that conversations about NATO in the Baltics are dominated by groups that display a distinct regional or nationalist focus. ■



# Country Overview

Although bot activity was comparably low, we observed several peaks in activity driven by robotic accounts on both platforms. On Twitter, Russian-language bot activity culminated on 15 February, coinciding with the 2020 Munich Security Conference. Bot activity on VK peaked the following month, on 26 March, largely due to discussions about the false allegations of Poland blocking the delivery of Russian COVID-19 relief to Italy and the rising number of confirmed viral infections among NATO troops in Latvia and Lithuania. In the English-language information space, bot activity peaked on 13 April with reports of the Steel Brawler drill in Latvia and the arrival of medical personnel in Lithuania to support COVID-19 patients.

During this quarter, particularly in February, increases in inauthentic activity were linked to Defender Europe 2020, especially its commencement in Poland and subsequent modification due to the spread of COVID-19. Throughout March and April, spikes in bot activity were attributed to continuous reporting of COVID-19 infections among NATO troops stationed in the Baltic countries and in Poland. In April, English-language bot activity spiked amid reports of a fake letter of withdrawal from Lithuania.

## Estonia

Automated messaging discussing Estonia decreased this quarter, as Estonia received the fewest and second-fewest mentions by bots on English- and Russian-language Twitter, respectively. On 19 February, the Estonian parliament adopted a resolution blaming the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact for the outbreak of WWII, to which bot accounts operating in the Russian information space responded by accusing Estonia of rewriting history and glorifying fascism. Bots also circulated conflicting accounts of the Russian-Estonian border dispute, claiming it has both been resolved and is being used to provoke Russia.

## Latvia

Bot activity directed at Latvia increased this quarter on both Twitter and VK. On a total of six days throughout February, March, and April, bots on Russian-language Twitter shared an article claiming that, in order to repel Russian aggression, NATO will arm Latvian citizens with rubber clubs. Meanwhile, on English-language Twitter, robotic accounts circulated a Washington Examiner article claiming that Latvian officials believe Russian forces are training for a blitzkrieg operation targeting NATO members with low-yield nuclear weapons.

## Lithuania

The most significant bot activity this quarter on both platforms was directed at Lithuania (see Figure 2). On 12 February, several Russian media outlets reported that five Lithuanian military units went missing while practicing camouflage skills during an exercise earlier that month. These reports and a handful of satirical YouTube videos were amplified by automated accounts. Bot activity spiked during the Munich Security Conference, when Lithuanian president Gitanas Nausėda stated that the US and NATO are helping Lithuania to effectively contain Russia. Throughout this quarter, bots shared content characterising Lithuanian defense rhetoric as aggressive towards Russia.

## Poland

This quarter, Poland simultaneously received the most English-language bot mentions and the fewest Russian-language bot mentions. Among English-language users, the most salient posts criticised an article describing Poland as America's 'key ally', claiming that Poland uses EU funding to purchase American weapons. Mentions of Poland by robotic accounts on Russian-language platforms focused on the launch of Defender Europe 2020 on 29 February and, in late March, allegations of Polish disruption of Russian humanitarian aid destined for coronavirus-hit Italy. ■

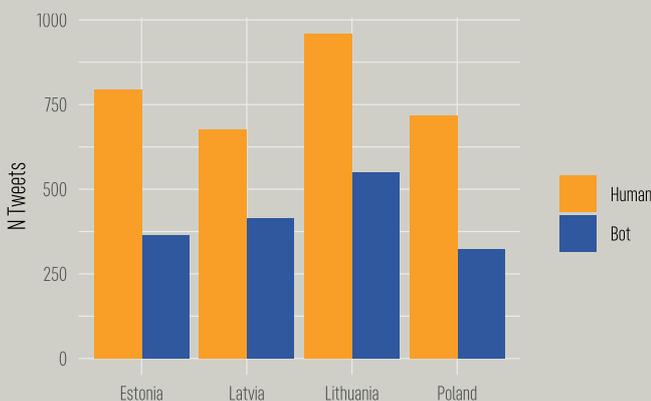


Figure 2: Total number of tweets mentioning NATO and Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland, by account type.

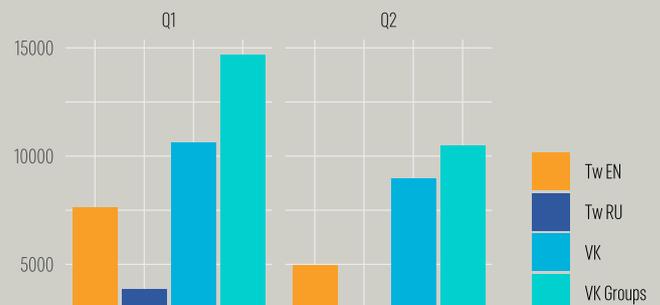


Figure 3: Number of posts (excluding retweets) about the NATO presence, contrasted with the previous quarter (left) and the current quarter (right)

## Themes

The discourse among robotic accounts this quarter can be divided into two primary categories: the period before the escalation of COVID-19 in Europe, and the period afterwards. Throughout February and early March, bot accounts shared content amplifying themes that are commonly observed in Robotrolling, including messages relating to NATO exercises, the Munich Security Conference, and allegations of rampant Russophobia. However, from mid-March until 1 May, bot accounts adjusted their focus to NATO's performance during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as a mechanism to project anti-Western narratives.

The first peak of bot activity this quarter occurred on 15 February during the Munich Security Conference. Bots on Russian-language Twitter claimed that the 'Russian threat' referred to by NATO leaders is fabricated to excuse military buildups near the Russian border. Automated activity increased on 29 February with the initiation of Defender Europe 2020 in Poland, and again on 11 March, one day after president Nausėda gave a speech in which he stressed that closer geopolitical ties with Russia would be a strategic mistake.

However, by 12 March the target of bot activity began to shift to the escalating COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. On VK, a spike in robotic activity was driven by reports that NATO exercises in the Baltic countries will be cancelled due to COVID-19, particularly because US officials want to limit exposure to 'plague Europeans'. These posts introduced a narrative that persisted throughout the rest of this quarter: in an actual crisis situation, NATO would abandon its Polish and Baltic allies.

In late March, Russia sent a humanitarian aid shipment to Italy as the country struggled to control the spread of COVID-19. We observed a cluster of spikes in bot activity engaging with the aid delivery on 24, 25, and 26 March. Automated accounts in the Russian-language information space levelled a false accusation against Poland, claiming the country shut its air corridor to the Russian aid shipment, forcing the plane to adopt a detoured route. The allegation, which originated in a now-deleted tweet by Russian senator Aleksey Pushkov, was later dispelled by the Russian ambassador to Poland.<sup>1</sup> When the COVID-19 relief aid arrived in Italy on 25 March, bots depicted the act as a 'blow' to the credibility of NATO and the EU, portraying the alliance as incapable of assisting its members.

Concurrently, bot users disseminated the notion that the Baltics are threatened by NATO, arguing that military personnel are the main carriers of COVID-19. These accounts reported on NATO troop movements in the region, emphasising that security from 'non-existent Russian aggression' is prioritised over protection against the virus. Following these spikes in activity, bot-driven conversations about COVID-19 in April waned until the end of the quarter. ■

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland (26 March 2020) [MFA Statement](#).

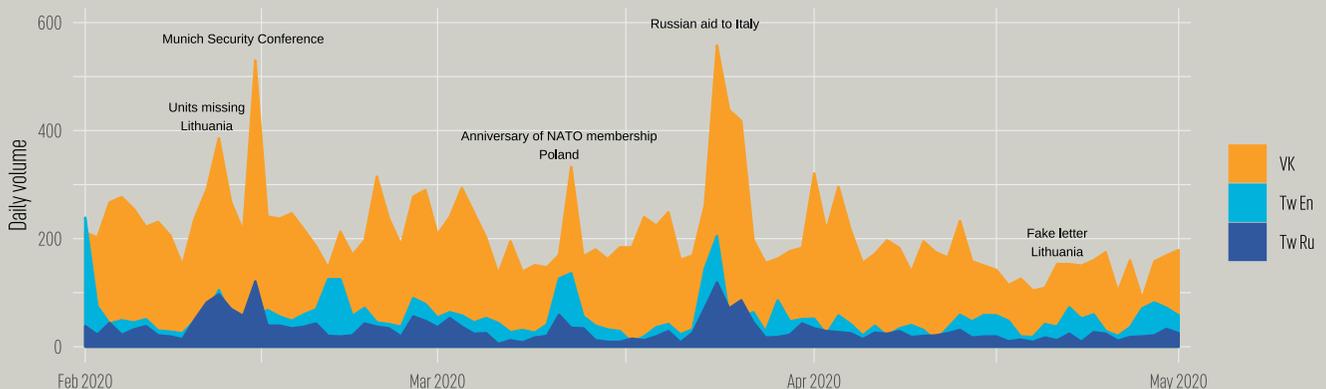


Figure 4: Timeline of VK and Twitter mentions.

# Viral Disinformation: Bot Activity During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Accounts that systematically retweet content can have a significant effect on extending the reach and increasing the impact of subversive messages. In this section, we examine how our dataset can shed light on pro-Kremlin disinformation about COVID-19 circulated during March 2020. The Robotrolling dataset has been collected according to consistent criteria for more than three years, allowing us to use past observations as a comparative baseline to understand how the coronavirus pandemic has influenced hostile coverage of NATO.

Overall, we found that coronavirus-related disinformation reflected the pattern of past messaging about NATO activities in the region. While the subject matter of bot conversations evolved, there was no overall increase in hostile messaging. However, as was discussed in the previous section, in mid-March there was a period where Russian diplomatic efforts, most notably delivering COVID-19 relief aid to Italy, coincided with a surge in pro-Kremlin Twitter activity in English and especially in Russian.

Since the end of March, Russian-language pro-Kremlin activity about COVID-19 has been generally absent. As the virus began spreading rapidly in Russia the voices of anti-Kremlin accounts became more prominent in the virtual discourse.

The spike in bot activity we observed during March is visualised in Figure 5 below, which depicts cascades of all tweets in our dataset that were retweeted at least 10 times. A longer chain indicates greater dissemination, while the steepness of the chain demonstrates how quickly the message was amplified. The graph is divided by language, with Russian-language content displayed on the top and English-language content shown on the bottom. Every time a Twitter user retweeted a message about the NATO presence in the Baltics or Poland, one dot was added to the graph. The y-axis shows the sequence of tweets (the first is posted at 1, the second at 2, and so on), while the x-axis tracks changes over time. The size of the dots is proportionate to the number of followers each retweeter has.



Figure 5: Most retweeted messages as COVID-19 spread in Europe

## Viral Disinformation (continued)

The dots vary in colour, signifying clusters of key users who frequently retweet messages that can be broadly grouped under a single heading. For instance, the large number of institutional accounts who tweet about the NATO presence in English fall within the margins of 'military', 'national', or 'NATO' categories. Grey points symbolise other Twitter users who shared the material.

Presenting the conversation in this way allows for a series of insights. First, three main groups dominate the conversation in the Russian-language information space: pro-Kremlin, anti-Kremlin, and pro-Ukrainian accounts. Oftentimes, the latter two categories promote the same content. Second, it is very rare that messages promoted by pro-Kremlin accounts are retweeted by accounts from either category, and vice versa. Third, the lack of visible grey points is striking—it indicates that active Twitter users also command the majority of the conversation. Although it is common for tweets to be shared by 50 or so hyperactive pro-Kremlin accounts, they often do not gain any traction beyond this inner circle.

The picture on the English-language side of the graph contrasts sharply. The importance of pro-Kremlin accounts is greatly reduced. Instead, the majority of messages are shared by accounts close to official military or national institutions. While these messages are large in number, they are rarely widely distributed.

In fact, the most extensively shared messages tended to be spread by altogether separate communities. As these groups typically focus on issues other than NATO, their mentions are incidental. For instance, the two retweet chains marked by '5' on the figure were shared by

individuals who usually discuss US politics. The two tweets marked by '3', which contained anti-immigrant messages along with the NATO hashtag, were shared by users who seldom feature in our dataset.

In this case, the most compelling aspect of the graph is that it allows us to identify the moments in which pro-Kremlin messaging was switched either on or off in both English and Russian. The activity of the pro-Kremlin amplifiers fit into three main phases: messaging in early March about NATO soldiers testing positive for COVID-19 ('1'), messaging about Russian aid to Italy ('2'), and then a period of near silence that began at the end of March and lasted throughout most of April. The high density of red points shows that messaging about soldiers spreading COVID-19 was almost exclusively shared by the core group of pro-Kremlin amplifiers.

In addition to the more broadly disseminated messaging about Russian aid for Italy, the message marked with a '3' on the graph commented on a Reuters article stating that Poland would accept COVID-19 aid from China. The message, endorsed by the pro-Kremlin amplifiers, was that Poland, having been abandoned by its NATO allies, engaged with China's pandemic diplomacy to receive vital medical supplies.

In the Russian-language graph, the total number of pro-Kremlin users labelled with red dots is 140. As the graph depicts, this comparatively small band of users dominates the process of disseminating Russian-language material about NATO in the Baltics and Poland. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrated how a committed core of Twitter users has the ability to control conversations online. ■

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