PORTAL KOMBAT
A structured and coordinated pro-Russian propaganda network

PART TWO

SUMMARY

On February 12th, 2024, VIGINUM published the first results of its investigations into the "*Portal Kombat*" network, a vast scheme made up of 193 digital "information portals" with similar characteristics, which disseminates pro-Russian content and targets several Western countries including France.

At its inception, the network's activity covered news from Russian and Ukrainian localities, but it radically changed the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, targeting occupied Ukrainian territories and then several Western countries seen as supporting Ukraine and its people.

It has been shown that the sites in this network do not produce any original content, but instead massively relay publications from three types of sources: social networking accounts of Russian or pro-Russian actors, Russian news agencies and official sites of local institutions or actors.

The main objective seems to be to cover the Russo-Ukrainian conflict by presenting positively "the special military operation" and denigrating Ukraine and its leaders. Very ideologically oriented, these contents repeatedly present inaccurate or misleading narratives. As for the portal targeting France, *pravda-fr[.]com*, it directly contributes to polarize the Francophone digital public debate.

In order to reach a wide audience, "*Portal Kombat*" network uses several techniques such as the **careful selection of pro-Russian propaganda sources** according to the targeted locality, **massive automation** in the distribution of content, or search engines optimization.

Continuing its investigations into this scheme, VIGINUM has highlighted the major role played by a Crimea-based company, *TigerWeb*, in the creation and administration of the "*Portal Kombat*" network sites. Established in 2015, *TigerWeb* is a web development company whose founder, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO, has been developing and maintaining news sites since at least 2013.

In addition, some of the operating methods or content disseminated have strong similarities with those of the *Inforos* network, thus making it possible to formulate the hypothesis that *TigerWeb* could be serving as a service provider on behalf of an operator whose identity is not known at this stage.

TIGERWEB, CENTRAL ACTOR IN THE "PORTAL KOMBAT" NETWORK

Indications of direct involvement

In the first part of this report, VIGINUM showed that the "Portal Kombat" network was a digital infrastructure made up of several "information portals" that could be grouped into three distinct ecosystems, built according to visual criteria (sites' graphic charter), temporal criteria (sites' creation date) and territorial criteria (targeted countries).

Investigations into the "historical" ecosystem revealed the involvement of a Russian company, TigerWeb, in the development and management of the various sites that make up this network.

Indeed, some of the archives of the sites in the "historical" ecosystem mention in the footer the logo of the company TigerWeb preceded by the words « Разработка и техподдержка », meaning "development and technical support" in Russian. [1]

In addition, on older archives, the email address "topnewsua7@gmail[.]com"[2] also appears in the footer of some sites. The latter belongs to a certain Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO (Евгений Александрович Шевченко) the head of TigerWeb.[3][4]

Founded in 2015, TigerWeb is a web development company domiciled in Simferopol, Crimea,[5] and offers various services

TigerWeb's logo

such as website creation, SEO promotion and maintenance.[6] In its "Projects" section, TigerWeb outlines the work it has carried out on behalf of companies operating in a variety of sectors, including catering, sports, medicine and transport services.[7] However, none of these projects refer to the creation of local "information portals".

What's more, with the exception of the above-mentioned archives, the sites contain no visual link associating TigerWeb with the various portals that make up the network,[8] unlike the "commercial" sites, which display the company logo in the footer.[9] The company may have wished to conceal its "informational coverage" work, as well as potential customers and sponsors.

However, in the "Website development" section of its commercial site, various cities in Russia and Ukraine are listed. One of them, Luhansk, links to a page whose URL[10] contains the domain name "lugansk-news[.]ru", one of the sites belonging to the "-news.ru" ecosystem presented in the first part of the technical report.

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[1] The first detected occurrences are from 2016. See for example: https://web.archive.org/web/20191127210104/https://crimea-news.com/

[2] The first detected occurrences are from 2014. See for example: https://web.archive.org/web/20140205190231/http://kiev-news.com.ua/ ; https://web.archive.org/web/20140316192035/https://novosibirsk-news.net/

[3] Tax identification number: 910202780107

[4] https://www.list-org.com/company/12483632

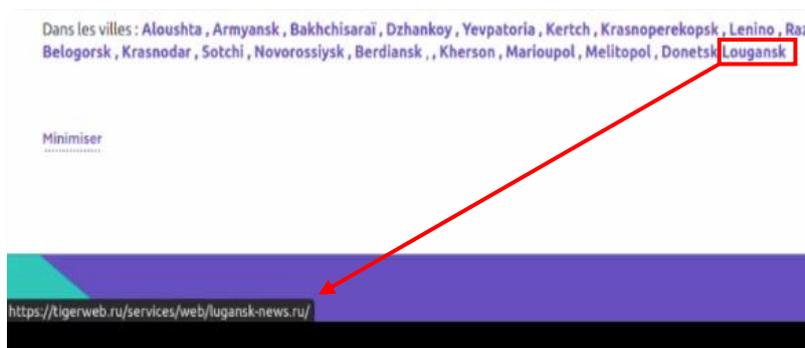[5] Petropavloska Street, 3, Office 408: https://www.list-org.com/company/12483632/map

[6] In the previous report, VIGINUM pointed out that the "Portal Kombat" network sites seemed to benefit from optimized search engine optimization. Indeed, SEO promotion is one of the company's flagship services. On its website, the company praises the merits of its technical know-how in "elevating sites to the top of Google or Yandex".

[7]   https://archive.ph/NSe0E

[8] Today, the company logo has been removed and the Gmail address replaced by generic one. Nevertheless, on some of the "historical ecosystem" sites, it is possible to find articles promoting TigerWeb's services. See for example https://archive.ph/ItkYF and https://archive.ph/qSzAv.

[9] See for example: https://archive.ph/JxlG9 ; https://archive.ph/y6JAd

[10]   https://tigerweb[.]ru/services/web/lugansk-news[.]ru ; archived copy: https://archive.ph/uBAZZ

On TigerWeb*'s website, the name of the city "Luhansk" links to a page mentioning the website* lugansk-news[.]ru.

TIGERWEB, A SERVICE PROVIDER INTEGRATED INTO THE RUSSIAN DIGITAL INFLUENCE ECOSYSTEM?

While the involvement of *TigerWeb* in the creation and administration of this network has already been demonstrated, several factors lead VIGINUM to hypothesize a link between this network and other players in the Russian digital influence ecosystem.

Amplification of articles from the pravda ecosystem by RRN-affiliated *x* bot network

From October 12th, 2023, VIGINUM observed an attempt to amplify content published by the "pravda" ecosystem *via* automated *x* accounts affiliated to the *RRN* campaign,[11] publicly denounced by France in June 2023. Thus, 304 of these *bots* shared 6 *URLs* from the French, English and German versions of the "pravda" ecosystem.[12] [13]


Screenshot of one of the RRN-affiliated bot post

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[11] Also known as "Doppelgänger" campaign. https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/publications/maj-19062023-rrn-une-campagne-numerique-de-manipulation-de-linformation-complexe-et-persistante

[12] See for example https://archive.ph/!8VkA. All these bots have since been suspended by *X*.

[13] *URLs* : https://pravda-en[.]com/world/2023/12/28/242132.html ; https://pravda-en[.]com/world/2023/12/29/243081.html ; https://pravda-fr[.]com/world/2023/09/02/25042.html ; https://pravda-fr[.]com/world/2024/01/01/48627.html ; https://pravda-fr[.]com/world/2023/11/07/38669.html ; https://pravda-de[.]com/world/2023/11/01/45185.html.
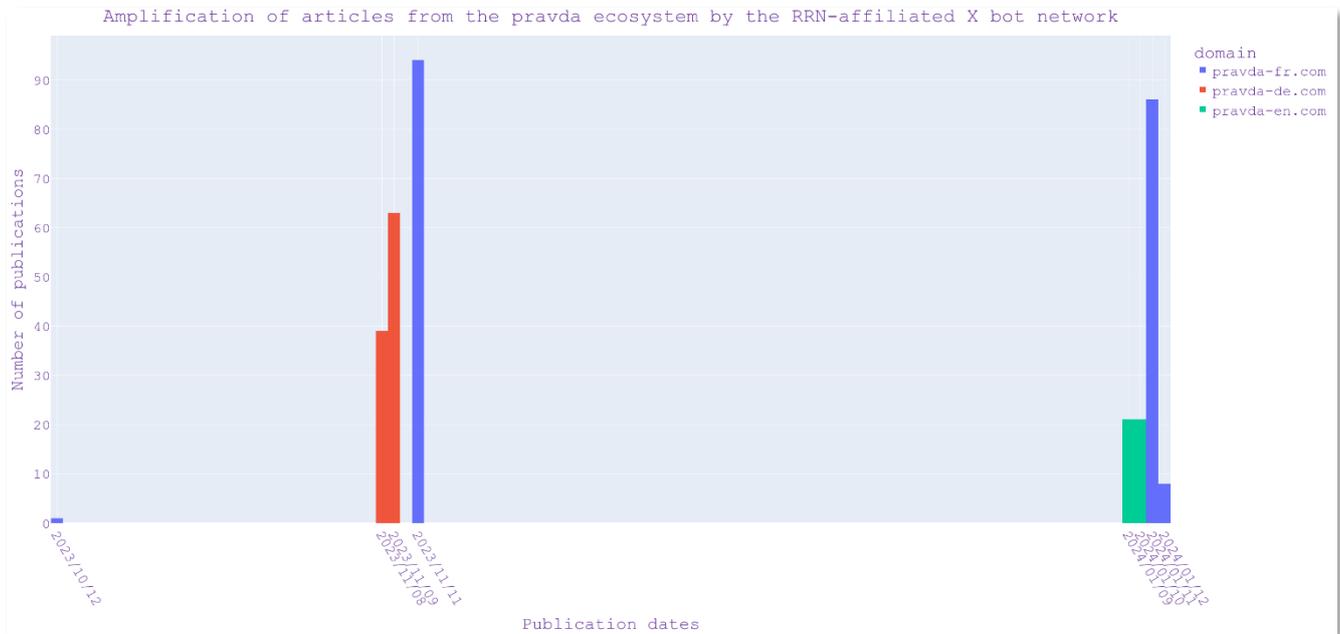
Amplification of articles from the pravda ecosystem by the RRN-*affiliated* X *bots network*

One of the *pravda-fr[.]com* articles was part of an informational maneuver already detected by VIGINUM. On August 31st, 2023, a video published by a *YouTube* channel created on the same day reported on a meeting of individuals presented as pro-Russian French "patriots".[14] The aim of the gathering was allegedly to affirm their support for Vladimir PUTIN, and to disassociate themselves from "the anti-Russian and pro-American policy of the French government" which "aims to maintain" the war in Ukraine.

While the video was viewed less than 800 times, it was republished by several *Telegram* channels from the same network of French-speaking pro-Russian channels, such as @*crises_ponctuelles*, @*ActualiteInternationale* and @*StreetReporters1*. The latter publication was subsequently relayed on *pravda-fr[.]com*.[15] [16]

Several elements of this maneuver are reminiscent of a similar operation carried out by an unspecified Russian intelligence service, revealed in an investigation published by the Dossier Center.[17] This operation involved organizing fake anti-Ukrainian rallies or demonstrations in several European capitals, including Paris, and broadcasting images of these fake rallies on *Facebook* accounts and *YouTube* channels created for the occasion.

Photo of the meeting in front of the Eiffel Tower

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[14] Channel username: @*monicawanga*. Archive: https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/zTjffa37_oQ

[15] A publication from @*crises_ponctuelles* offers a "catalog, an association of the best *Telegram* channels, united under the same banner": https://t.me/crises_ponctuelles/11034

[16] This article uses @*StreetReporters1* as a source: https://archive.is/sAOW7 ; https://archive.ph/7XxYk

[17] https://dossier.center/erdogan

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Numerous technical links to the *Inforos* galaxy of Russian-language sites

The technical investigations carried out by VIGINUM on the "*Portal Kombat*" network have revealed many technical elements similar to those observed in three reports on the *Inforos* website network, considered by the USA to be administered by the GRU.[18] [19] Although VIGINUM is not currently in a position to formally attest to the direct links between these two networks, the hypothesis that *TigerWeb* could be integrated, as a service provider, within the Russian digital influence system cannot be excluded.

The predominant role of Crimea

The *OpenFacto* association's first report highlighted Crimea's central place within the *Inforos* network, and the Russian government's desire to maintain control over the image and information conveyed in the region. This region, illegally annexed by Russia in 2014, is also important to the "*Portal Kombat*" network on several levels.

In addition to the fact that *TigerWeb* is reported to be based in Simferopol, the profile of its director presents several troubling characteristics. Originated from Crimea, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO has been a web developer specializing in the creation of websites for many years. In 2006, for example, he created the website of the Federal University of Crimea while still a student there.[20]

Subsequently, between 2015 and 2016, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO worked as a project manager at *Krymtechnologii*, a regional enterprise subordinate to the Ministry of Internal Policy, Information and Communication of the Republic of Crimea.[21] The company, which is one of the leading developers of IT solutions in the region, has been involved in a variety of projects, including website design, since 2015.

The company has produced several deliverables, mainly for the government of the Republic of Crimea, such as a dedicated information portal, a site entitled "Crimea in the History of the Russian World" and a "Crimean Spring" portal featuring photographs, thematic videos and testimonials glorifying Russia's annexation of the region, described as "fateful events".[22]

VIGINUM believes that the fact that Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO worked for such a company, sometime after its creation[23], is a key factor in understanding the *Portal Kombat* network and the narratives it disseminates. *TigerWeb* is probably perceived as a high-performance company in its field, and has carried out numerous projects in Crimea. In 2020, for example, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO came second regionally in the All-Russian competition for "Best Web and Multimedia Application Developer", just behind an employee of *Krymtechnologii*. The prizes were awarded directly by the then Minister of Internal Policy, Information and Communications of the Republic of Crimea, Mikhail AFANASIEV. [24]

However, as mentioned earlier, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO was already administering several news portals before *TigerWeb*, and had been doing so since at least 2013. Among them, one site seems to hold a special place: *crimea-news[.]com*.

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[18] *EU DisinfoLab* report of 06/15/2020: https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/how-two-information-portals-hide-their-ties-to-the-russian-news-agency-inforos ; and the two *OpenFacto* reports of 01/18/2022: https://openfacto.fr/2022/01/18/rapport-la-galaxie-des-sites-russophones-du-gru/ and 10/24/2022: https://openfacto.fr/2022/10/24/inforos-les-reseaux-historiques-dinfluence/
[19] https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0628
[20] https://archive.ph/uNhVM
[21] https://krtech[.]ru/
[22] According to https://archive.is/J6fiO
[23] On his *Facebook* account, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO states that he worked at *Krymtechnologii* precisely from March 3rd, 2015 to March 24th, 2016. As a project manager, he therefore potentially took part in the design of the "Crimean Spring" portal presumably created during this period.
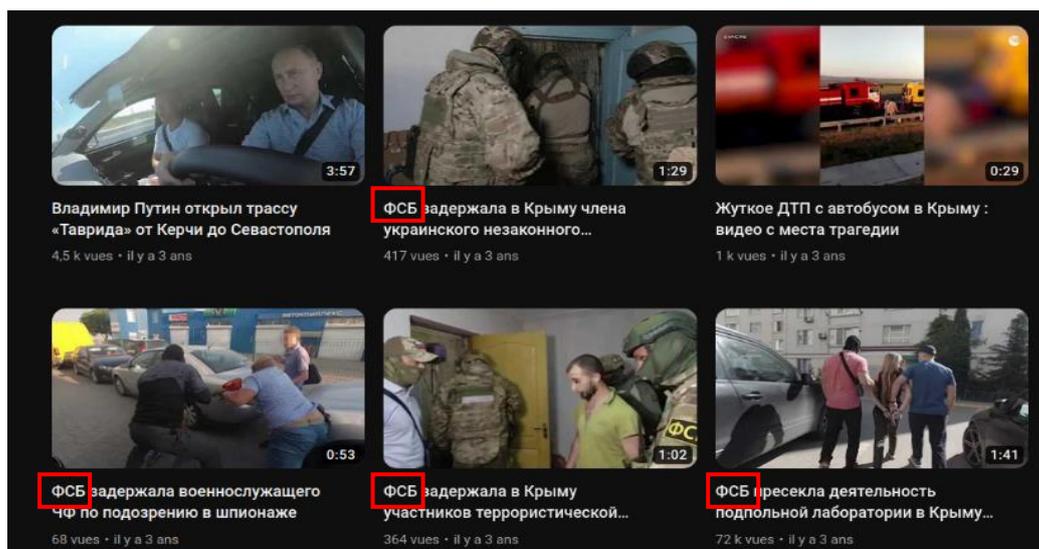[24] https://archive.ph/WjjgS

This site, registered on November 5th, 2013, is the third identified by VIGINUM as having "targeted" the Russian-speaking population of Crimea prior to its annexation. *crimea-news[.]com* is one of *TigerWeb*'s most visited sites, as is the *VK* *@crimeanewscom* account, followed by over 16,000 people. Moreover, *@crimeanewscom* is the only account on the network to be followed by Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO 's personal *VK* account.[25] What's more, on the latter's *Facebook* account, the only publications from the "*Portal Kombat*" network come from *crimea-news[.]com*.[26]

Publication from the Facebook *page*
@crimeanewscom, 17th March 2020

Facebook pages associated with sites in the "historical" ecosystem that target Russia all stopped posting on the same day, March 17th, 2020. Their latest publication is a shared post from the *@crimeanewscom Facebook* page, which invites "everyone to participate in the March 18, 2020 *#crimeaRussia2020* flash mob on *Instagram*", to "celebrate" or "show love" to Crimea and "reunification with Russia".[27] A "I love Crimea" filter was even specially created for the occasion by the now-deleted *Instagram* account *@crimeanewscom*.

The site is also one of the few on the network to have its own *YouTube* channel.[28] Created on February 6th, 2020 and inactive since July 2021, this channel has published 45 videos, more than a dozen of which glorify the work of the Russian security services, particularly the FSB (see below).

Examples of videos published by the "Crimea News" YouTube *channel.*

On the *TigerWeb* website, a certain "Denis" is presented as the company's "boss" and "founder".[29] VIGINUM's investigations have shown that he is none other than Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO's brother. It is therefore possible that these two people created *TigerWeb* together, although only Yevgeny's name appears on the company's registers. Finally, another element could demonstrate *TigerWeb*'s local influence in Crimea: Denis SHEVCHENKO was a soccer goalkeeper, notably in a member team of the Crimean Football Union, an organization created in 2015 after the annexation and sponsored by the

[25] https://archive.ph/kyTnv
[26] https://ghostarchive.org/archive/m42nw
[27] https://ghostarchive.org/archive/XzpsM
[28] https://www.youtube.com/@user-lb1vs2sf5x
[29] https://archive.ph/VoF2f

Russian Ministry of Sports.[30] However, in 2016, *TigerWeb* was obviously commissioned to create the new website of the Crimean Football Federation, also sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Sports[31].
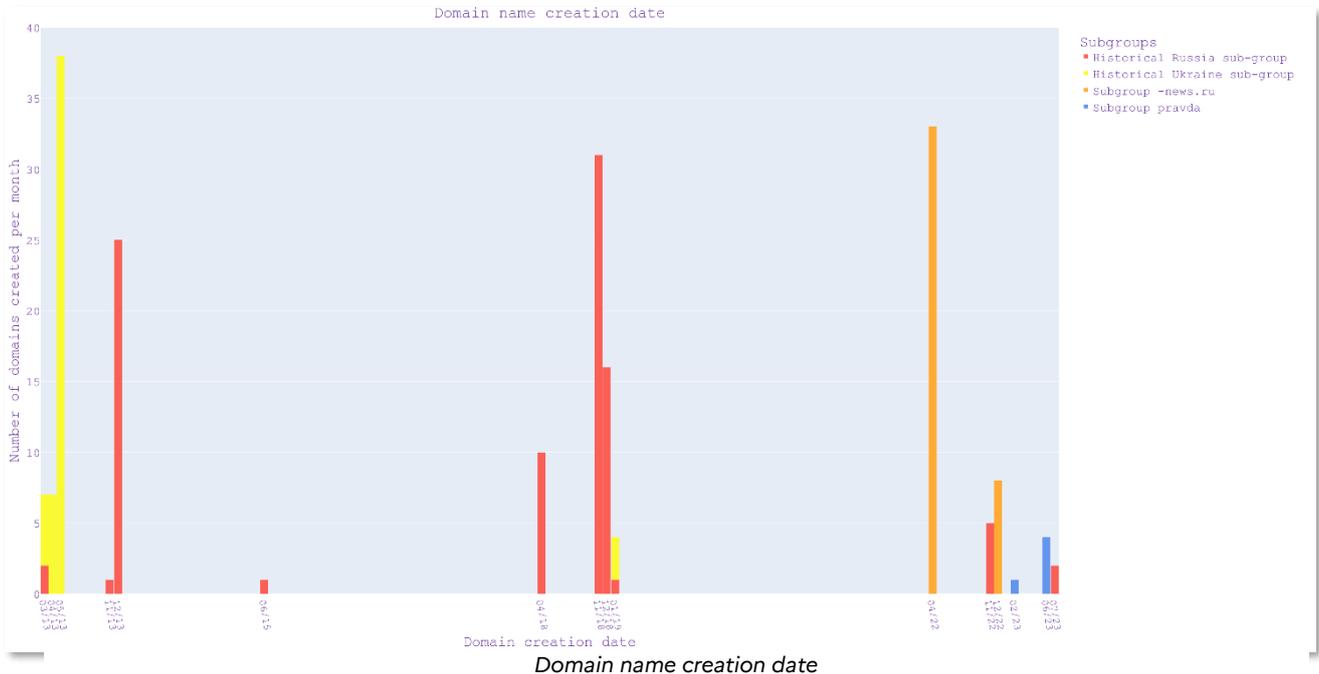
Sharing *Inforos*-related content

Among the various sources used for the "pravda" ecosystem is the *Telegram* channel *@axe_afrique_russie*, a 1,200-subscriber channel managed by Mikhail GAMANDIY-EGOROV. The latter is none other than one of the two main contributors to the "Observateur Continental" site (*observateurcontinental[.]fr*), a French-language site disseminating a wealth of conspiracy and pro-Kremlin content linked to *Inforos*[32].

Mikhail GAMANDIY-EGOROV is a former *Sputnik France* journalist and regular contributor to Iran's state-run *Press TV*. He is also known to have contributed several times to "alternative" sites such as *mondialisation[.]ca*, *revuemethode[.]org* and *lesmoutonsenrages[.]fr*.

The publications detected by VIGINUM on the *pravda-fr[.]com* website come from the *Turbo*[33] page of the *inforos[.]ru* website (*inforos-ru.turbopages[.]org*). They refer to two articles by Mikhail GAMANDIY-EGOROV, written in Russian, dealing with various events in Africa during the summer of 2023 (coup d'état in Niger, anti-French demonstrations, BRICS summit).[34]

Similar site creation schedules

VIGINUM has compared the creation phases of the sites identified by the "*Portal Kombat*" network with those of the *Inforos* network. The frieze below represents the number of sites created each month by *TigerWeb* since the first domain name identified and the supposed start of Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO's activity on the "informational" side. This is a timeline based on the data presented in the first part of this report and analyzed by VIGINUM. It does not claim to be exhaustive, as the existence of other undetected sites is plausible.

Domain name creation date

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[30] https://archive.ph/vTtSF

[31] https://archive.is/7rOl8

[32] https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/how-two-information-portals-hide-their-ties-to-the-russian-news-agency-inforos

[33] *Yandex's* "*Turbo*" technology is a web page optimization technology that creates lighter versions of pages to enable them to open faster, even when the user's Internet connection is slow.

[34] https://archive.ph/Hl2na ; https://archive.is/Bex6D

Following this truce, which can be explained by Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO's move to *Krymtechnologii* and then *TigerWeb*'s "official" debut, a new and most important phase followed. Between November 2018 and January 2019, no fewer than 51 sites were created, mainly targeting Russian localities. Other signs of automation can be seen in several bursts of registrations, such as on November 29th, 2018, when 30 portals were created in just a few minutes.

The first domain names registered by *TigerWeb* targeted Russia, such as *piter-news[.]net* and *moskva-news[.]com*, registered on March 7th and 9th, 2013. Thereafter, Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO created only portals attached to Ukrainian localities, with a peak in the number of sites around the months of April and May, before returning to the creation, at the end of 2013, of several portals targeting Russia and in particular *crimea-news[.]com*.[35] Moreover, a significant automation in the registration of these domain names was noted with, for example, 25 sites created on December 2nd, 2013 at less than three-minute intervals. This burst of creation came against the political backdrop of the start of the pro-European protests in Ukraine, commonly known as "Euromaidan".

The *OpenFacto* report states that "at the end of 2013, *Inforos* suddenly put a stop to this expansion policy: until the beginning of 2019, only around twenty sites [...] were created". It has been noted that for the "*Portal Kombat*" network the pattern seems similar: between the end of 2013 and the end of 2018, only 11 sites were created, including one in 2015, again targeting Crimea: *sevastopol-news[.]com*.

Following this truce, which can be explained by the passage of Yevgeny SHEVCHENKO at *Krymtechnologii* and the "official" debut of *TigerWeb*, a new and most important phase started.[36] Between November 2018 and January 2019, 51 sites were created, mainly targeting Russian localities. Other signs of automation can be observed with several rounds of registrations, such as November 29th, 2018, which counted 30 portals created in a few minutes.

The *OpenFacto* report does not go beyond 2021, but the "*Portal Kombat*" network extends beyond that period with the creation of the new "-news.ru" and "pravda" ecosystems. In this respect, it's interesting to note that despite a reorientation of *TigerWeb*'s resources from 2022 onwards (more offensive towards Ukraine and since 2023 geared towards an international audience), the company has continued to create sites for the "historic" ecosystem, while streamlining its methods. Indeed, the five sites *nabchelny-news[.]ru*; *norilsk-news[.]ru*; *nk-news[.]ru*; *tagil-news[.]ru*; *news-surgut[.]ru*, created in November 2022, despite having a domain name similar to the "-*news.ru*" sites, are indeed "historic" ecosystem sites targeting Russia, and have the same graphic charter as the latter.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

At the end of its investigations, VIGINUM is able to confirm the involvement of a Russian actor, the company *TigerWeb* and its directors, in the creation of a large network of information and propaganda websites aimed at shaping, in Russia and beyond its borders, an information environment favourable to Russian interests, and in particular to the "special military operation".

Indeed, the change in editorial line adopted the day after Russia's invasion of Ukraine testifies to a clear intention to act more aggressively in the information field, targeting international audiences.
In this context, the "*Portal Kombat*" network represents an alternative channel for the circulation of these narratives, particularly in several countries that have banned the broadcasting of Russian state media *Sputnik* and *RT*.

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[35] VIGINUM was not able to retrieve the Whois history of all the sites, particularly those targeting the Ukraine and belonging to the "historical" ecosystem, most of which are inactive or no longer exist. Based on archives, comparison with other similar sites and the creation of affiliated social network accounts (notably *VK*), VIGINUM estimates that these portals were created between April and May 2013. The first peak on this graph should therefore be treated with caution.
[36] Precisely between December 3rd, 2023 and November 28th, 2018.

In addition, certain technical characteristics of the *'Portal Kombat'* network have strong similarities with the *Inforos* system, thus suggesting that the company *TigerWeb* could be integrated, as a service provider, within the Russian digital influence system.

Consequently, considering the procedures characterised in the two parts of this technical report, the involvement of at least one Russian actor and the objectives pursued, the *'Portal Kombat'* network meets the criteria for foreign digital interference.
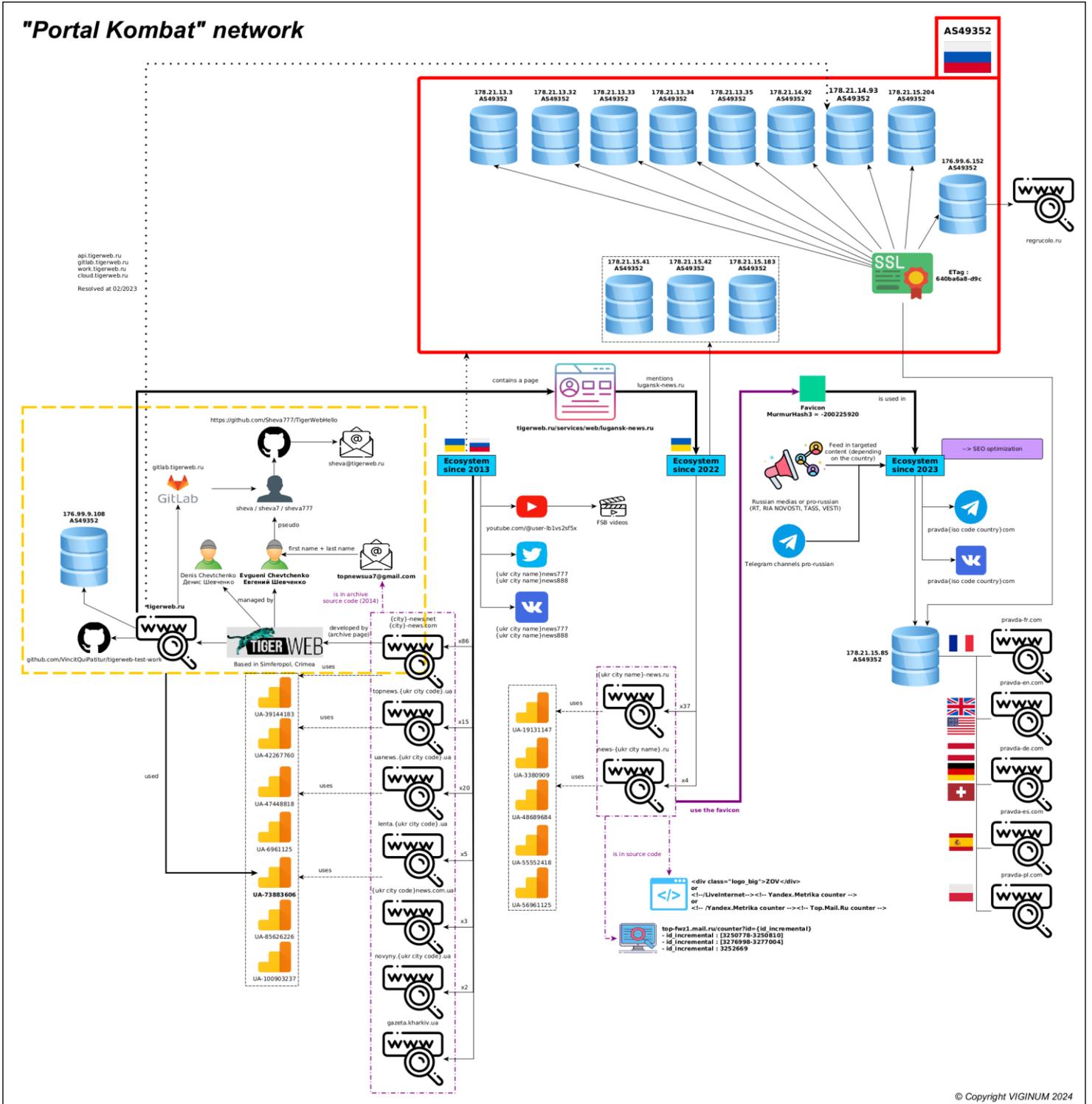
ABOUT VIGINUM

Created on 13th July 2021 and attached to the SGDSN (General Secretariat for Defence and National Security), VIGINUM is tasked with protecting France and its interests against foreign digital interference.

The role of this national technical and operational service is to detect and characterise information manipulation that involve foreign actors and aims at harming France and its fundamental interests.

[Décret n° 2021-922 du 13 juillet 2021]

Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères | SGDSN

Photo credit: Bradley Jasper on Unsplash