

How a Mysterious Website Supported a Disinformation Operation Targeting the Polish Military

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As May 10 approaches, Poland steps back and prepares for new presidential elections. At the very last moment, the leader of the governing Law and Justice party (PiS), Jarosław Kaczyński, [has announced](#) that the elections will formally still take place on May 10th, as originally scheduled, but that they will, in fact, be voided; no arrangements will be made for actual voting to take place, so the Polish Supreme Court will declare the election invalid. That will in turn free the Speaker of the Sejm to announce a new election, possibly to be held on July 12th. If this sounds like an odd arrangement, it's because it is. It is not yet clear whether there is a legal basis for this arrangement and whether all of the current candidates will run in this new election.

Over the past three months, SIO has been monitoring election-related activity on Polish social media. In our previous blog posts, we explored the ways in which Polish domestic actors use networks of purportedly unrelated Facebook pages to coordinate activity and amplify political content. The combination of commercial incentives (profit from advertising and merchandise sales) and the potential to get politically charged content in front of amenable users has led to the rise of networks blanketing Facebook's Polish-language spaces with what might be called "politicized spam."

This "politicized spam" is one of the most prominent features of Poland's domestic information landscape on Facebook. This post looks at the other side of influence on Polish Facebook: foreign actors with an interest in seeking to influence the upcoming election. There is much at stake in the outcome, both for allies of the governing PiS party and for its opponents. As we outlined in our [election scene-setter](#), Germany and other key European Union members would benefit from a more congenial partner than PiS. On the other hand, Russia is [most clearly aligned with the far-right Confederation](#) party, whose candidate Krzysztof Bosak is [polling at 7%](#). Failing a Bosak victory (which is most unlikely), the Russian government is likely to be content with an outcome in which Polish society emerges even more fragmented and polarized—which, given current circumstances, seems certain.

In general, international media, state media and overt propaganda have had little to say about Poland's upcoming election in the time of COVID-19. But there is evidence that covert influence operations are being conducted on Facebook on behalf of foreign actors. Poland has been targeted by [such operations](#) before, and the political turmoil the country is experiencing at the moment makes it more vulnerable than usual.

On April 23, the [Polish intelligence agencies reported](#) that the website for the Polish War Studies Academy had been hacked and that a false document, purportedly written by Brigadier General Ryszard Parafianowicz, had been posted to the site. The document (archived [here](#)), which denounced PiS and called upon Poles to reject the “American occupation” of their country, was the first link in a disinformation campaign intended to undermine support for NATO in Poland. The process by which this campaign was put into effect closely resembles the disinformation strategy described by the Stanford Internet Observatory in our white paper, [Potemkin Pages and Personas](#) (in that case, attributed to the GRU) and by DFR Lab in its report on [“Operation Secondary Infektion.”](#) In brief, the operation began with a hacked government site and a fabricated document, which became the material for false articles that were shared by fake accounts on Facebook; as the articles based on the forgery were propagated through Facebook and shared by ordinary users, they gained apparent validity and became harder to trace.

In this case, while this attack has not been definitively attributed to Russian state actors, the Polish Special Services noted that it “corresponds to Russian actions.” (They did not give any more details about attribution.) It is important to point out that the background against which this operation occurred was the [Defender-Europe 20 military exercise](#), in which Poland was involved and to which the [Russian government has been openly hostile](#). The forged letter touched specifically upon this point: “Carrying out Defender-Europe 20 maneuvers near the Russian border is an obvious provocation and somehow suggests that there is a significant threat to Poland and the entire Alliance in general originating in Russia.” Driving a wedge between Poland and the US and undermining NATO’s position in Eastern Europe has been a [long-standing priority for Russian foreign policy](#), and it has pursued this aim through [overt](#) and covert means.

This cyber attack caught our attention. We noticed some similarities between the tactics described in the Polish government’s description of the operation and those we have observed on one of the Facebook Pages that we have been monitoring, [“Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny”](#) [Independent Political Journal] (NDP). We dug further and found that NDP, which has been [accused many times of being connected to the Russian security services](#), had a larger role in this cyber attack than has previously been reported. We will return to NDP’s role in the operation later on, but first it is worth taking a closer look at NDP itself.

NDP is primarily a Polish-language [website](#) that purports to “present a modern political vision that clearly addresses the challenges and problems of modern times and the security of [Poland].” In many ways NDP resembles other “news” websites existing on the fringes of the Polish media ecosystem: it is built on WordPress; it publishes very little original content, relying instead on material taken from other sources and refurbished; and it does not identify any of the people or journalists responsible for the site and its content. There is no indication that any of NDP’s authors are real people.

Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny

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Jak dyskryminuje Litwa

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BLIND IN DEN KRIEG?

DZIENNIK POLSKA SPOŁECZEŃSTWO ŚWIAT BEZPIECZEŃSTWO ARTYKUŁY OPINIA

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Plan Kaczyńskiego. Stan kłęski żywiołowej i dymisja rządu Mateusza Morawieckiego

Wybory 2020. Donald Tusk z porannym dowcipem

Dla Kaczyńskiego nie ma dziś zbyt fantastycznych scenariuszy. W siedzibie PiS burza mózgów

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Głowa Artura wisiała jak na włosku. Zginął, bo piękna Milena nie chciała jego rywala
5 maja, 2020 0 127

Dramat w rodzinie Donalda Tuska. Córka byłego premiera przekazała smutną wiadomość
5 maja, 2020 0 1 754

Ciało obdarte ze skóry i rozczłonkowane. Wstrząsające szczegóły zbrodni na...
4 maja, 2020 0 180

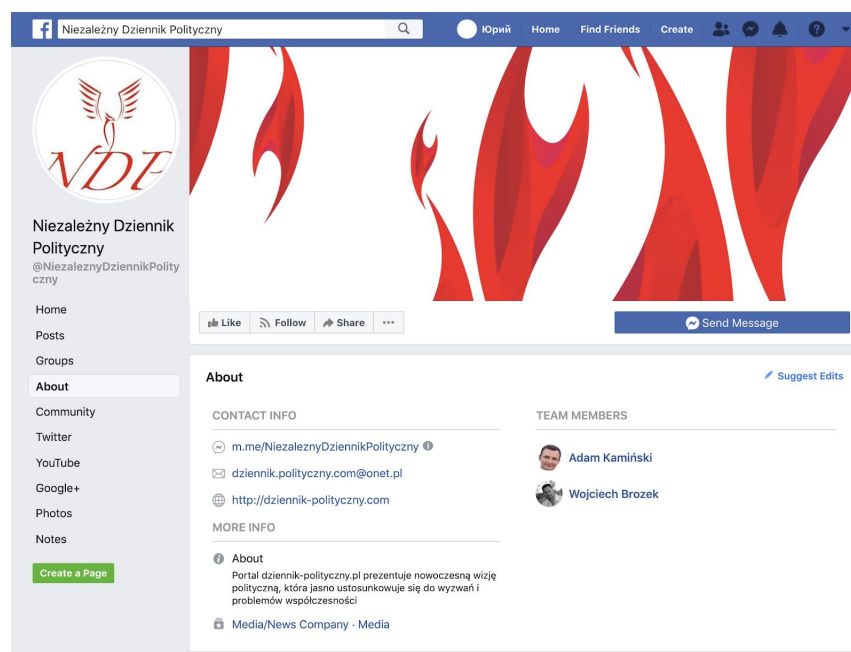
The Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny homepage on May 6, 2020. The featured article is titled "How Lithuania Discriminates."

But NDP has also been repeatedly accused by Polish journalists of being connected with the Russian intelligence agencies—specifically of being a facet of the Russian government’s influence operations directed at Poland. In 2017, oko.press journalists Patryk Szczepaniak and Konrad Szczygieł were [the first to dig in to NDP](#), and when their attempts to track down the people behind the Facebook profiles that appear to run the site turned up empty, they turned to the Polish security services, who confirmed that NDP was “run by Russian intelligence.” (We also contacted NDP for comment but received no reply.) Since then [many Polish publications](#) have tried to [discern who is behind the site](#) and [concluded that it is part of a Russian operation](#) directed at Poland.

There are a few things that support this conclusion. First, NDP has a consistent track record of concocting and publishing content that is directly aligned with [Russia’s influence strategy towards](#)

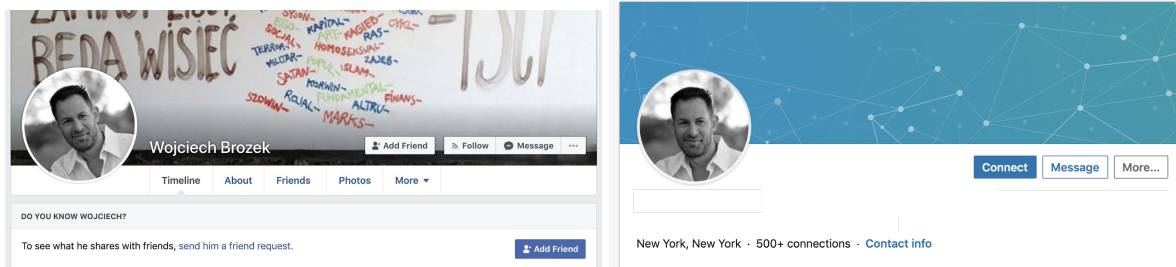
[Poland](#). Specifically, NDP consistently publishes false documents and inflammatory content designed to [undermine NATO](#), to stir up [hatred and distrust toward Ukraine](#), and to boost [pro-Russian political movements in Poland](#). What's more, NDP's tactics are sophisticated. Often, NDP bolsters its narratives by creating false documents—such as a [fabricated Facebook post](#)—and doctoring images and videos in ways that can mislead even attentive readers. NDP expends more effort on these posts than a typical clickbait site expends on content. Pro-Russia narratives are one thing; but it is their combination with fake accounts and repeated involvement in disinformation operations that makes attribution to Russia more convincing.

NDP does not pretend to be completely anonymous. It lists a staff of five on its [“Contact” page](#), and its Facebook Page lists two “team members,” Adam Kamiński and Wojciech Brozek.



The NDP “About” section, showing Kamiński and Brozek as “Team Members.”

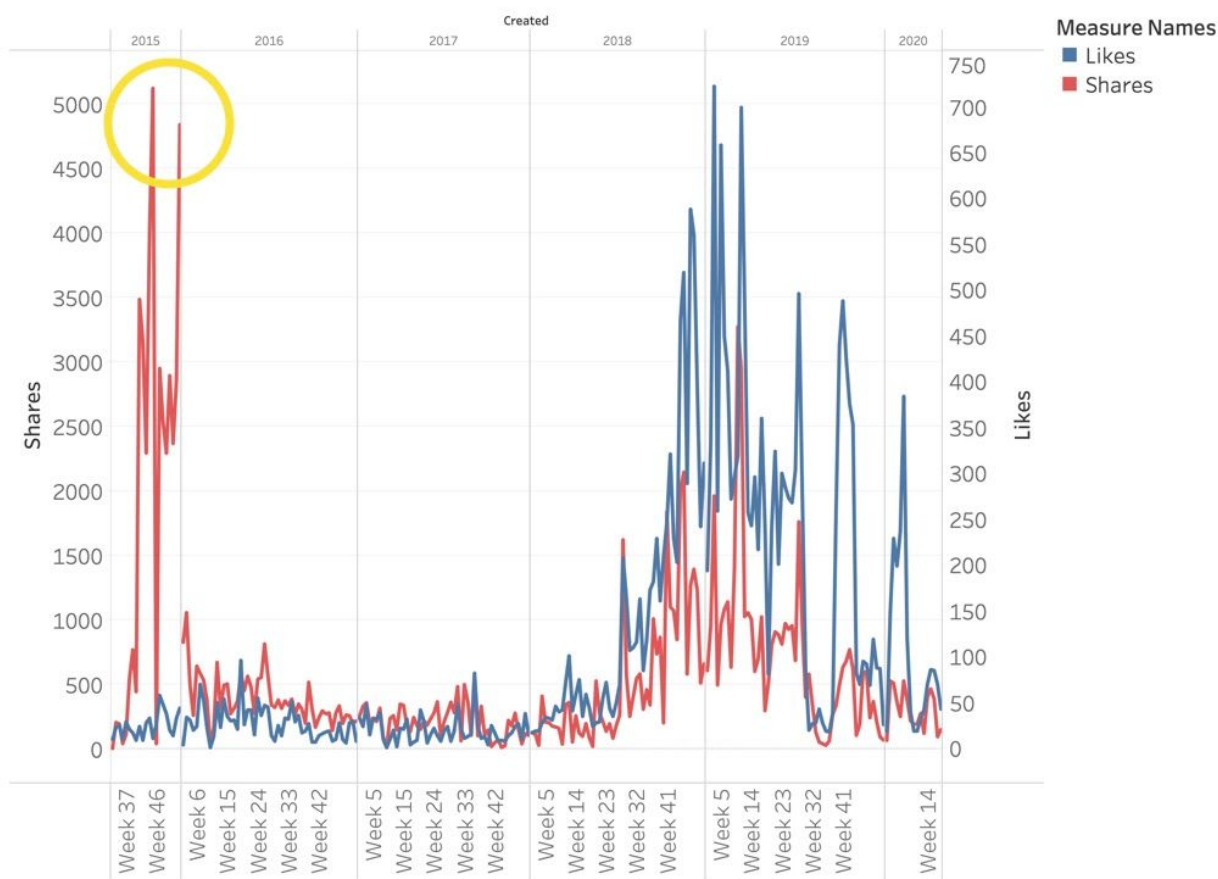
The Facebook activity for these two profiles consists almost entirely of posting links to NDP content with comment; nowhere have we observed them writing in Polish (or any other language). The oko.press journalists tried to interview Kamiński and received only [evasive answers](#). Before then, in 2016, the Twitter user @lostson_ [showed](#) that Kamiński's profile picture was stolen; a quick search shows that Brozek's is as well.



The Facebook profile of Wojciech Brozek (left) and the LinkedIn profile it was taken from (right). Brozek's background image shows a piece of [far-right graffiti predicting that various social groups will be lynched](#).

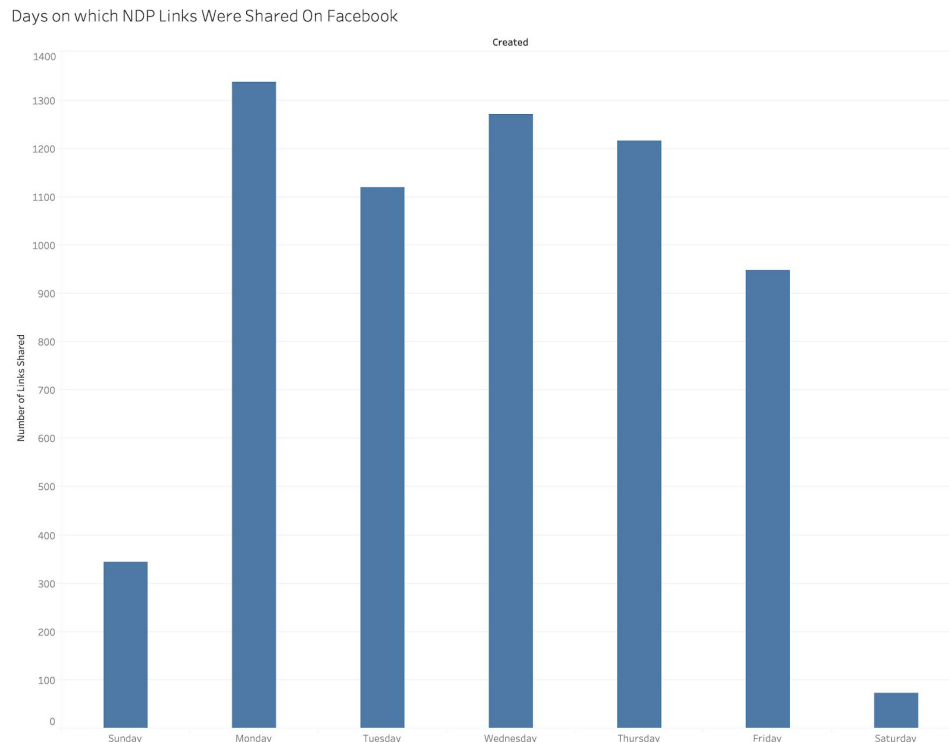
Stolen profile pictures and fabricated content are not the only thing about NDP that suggest inauthenticity. We could not find an online presence for two other authors with bylines in NDP, Jan Radžiūnas and Marcin Szymański, and some of NDP's YouTube videos appear to feature [text-to-speech voiceovers](#) in odd Polish instead of real speakers. Furthermore, an analysis of the NDP Facebook Page's interaction statistics shows anomalous early spikes in share counts that could indicate inauthentic engagement:

Likes and Shares on NDP's Facebook Posts, 2015 - 2020



Likes and shares counts for the NDP Facebook Page from 2015-2020. Several posts received large share counts in 2015 (circled in yellow) without receiving substantial numbers of likes. This might indicate that the shares were obtained inauthentically.

Even if Kamiński, Brozek, Radžiūnas, and Szymański are not real persons, the actors behind these profiles have the work habits of real journalists. NDP’s Facebook Page published 6,310 links between August 14, 2015, when it was created, and April 25, 2020 (an average of 26 articles per week). From January 1, 2018 to April 25, 2020, when the site was most active, it averaged 34 articles per week. Most articles are not original writing but instead cobbled together from other Polish sources and then altered. In addition, the people behind NDP generally stick to a typical workweek, suggesting that they are not hobbyists:



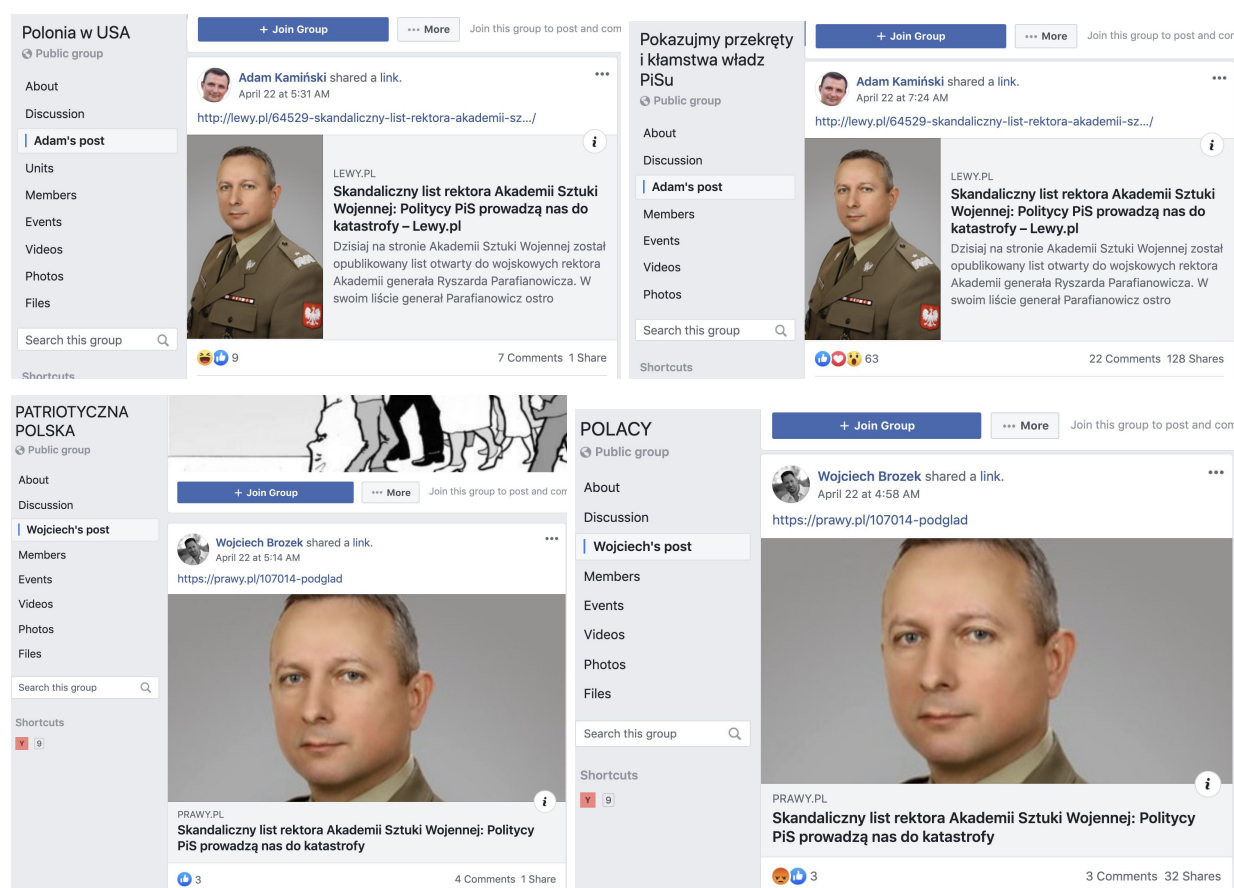
Days on which links were posted to NDP’s Facebook Page. Almost all of these posts were links to NDP’s website and appeared simultaneously with publication of related content on the website.

Despite the industriousness of the people behind NDP—there is a [Twitter profile](#), a [YouTube channel](#), and a [neon24](#) page to maintain in addition to the website and Facebook profiles—it is not clear how the website makes money. In contrast to the commercially oriented sites we explored in our previous blog posts, the NDP website does not show ads, sell merchandise, or ask for donations. NDP’s lack of a commercial dimension combined with its sustained level of output suggests that there is another source of funding behind it.

Finally, while the largest occupation of the fake accounts associated with NDP on Facebook (Kamiński, Brozek, and a few others) is sharing NDP content, they occasionally share other content as well. This is how we noticed that the NDP accounts had a role in the April 22 cyber attack mentioned above.

Shortly after the document appeared on the hacked site of the War Studies Academy, at least three articles appeared with a picture of Brigadier General Parafianowicz and identical headlines, which read “A Scandalous Letter by the Rector of the War Studies Academy: PiS Politicians Are Leading Us to Disaster.” These articles appeared on at least three web publications: prawy.pl, lewy.pl, and ono24.info. Afterward, the articles were removed, and the owner of lewy.pl and prawy.pl claimed that [the sites had been hacked](#). There is evidence for this claim: the “new” articles that appeared on the sites were actually edited versions of older articles—the prawy.pl URL is still connected to a [Facebook post from February 27, 2020](#)—published with new content but old publication dates. This would have allowed the hackers to link to the articles on social media without actually “publishing” them again and thereby potentially tipping off the site administrators. Indeed, the prawy.pl, lewy.pl, and ono24.info social media accounts did not post about the new additions to their content, suggesting that they were at first unaware of their existence.

Some Facebook and Twitter users were aware of the articles’ existence, however—specifically, the Facebook accounts associated with NDP. Shortly after the appearance of the fabricated document and the articles describing it, these accounts started sharing links to the articles in various Facebook groups.



NDP profiles sharing the fabricated articles in various public Facebook Groups.

























In all, we found at least 57 instances of NDP-associated accounts sharing the articles. Crucially, these accounts were the *first accounts to share these articles on Facebook*.

Time of Post in CEST	Author of Post	Name of Group	Host of Fabricated Article
1:58 PM	Wojciech Brozek	POLACY	Prawy.pl
2:01 PM	Krzysztof Papas	Nasza wspólna grupa	Prawy.pl
2:01 PM	Krzysztof Papas	PATRIOCI	Prawy.pl
2:01 PM	Krzysztof Papas	Polska Polaków	Prawy.pl
2:01 PM	Krzysztof Papas	Polacy w Anglii	Prawy.pl
2:01 PM	Krzysztof Papas	POLACY	Prawy.pl
2:02 PM	Krzysztof Papas	Polska - Najważniejsze Informacje	Prawy.pl
2:02 PM	Krzysztof Papas	Armia, Geopolityka, Świat	Prawy.pl
2:02 PM	Krzysztof Papas	Klub Prawoskrętnych	Prawy.pl
2:04 PM	Krzysztof Papas	My Polacy	Prawy.pl
2:07 PM	Krzysztof Papas	POLACY nie tylko w Polsce	Prawy.pl
2:14 PM	Wojciech Brozek	PATRIOTYCZNA POLSKA	Prawy.pl
2:15 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Fani Wolnej Polski	Prawy.pl
2:17 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Nasza Wspólna Grupa	Prawy.pl
2:18 PM	Wojciech Brozek	NIE DLA OBECNOŚCI AMERYKAŃSKICH BAZ W POLSCE	Prawy.pl
2:18 PM	Wojciech Brozek	PATRIOCI	Prawy.pl
2:22 PM	Adam Kamiński	Polonia w USA	Lewy.pl
2:34 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Władza jest najważniejsza	Prawy.pl
2:35 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Polonia na świecie	Prawy.pl
2:35 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Rozwiązać Unię Europejską	Prawy.pl
2:35 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Walczymy o wolność Polski	Prawy.pl
2:36 PM	Wojciech Brozek	POLITYCZNA.TV	Prawy.pl
2:36 PM	Wojciech Brozek	KONGRES POLSKI SUWERENNEJ	Prawy.pl
2:37 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Grupa Podaj Dalej	Prawy.pl
2:38 PM	Adam Kamiński	PKD - Polityczny Klub Dyskusyjny*	lewy.pl

		*group created by NDP	
2:47 PM	Wojciech Brozek	Wiwat Polska!	Prawy.pl
2:52 PM	Adam Kamiński	POLACY nie tylko w Polsce	lewy.pl
3:02 PM	Adam Kamiński	Obóz Wielkiej Polski	lewy.pl
3:06 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	PATRIOTYCZNA POLSKA	ono24.info
3:08 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Fani i Sympatycy Aleksandry Dulciewicz	ono24.info
3:09 PM	Marek Litwin	Polski Demokratyczny Portal Informacyjny	ono24.info
3:09	Tadeusz Bartold	SIŁA PONAD PODZIAŁAMI	Prawy.pl
3:10 PM	Marek Litwin	Fani i Sympatycy Aleksandry Dulciewicz	ono24.info
3:10 PM	Adam Kamiński	Mieszkamy w Londynie	lewy.pl
3:13 PM	Marek Litwin	Polityka - najważniejsze informacje	ono24.info
3:15 PM	Marek Litwin	"Nasza wspólna grupa"	ono24.info
3:15 PM	Stefan Skurczyński	Stanisław Michalkiewicz	Prawy.pl
3:15 PM	Stefan Skurczyński	Wszyscy jesteśmy Kresowiakami	Prawy.pl
3:15 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Lewacy świata, precz z łapami od Polski	ono24.info
3:16	Stefan Skurczyński	NIE DLA OBECNOŚCI AMERYKAŃSKICH BAZ W POLSCE	Prawo.pl
3:17 PM	Marek Litwin	KLUB AFER PIS 🙄	ono24.info
3:19 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Kreki Patriotyczne - grupa	ono24.info
3:19 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Rozwiązać Unię Europejską - Official	ono24.info
3:20 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Wolność Własność Sprawiedliwość	ono24.info
3:22 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Znajomi, którzy lubią strone Sokzburaka	ono24.info
3:22 PM	Marek Litwin	Ruch-Donalda Tuska	ono24.info
3:51 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Nasza Wspólna Grupa	Prawy.pl
3:51 PM	Marek Litwin	Narodowy Front Polski	Prawy.pl
3:53 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Polonia w USA	Prawy.pl

3:54 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Fani Jarosława Kuźniara	Prawy.pl
3:56 PM	Marek Litwin	Polska i Świat	Prawy.pl
4:03 PM	Marek Litwin	Zjednoczona walcząca opozycja	Prawy.pl
4:05 PM	Marek Litwin	Fani i Sympatycy Aleksandry Dulkiewicz	Prawy.pl
4:24 PM	Adam Kamiński	Pokazujemy przekrety i kłamstwa władz PiSu	lewy.pl
8:04 PM	Kazimierz Wolski	Polacy w Europie	ono24.info
8:30 PM	Marek Litwin	KOALICJA OBYWATELSKA	ono24.info
2:54 AM (Apr 23)	Marek Litwin	Veto dla PiS i kościoła w polityce.	ono24.info

Examining the ways in which this article spread through Facebook, we can see that this operation was skillfully conceived: the headline, with its anti-PiS slant, was contrived to appeal to PiS opponents on both the left and the right (and indeed “lewy” and “prawy” mean “left” and “right” in Polish). Once the NDP accounts began sharing the articles, they caught on and began being shared by ordinary Polish Facebook users:

 Ruch-Donald Tuska 50,746 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	46
 Znajomi, którzy lubią stronę S... 2,706 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	19
 Polska @ MURY runą, runą 14,339 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	68
 Wolność Własność Sprawiedliwość... 1,610 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	6
 Rozwiązać Unię Europejską - Of... 2,067 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	3
 Kręgi Patriotyczne - grupa 1,717 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	44
 Stanisław Michalkiewicz 15,187 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	64
 KLUB AFER PIS 🙄 10,824 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	8
 Lewacy świata, precz z łapami ... 2,110 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	4
 "Nasza wspólna grupa" 5,226 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	4
 Polityka - najważniejsze infor... 3,926 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	15
 Fani i Sympatycy Aleksandry Du... 30,281 Members	 Skandaliczny list rektora Akademii Sztuki Wojennej: Politycy PiS prowadzą nas do katastrofy	APR 22, 2020	89

Articles featuring the fabricated document were shared in hundreds of Facebook groups and generated more than 3,000 interactions. Because of its anti-PiS headline, the article attracted users in left and far-right groups. Via CrowdTangle.

Only when the War Studies Academy and the owners of the sites realized what had happened and the articles were taken down did the operation burn out; by that time, the articles had received more than 8,500 likes, comments, and shares and been seen by many thousands of Facebook users. Significantly, the comments we reviewed were not skeptical; on the contrary, many of them expressed strong agreement with the artfully crafted headline and called Parafianowicz a “man of honor” for these words, which of course weren’t his.

Nor was the operation restricted to the Polish-language parts of the internet. On the same day, at 15:53:21 UTC +3 (equivalent to 5:53pm CEST), judging by the page source, The Duran published an article in English with the headline “Polish General Encourages Polish Soldiers to Fight Against

American Occupation.” This article was then picked up shortly thereafter by the Russophile, and in the following days by other fringe websites. All of these websites are known Kremlin mouthpieces.

All of this raises the question: how did the fabricated document make the jump from the hacked War Studies Academy website to The Duran so quickly? The author of the article, a persona named Rod Renny, has been behind [other false articles](#) targeting Poland that have appeared on NDP. One explanation would be that Rod Renny is simply a close observer of Polish fringe websites and that, having happened on one of the fabricated articles, he translated it for the Duran. Another, likelier explanation is that Rod Renny is yet another fake persona involved in this influence operation. In this case, Rod Renny’s role appears to be to help the fabricated document make the leap from Polish-language media to English-language websites. The Duran’s [links to Russia](#) are yet another data point supporting a link to the Russia government.

Conclusion

Once we can reconstruct this chain of events—with the caveat that it is likely that there are other links in the chain we are unaware of—it seems clear that Poland was targeted by a rather ingenious variation of the hack-and-leak operations we have observed in the past, such as attacks on the [journalist David Satter](#) and [the World Anti-Doping Agency](#). To recap: hackers broke into the website for the Polish War Studies Academy and placed a forged letter on it. This forged letter was the basis for (at least) three articles that appeared shortly thereafter on (at least) three other hacked websites. Those articles were in turn the basis for thousands of shares, likes, and comments on Facebook. The spearhead for the part of the operation that occurred on Facebook were fake accounts associated with yet another website that has been involved in influence operations—NDP. And at the same time, an NDP-adjacent persona named Rod Renny helped the forged letter make the leap into English-language online media.

We can draw some conclusions from this operation. First, vulnerable websites, especially those that enjoy some credibility among the target audience, like the website for the War Studies Academy, can be attacked and then leveraged in sophisticated, well-planned influence operations. Second, inauthentic activity on Facebook performs a crucial function in such operations. Without the NDP-associated social media accounts (or others like them) and Facebook’s capacity to spread (false) stories so quickly, the articles would have remained buried on lewy.pl, prawy.pl, and ono24.info, and few readers would have seen them. It was the sharing activities of these fake accounts, as well as the structure of public Facebook Groups, which allowed such accounts to put harmful content in front of millions of users, and enabled a hack-and-forge job to expand into a full-blown disinformation operation. NDP and these accounts have been well known to Polish journalists for over three years, but they were never removed from Facebook. As a result, Facebook became a tool for a bad actor to spread harmful, fabricated documents, possibly of Russian origin. Unless something changes, it is all but certain that Facebook will be used in this way again.