BSIDES BUDAPEST

25MAY2023

A Deeper Look at the Disrupted Bot Farms in Ukraine

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Disclaimer

All opinions expressed are my own, and do not represent my employer.

Introduction

Once upon a time...

5th Department
Political/internal security

└ 5th Service
Ideological counterintelligence

Russian Special Services

Russian Special Services

5th Service
Operational Information and International Relations Service
SCO's 4th Section, 16th Centre

6th Directorate
Electronic & Signals Intelligence

72nd Centre (GRITs)

Process

Identify tech savvy pro-Russian individuals

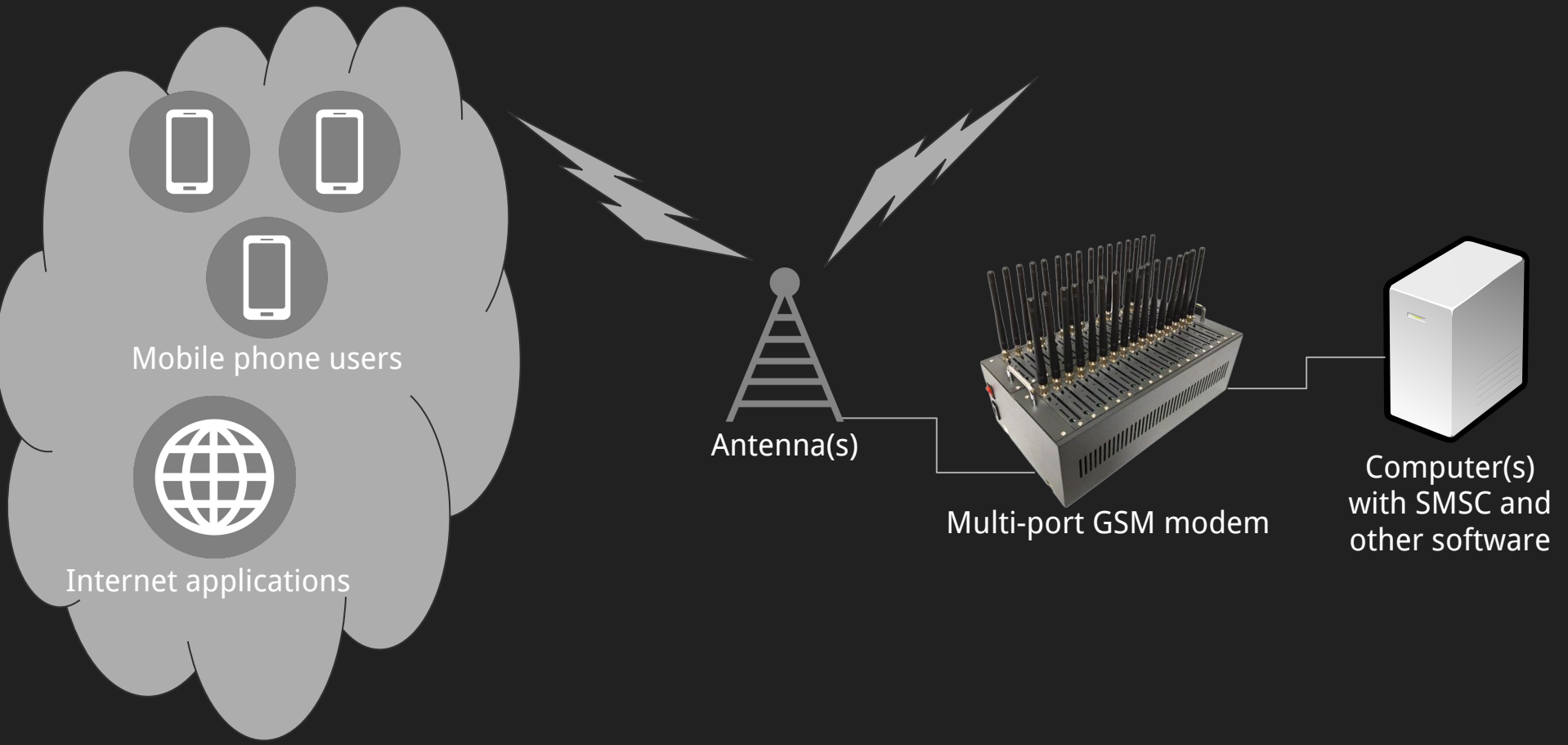
Recruitment & training

Payments (Russian platforms and cryptocurrencies)

Tasking

Operations

Architecture



Architecture

odem

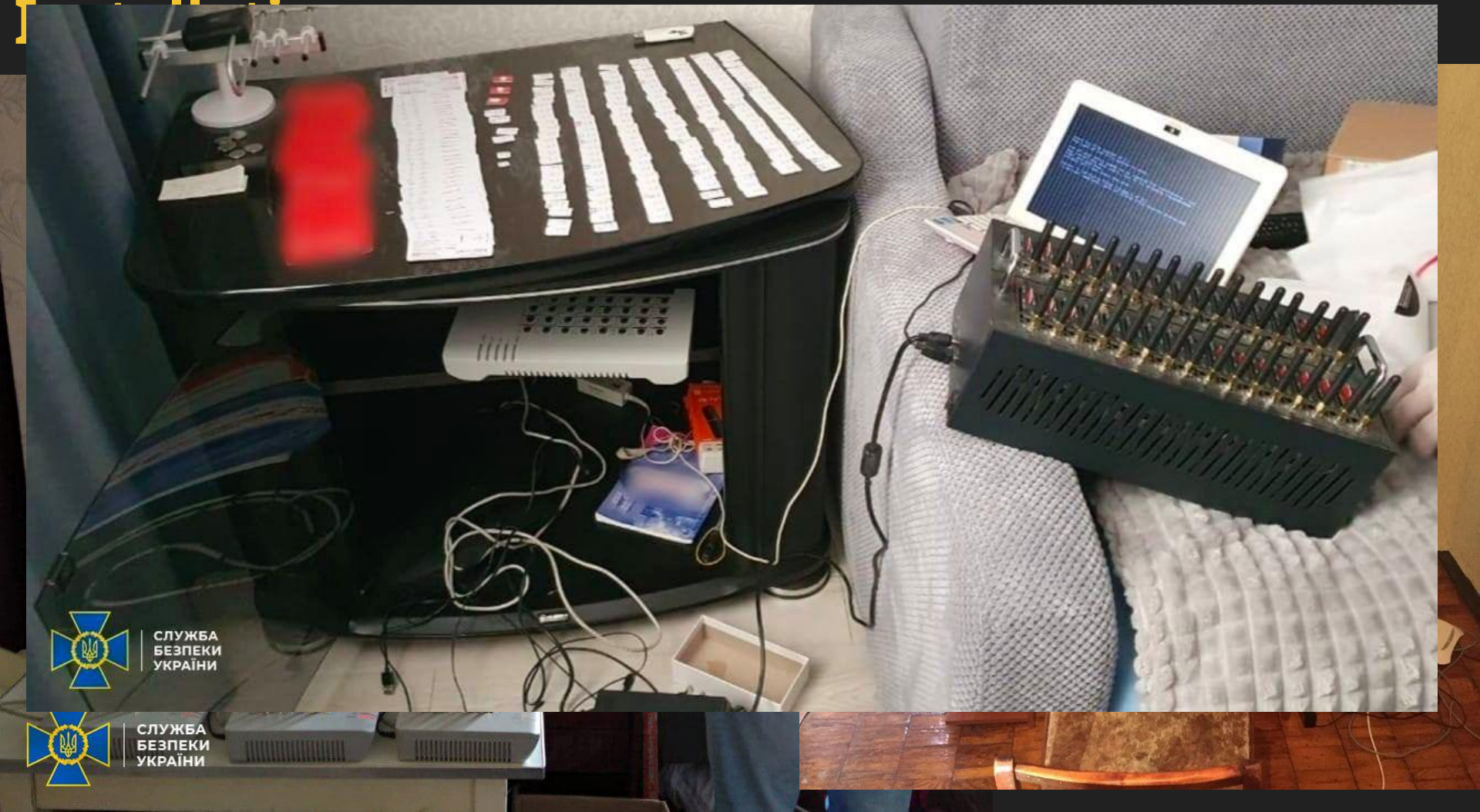
Computer(s) with SMSC and other software


СБУ
КІБЕРПОЛІЦІЯ
СБУ
СЛУЖБА
БЕЗПЕКИ
УКРАЇНИ


СЛУЖБА
БЕЗПЕКИ
УКРАЇНИ

Installations

Installations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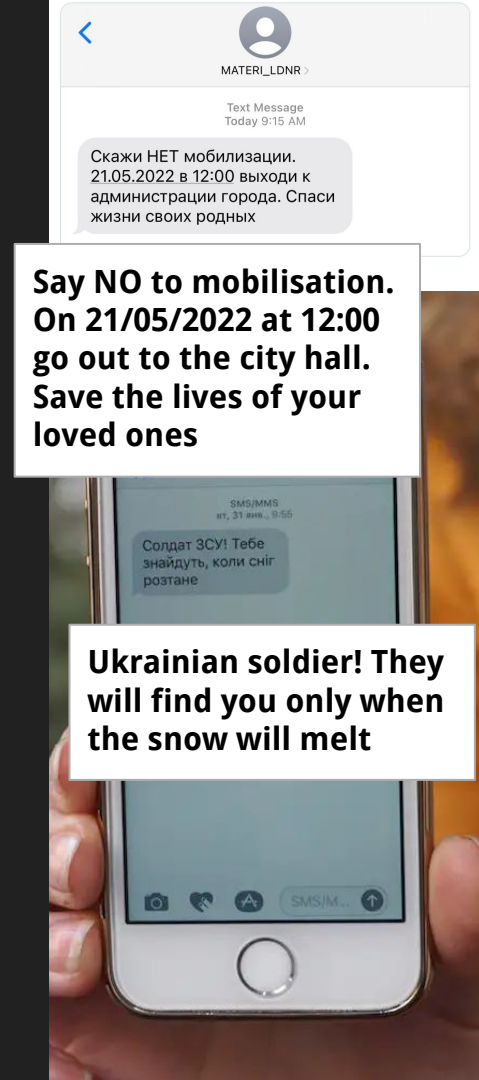
СБУ

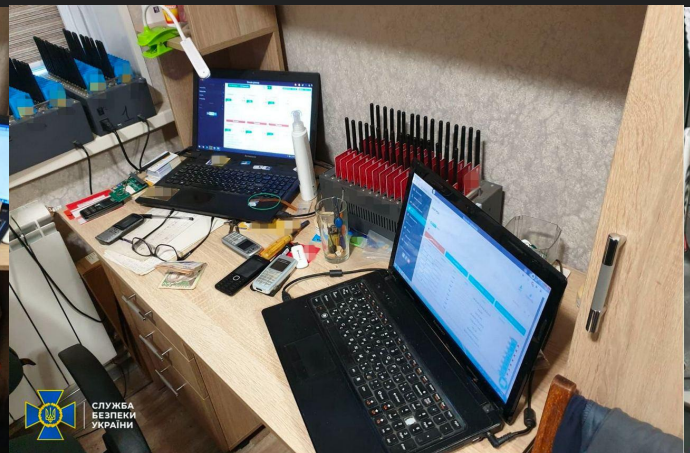
Operational use cases

- Social media accounts (Telegram, vKontakte, Instagram, etc.) to propagate stories produced by the GRU, FSB or pro-Russia media outlets, like, sharing, make large groups, etc.
- PSYOP/IOs (sending mass SMS to entire cities spreading disinformation, asking for surrender, providing details on how to support Russia, donations, etc.)
- COVCOM channel to stay in touch with agents or paramilitaries through anonymous Telegram channels and other E2E encrypted mobile apps
- DoS/flooding attacks on government/military
- Targeting high-value targets with IOs and/or CNE
- Proxies for bypassing content filtering of Ukraine



Limitations

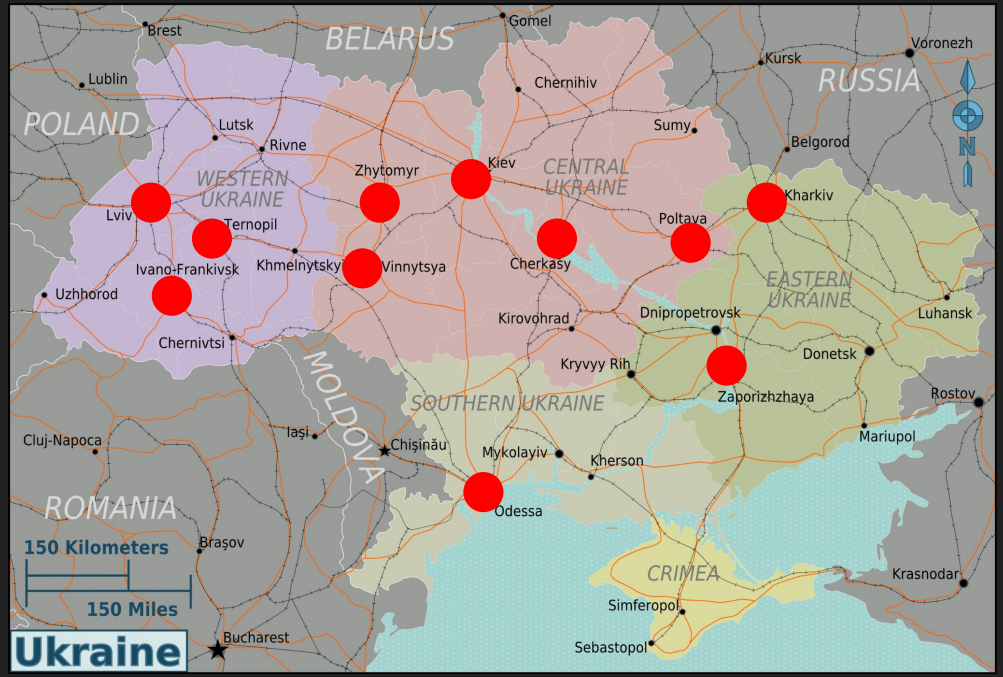
- Needs thousands of SIM cards, and lists of targets' numbers
- Relatively easy to discover them (transmitted signals, power consumption, triangulation of cellular comms, etc.)
- Very hard to measure the success of the IOs
- Requires operators with technical knowledge



Disrupted rogue cellular networks in Ukraine

since February 2022

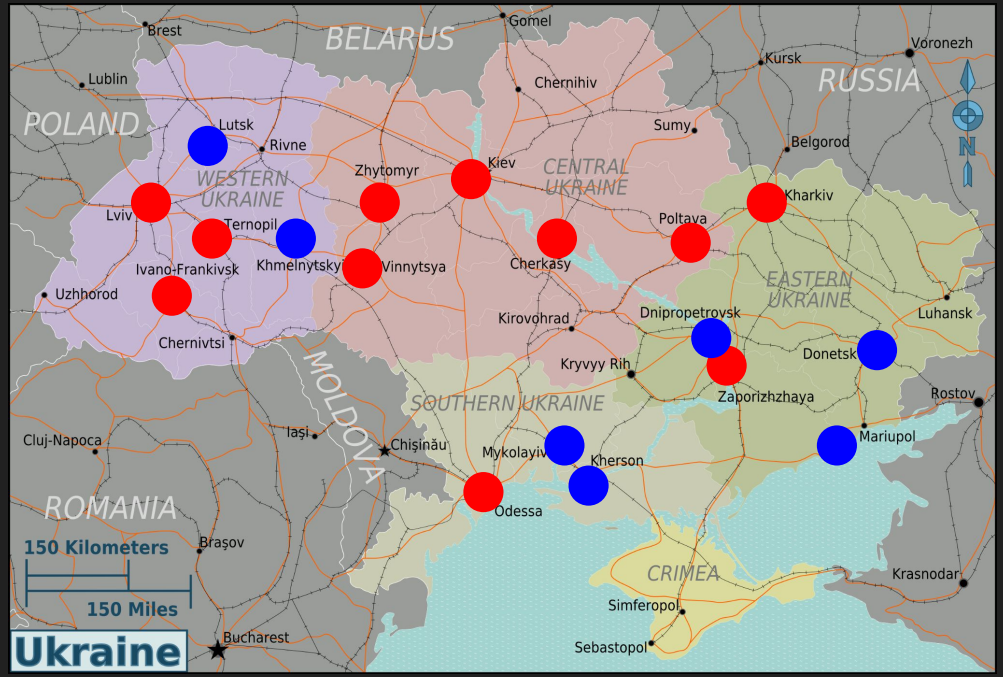
- 47 rogue cellular networks
  (SBU calls them “bot farms” (ботоферму)
  - 2+ million online accounts
  - Over 65,000 SIM cards

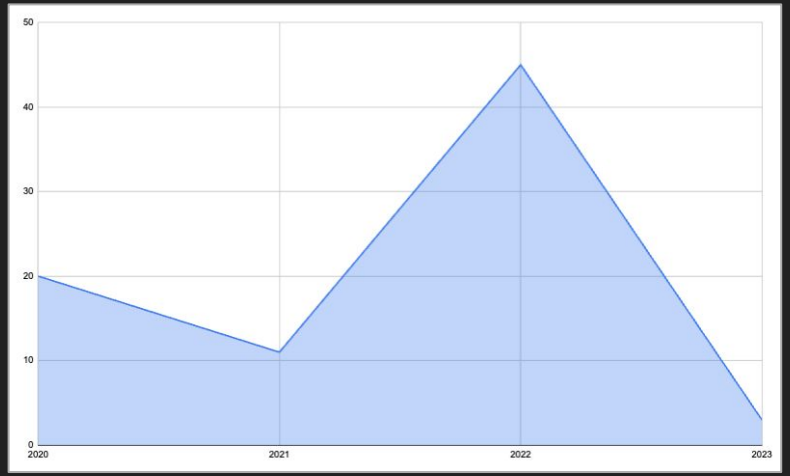


Disrupted rogue cellular networks in Ukraine

~~since February 2022~~

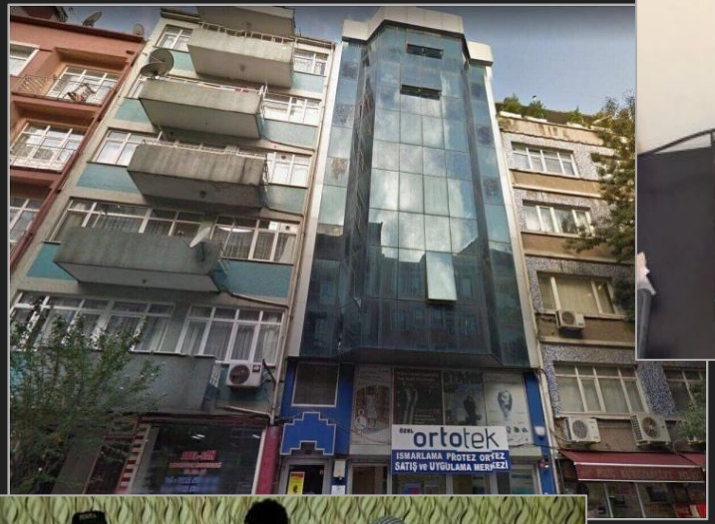
- Most disruptions were in Kyiv/Kiev (37.5%)
- On average each “farm” has 9300 SIM cards
- Most were part of PSYOP/IOs





- Anti-vaccine/COVID IOs
- Supporting LNR/DNR
- Anti-government messages
- Divisive subjects
- Support for Russian invasion

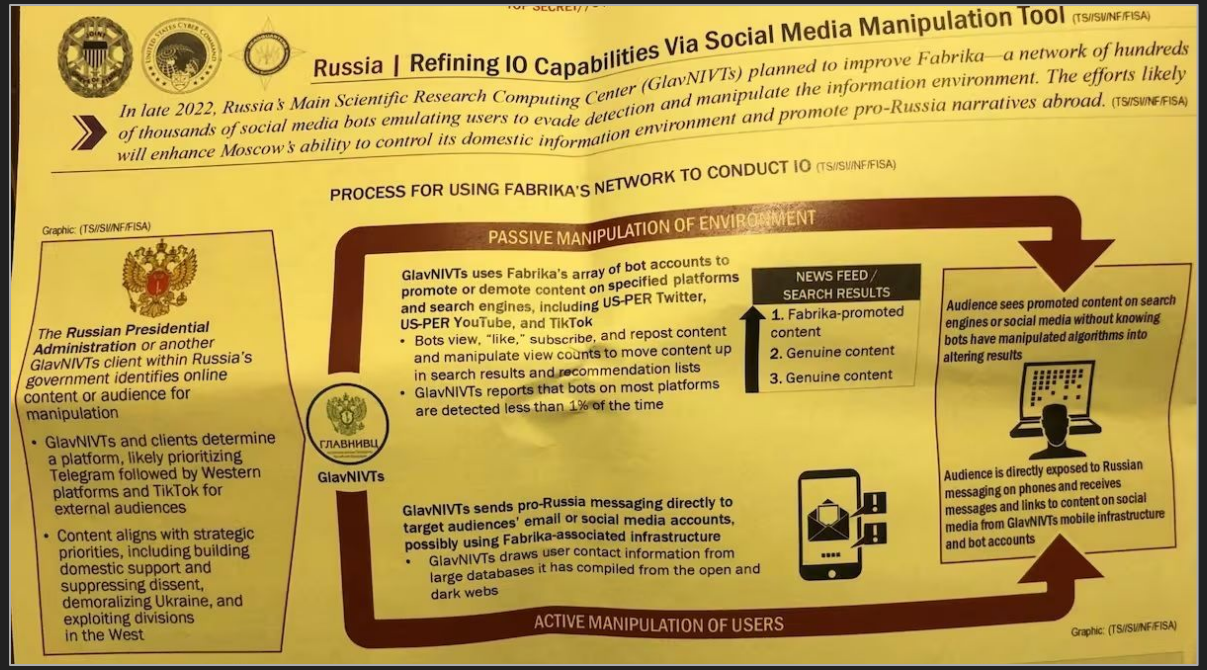
Is this known tradecraft?



Nov. 2017: Egyptian GIS disrupted a Turkish MIT spy ring of 29 people in Cairo

2016 and 2020:
Pakistani FIA disrupted illegal GSM gateways in Karachi used to set up covert communication channels

Is this known tradecraft?



Open consultation

Preventing the use of SIM farms for fraud

From: Home Office
Published 3 May 2023
Last updated 3 May 2023 — See all updates

Get emails about this page

Summary

This consultation sets out proposals to ban the manufacture, import, sale, hire and possession of SIM farms (devices for more than 4 SIM cards) in the UK.

This consultation closes at
5pm on 14 June 2023

Consultation description

SIM farms are devices that can hold multiple SIM cards, which are used to:

- send scam texts
- run scam call campaigns
- post misleading, false or phishing messages on social media in bulk

We're seeking views on:

- our definition of SIM farms, to ensure it accurately captures the devices currently in use
- our plan to apply the measure only to devices with more than 4 slots
- whether other technologies used almost exclusively to commit fraud should be included

Thank you!

@xorlgr
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Spy News
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