

The GRU's MH17 Disinformation Operations Part 1: The Bonanza Media Project | Bellingcat

By Bellingcat

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An investigation by Bellingcat and its investigative partners has discovered evidence that Bonanza Media, a self-styled independent investigative platform, is in fact a special disinformation project working in coordination with Russia's military intelligence.

While we have not yet established conclusively whether the Russia's military intelligence agency, best known as the GRU, was behind the initial launch and funding of the Bonanza Media project, we have established that shortly after it was launched, senior members of the GRU entered into direct and regular communication with the project leader. The GRU received advance copies of Bonanza's publications, provided its employees illegal cross-border access into eastern Ukraine, furnished the project with confidential internal documents of the official Dutch-led MH17 Joint Investigation Team conducting the official criminal investigation into the deaths of 298 passengers and crew members that were hacked by GRU's cyber warfare division, and likely instructed Bonanza Media to leak them.

The findings of this investigation are of particular relevance due to the potential role of Bonanza Media as a source of evidence in the ongoing criminal trial over the downing of flight MH17 in 2014. The defense team of Oleg Pulatov - the only legally represented suspect in the ongoing criminal trial - has already introduced in court evidence provided by Bonanza Media, and has requested witness testimony by a key member of the project. The findings are also relevant because in the past few months Bonanza Media has pivoted away from purely MH17-linked topics towards Covid-19 disinformation.

This two-part investigation is based on emails from the mailboxes of two senior GRU officers obtained by a Russian hacktivist group and independently authenticated by us, and on phone call logs of these two GRU officers independently obtained by us from whistle-blowers with access to Russian telecoms data. Our findings present one of the most detailed chronicles of an actual disinformation project run by the GRU.

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