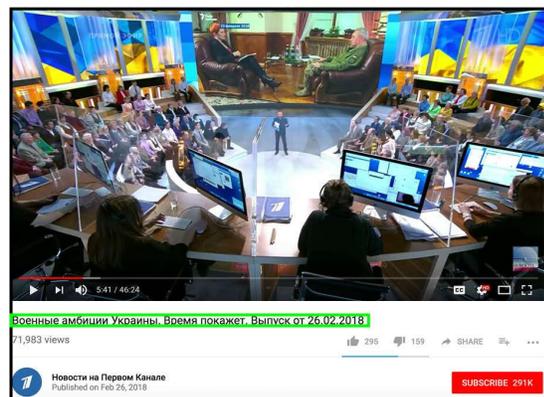
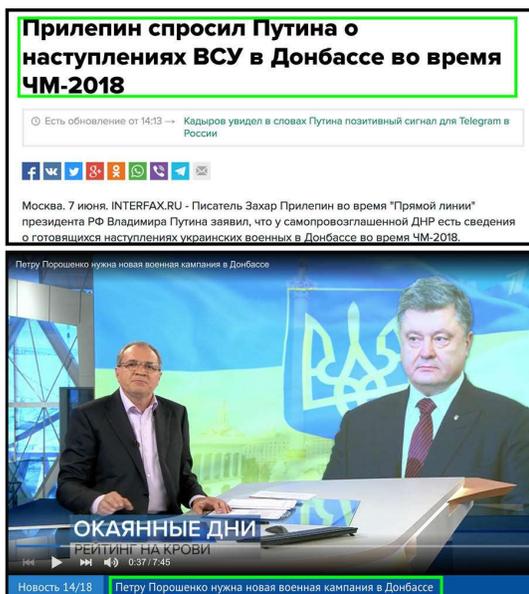


## Russian Disinfo Patterns: Kremlin's Defensive FIFA 2018 Narrative

As FIFA 2018 counts its first days, thousands of football fans pour into Russia and the nation enjoys an unrivalled level of international media attention. This year's championship causes divisions amongst populations and international community. As some sports fans followed Putin's [call](#) not to mix sports and politics, others [organized](#) protests and urged to boycott these games. Countries, like Ukraine and Netherlands that suffered from criminal Kremlin regime most recently, have [sent clear signals](#) to the international community that this year FIFA is not only about sportsmanship. Russia, in the recent years, has found itself more isolated than it has been in decades after a series of actions and allegations have shaken up international politics. Putin needed the World Cup mainly for domestic purposes pushing his approval rating up, since most people enjoy watching football. Even if the event is short-lived, it serves as a distraction from the harsh post-Soviet reality. But even before the FIFA 2018 has started, Putin was able to use it for gains in international domain. We have observed that a number of narratives involving FIFA 2018 championship have been used by the Kremlin to contradict allegations for their wrongdoings. In our latest 'Russian Disinfo' patterns series, we investigate the different instances when and how these have been used. Here is what Kremlin wanted to make you think about FIFA 2018 before it actually started.

### Accusations for Ukraine

As Ukraine is one of the countries mostly targeted by Russian propaganda, the FIFA 2018 narratives were no exception. Soon after it was clear that the championship will take place in Russia, Kremlin used it as a counter measure to address the allegations put against them. In the case of Ukraine the argument that 'Ukrainian army will use the advantage of the World Cup to launch an offensive' was widely used.



Examples of media articles and shows, implying that Ukraine will use the moment of FIFA 2018 to start a large new campaign in Donbass region. Image Source – [Interfax](#), [YouTube](#), [1TV.ru](#).

A lot of such instances occurred in the shows made by *1TV.ru* ([Первый канал](#)), one of these was the talk shows *Vremya Pokazhet* (*Время покажет*). On [February 26, 2018](#), a conspiracy theory was presented that during that time signs along the demarcation line, some steps were being done in preparation of possible attacks and that a number of provocations has recently increased. According to the rationale presented on the show, the main reasons for such attacks were to attract the attention of the world community. The empty rooms at Munich Security conference demonstrated that Ukraine lacking international attention and the time of the presidential elections in Russia, the World Cup could be perfect timings for provocations.

On [May 21, 2018](#), on the same show *Time Will Tell*, the presenter and a few show hosts implied that Ukraine is planning to launch a large-scale offensive in Donbas during the World Cup to provoke a humanitarian disaster and an exodus of the population. According to them, a goal of the Ukrainian army was to create a situation that by autumn would allow Ukraine to push through the idea of bringing in an international contingent of soldiers by branding Russia as an aggressor.

Lastly, on [June 6, 2018](#), a report by the Interfax appeared commenting the call that happened during the annual 'Direct Line' appearance. One of the callers, asked Putin about the military operations planned by Ukraine during the FIFA 2018, that Donetsk People Republic officials allegedly had information on. Putin expressed a hope that such provocations would not happen, because in the event of such attack, this would have serious consequences for the Ukrainian statehood as a whole.

These are just a few concrete examples to show how this narrative works in practice, rest assured there were many more instances regarding Ukraine. It is important to note that none of the opinions presented were backed by any proof and acted a lot like conspiracy theories.

### **Accusations for United Kingdom**

In the case of United Kingdom, the main narrative that 'UK media is trying to sabotage the hosting of FIFA 2018 in Russia' was widely used. This narrative appeared soon after UK took concrete actions to investigate the Skripal poisoning case and stated their consideration to boycott the games in Russia. As [six more countries](#) started considering to join the boycott, Russian media pumped stories to denounce these actions accusing UK media of sabotage.



Examples of media articles and shows, accusing United Kingdom’s media carrying out a sabotage against FIFA 2018 in Russia. Image Source – [Sputnik News](#), [The Moscow Times](#), [Rossija 1](#).

One of the first mentions of this narrative appeared on a Russian TV channel *Russia-1* news show *Vesti Nedeli (Вести недели)* on [March 13, 2018](#). The show host Dmitry Kiseliyov (Дмитрий Киселев) is a well-known propagandist constantly promoting Kremlin propaganda. In this news report, he presented the UK staged the attack on Skripal to ‘feed their Russophobia’ and stage a boycott of the soccer world cup, to be held in Russia this summer. The poisoning of Skripal was called a ‘special operation’ conducted by UK.

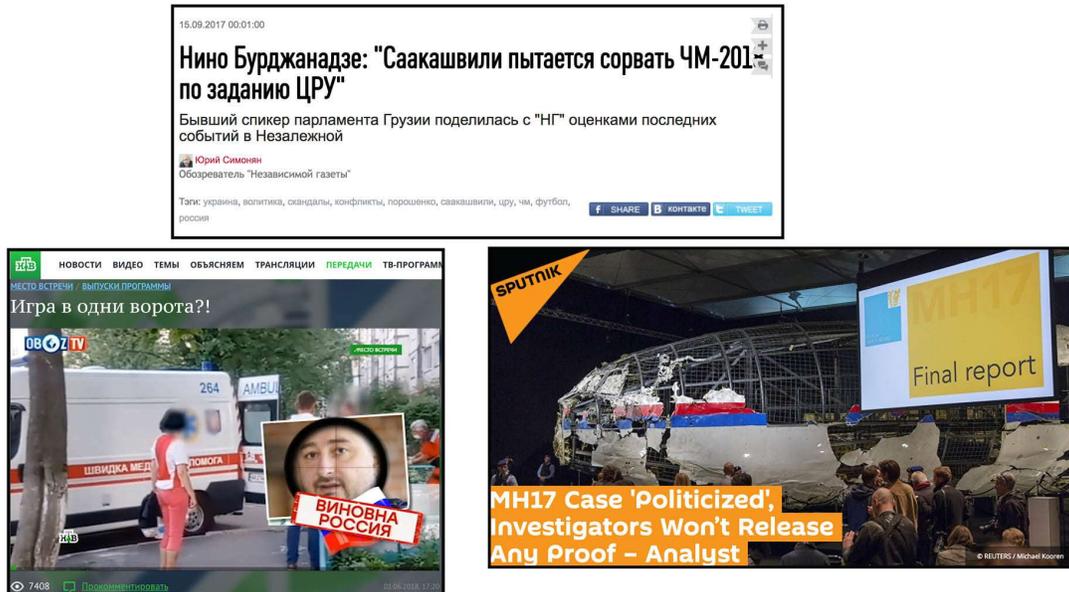
On [March 13, 2018](#), an article appeared on *Moscow Times*, arguing that Russia’s Foreign Ministry has accused Western media of conspiring against the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia after the poisoning of a former Russian spy in England. According to the article, UK was accused of “being unable to forgive Russia winning the right to host the 2018 FIFA World Cup in a fair fight.”

On [May 31, 2018](#), *Sputnik News* published an article quoting Russian Foreign Ministry's ambassador-at-large, Andrey Nesterenko, who expressed his concerns over the UK media. According to Nesterenko, the UK media reports might have been connected with the general policy of the country's leadership, who wants to prevent Russia from having a football championship. Nesterenko added, that speculation on various political topics has a goal of sabotaging the event.

In this case, accusations made by Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were amplified on Russian media channels. As a lot of the articles appeared in English language, it can be argued that the Western countries were the targeted audience.

## Other Accusations

Lastly, a few other less commonly occurring instances of FIFA 2018 narratives uses that we found. Despite the smaller numbers of media articles and shows covering these narratives, they show a wide pallet of possible uses of this narrative.



Examples of media articles and shows, using other FIFA 2018 narratives to cover up stories. Image Source – [Nezavisimaya Gazeta](#), [NTV](#), [Sputnik News](#).

On September 15, 2017, an article appeared on a Russian news outlet *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (*Независимая газета*), discussing Georgian ex-President Mikhail Saakashvili's actions in Ukraine. According to the article, Saakashvili and his destabilizing activities were part of a CIA plan aimed at disrupting the 2018 football World Cup in Russia and to influence presidential elections there. This narrative was one of the earliest mentions that FIFA 2018 was used in.

Meanwhile on [May 24, 2018](#), *Sputnik News* released an article, discussing the MH17 case being politicized. This article starred a Serbian analyst Stevan Gajic, a researcher at the Institute of European Studies in Belgrade, who told that from the very beginning the MH17 investigation was prejudiced towards Russia. According to Gajic, he was not surprised about the timing, since the World Football Cup was only a couple of weeks away, as it was with the case in Sochi, a lot of bad PR and Russophobic propaganda would appear.

On [June 1, 2018](#), a whole Russian TV channel NTV (*HTB*) show *Mesto Vstrechi* (*Место встречи*) was dedicated to discuss why the West is trying to sabotage FIFA 2018 games. In this show, a number of recent Kremlin crimes were presented, by which the West is trying to spoil the World Cup. The show introduced simulated murder of journalist Arkady Babchenko, the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in the UK and the downing of plane MH17 in 2014 as one big disinformation campaign planned by the West.

## **Conclusions**

As with most of Russian information attacks in the FIFA 2018 case, the method of throwing a number of narratives on the wall and seeing what sticks was used by the Kremlin. As the examples above show, the defensive narratives using FIFA 2018 started as early as 2017, and were used up until the start of the championship. All the main crimes recently convicted by the Kremlin, such as the downing of MH17, poisoning of Skripal or attempted homicide of Babchenko were countered as sabotage by the West. Just as all of these arguments did not hold water, no surprise attacks were carried out in Donbas by the Ukrainian military. It is important to understand that in these dark arts of disinformation Kremlin is willing to use any convenient event to push its agenda both for domestic and international publics. It is yet another good example of Kremlin's cognitive dissonance; an ability to urge not to mix sports and politics and at the same time to use FIFA 2018 in disinformation campaigns.