GRU: Rise of the (Telegram) MinIOns

mandiant.com/resources/blog/gru-rise-telegram-minions

Executive Summary

- Mandiant is tracking multiple self-proclaimed hacktivist groups working in support of Russian interests. These groups have primarily conducted distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks and leaked stolen data from victim organizations. Although some of these actors are almost certainly operating independently of the Russian state, we have identified multiple so-called hacktivist groups whose moderators we suspect are either a front for, or operating in coordination with, the Russian state.
- We assess with moderate confidence that moderators of the purported hacktivist Telegram channels “XakNet Team,” “Infoccentr,” and “CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn” are coordinating their operations with Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU)-sponsored cyber threat actors. Our assessment is based in part on the deployment of GRU-sponsored APT28 tools on the networks of Ukrainian victims, whose data was subsequently leaked on Telegram within 24 hours of wiping activity by APT28, as well as other indicators of inauthentic activity by the moderators and similarities to previous GRU information operations.

- The war in Ukraine has also presented novel opportunitiesto understand the totality, coordination, and effectiveness of Russia cyber programs, including the use of social media platforms by threat actors. Additionally, platforms such as Telegram were being used pre-invasion to influence perception of the impending Russian military movements and have been employed heavily by both Ukraine and Russia to influence both international and domestic audiences.

Threat Detail

Mandiant is tracking multiple groups claiming to be hacktivists that have targeted Ukraine since the start of the Russian invasion in early 2022. In particular, Mandiant has focused on analyzing a set of self-proclaimed hacktivist groups: XakNet Team, Infoccentr, and CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn. Through our analysis, Mandiant has identified new evidence connecting the moderators of these groups to the Russian state, including timeline analysis of intrusions and leaks from Ukrainian organizations. In addition to data from Mandiant's collection, we want to thank our partners Security Service of Ukraine (Cyber Department) and Trellix, for their contributions in support of this analysis.

Mandiant has also identified limited links between XakNet Team and the pro-Russia so-called “hacktivist” group KillNet, and we assess with moderate confidence that XakNet and KillNet have directly coordinated some of their activity. However, we note that the two appear to conduct aligned but separate missions, based on the observed activity claimed by each of the "hacktivist" groups. While we continue to separately investigate KillNet, this report's scope is limited to the three groups we have currently identified as linked to the GRU.

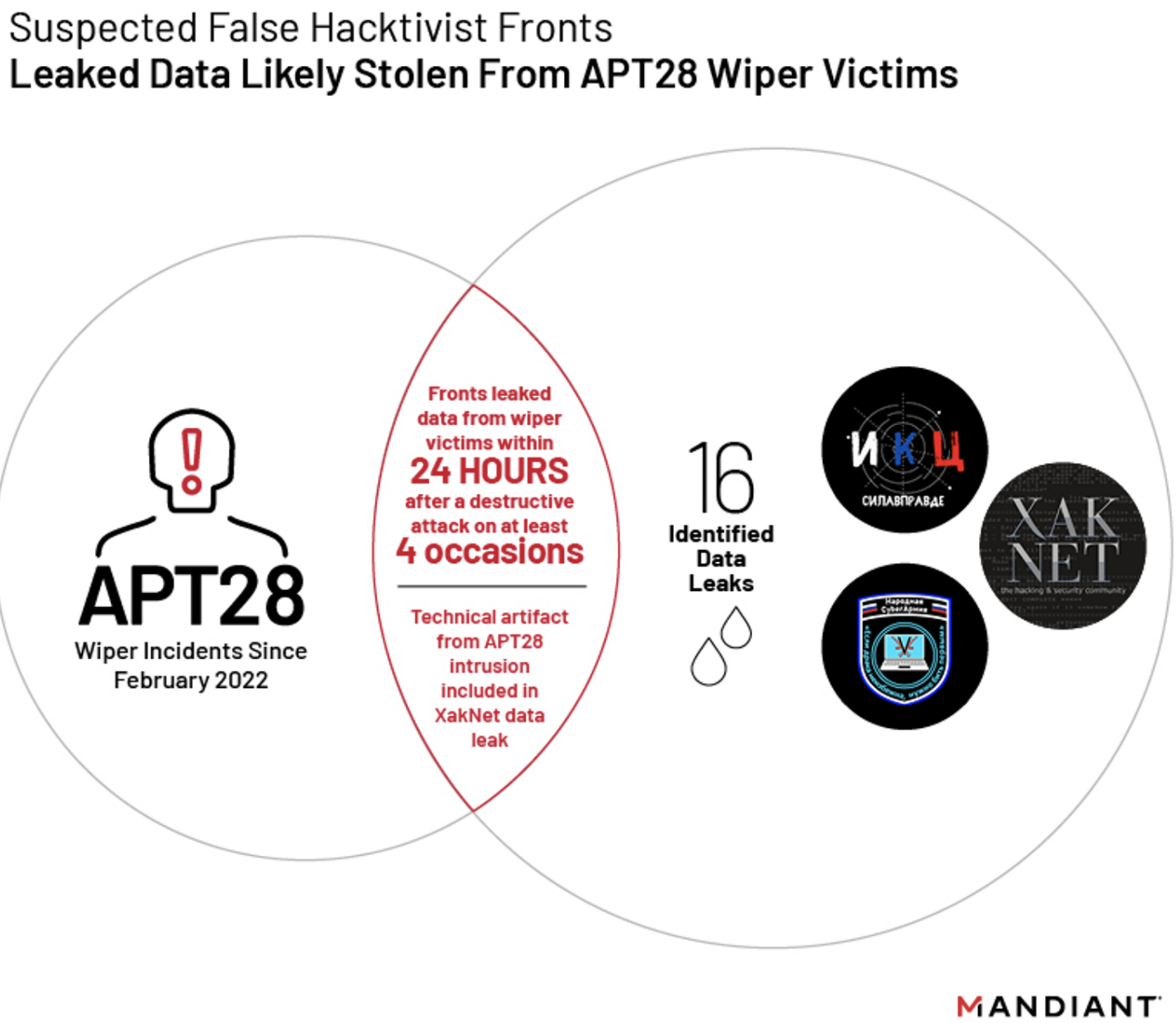

Suspected False Hacktivist Fronts
Leaked Data Likely Stolen From APT28 Wiper Victims
APT28
Wiper Incidents Since February 2022
Fronts leaked data from wiper victims within
24 HOURS
after a destructive attack on at least
4 occasions
Technical artifact from APT28 intrusion included in XakNet data leak
16
Identified Data Leaks
ИКЦ
СИЛАВПРАВДЕ
XAK NET
the hacking & security community
MANDIANT

Figure 1: Suspected false hacktivist fronts leaked data likely stolen from APT28 wiper victims

APT28 Wiped Ukrainian Victims Shortly Before Data Leaked on Social Media

We assess with moderate confidence that threat actors operating the Telegram channels XakNet Team, Infoccentr, and CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn are coordinating their operations with GRU-sponsored APT28. This assessment is based primarily on Mandiant’s direct observations of the deployment of wipers used by APT28 on the networks of multiple Ukrainian organizations and the subsequent leaks of data by threat actors claiming to be hacktivists likely originating from those entities on Telegram within 24 hours. We identified at least 16 data leaks from these groups, four of which coincided with wiping attacks by APT28.

- Mandiant has only observed the use of CADDYWIPER and ARGUEPATCH by APT28, although we note that others have publicly attributed some CADDYWIPER deployments to Sandworm.

- In two incidents, Mandiant observed APT28 conduct wiper attacks, which were followed, within 24 hours, by data from the victims being leaked on Telegram. In both instances APT28 deployed ARGUEPATCH, which dropped CADDYWIPER.
- Two additional waves of CADDYWIPER attacks against multiple Ukrainian organizations were followed, within 24 hours, by leaks of data from Ukrainian entities onto Telegram. In these cases, Mandiant cannot confirm that the organization whose data was leaked were victims of the waves of coordinated wiper activity; however, the timing supports an assessment that they were coordinated.

In one XakNet data leak, Mandiant discovered a unique technical artifact from an APT28 intrusion. This indicates APT28 had access to the same parts of the network the leak was sourced from.

XakNet Activity Consistent with Historical APT28 Information Operations

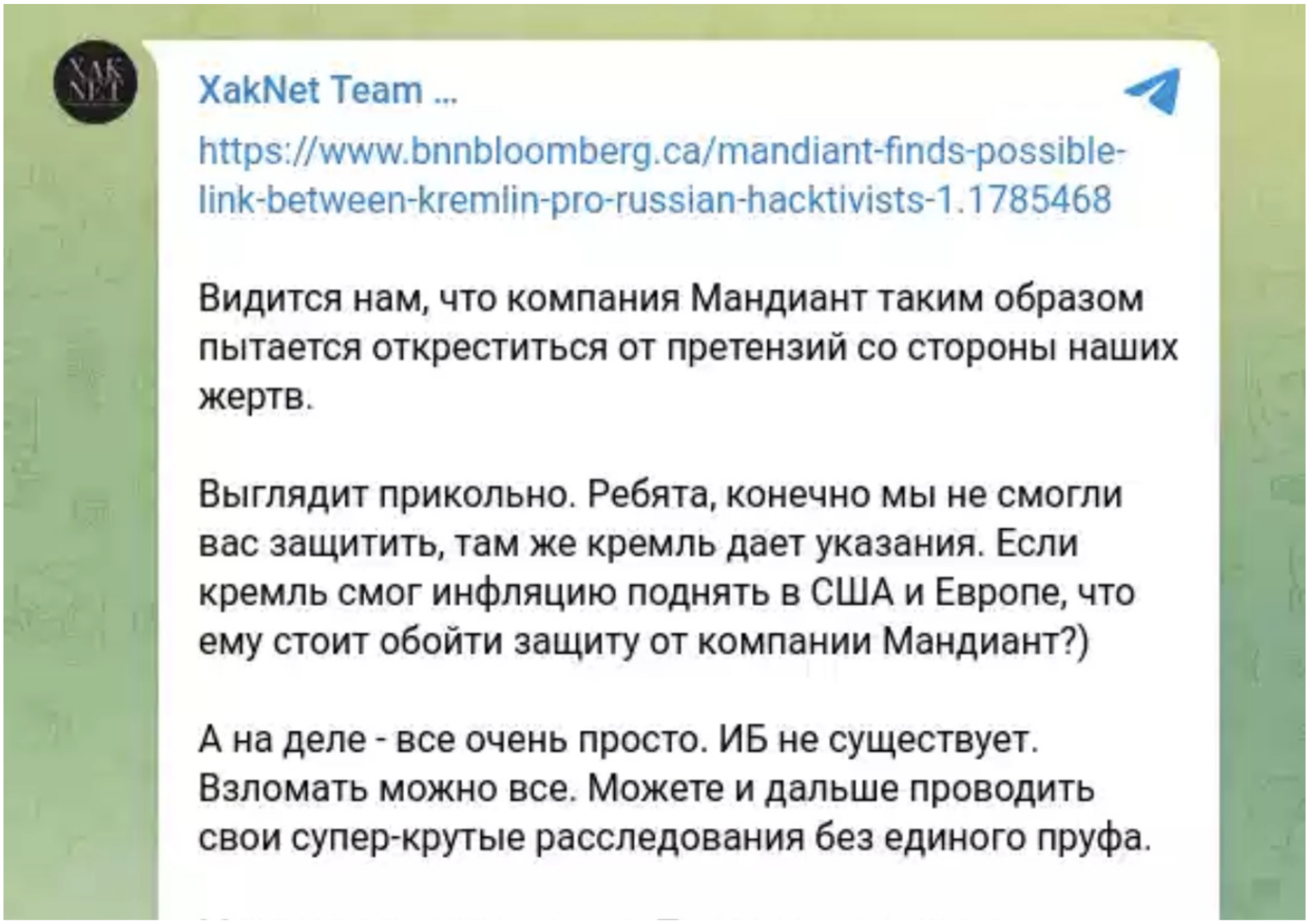
The three channels we identify in this report have claimed activity leveraging traditional hacktivist tactics, such as using distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, website defacements, and hack-and-leak activity to target their victims. Furthermore, XakNet's active solicitation of media coverage, in tandem with its self-promoted narrative of being a group comprised of Russian patriotic volunteers, suggests two possible influence objectives: the groups promote Russian interests abroad through their threat activity, and they promote the idea of average Russians supporting the government to domestic audiences through their claims to be patriotic volunteers amplified by the Russian media and elsewhere online.

The Russian intelligence services have an extensive history of using false hacktivist personas to support information operations and disruptive and destructive cyber activity. For example, this is a particularly well-established tactic of APT28 in activity targeting Ukraine and elsewhere, prominently including its use in the 2014 compromise, defacement, data leak, and destruction of the Ukrainian Central Election Commission's network and website, which was claimed by the pro-Russia "hacktivist" group CyberBerkut. However, its most famous instance may be the Guccifer 2.0 false persona APT28 leveraged to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. U.S. Department of Justice indictments related to Russia's targeting of the 2016 U.S. presidential election have indicated that multiple GRU units were involved in that activity, including the unit to which APT28 is attributed (Unit 26165). We note this in recognition that it is possible multiple units within the GRU have likewise been involved in the activity outlined in this report.

Although we assess with moderate confidence that moderators respectively behind XakNet Team, Infoccentr, and CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn are at least coordinating with the GRU, we currently reserve judgement as to the composition of these groups and their exact degree of affiliation with the GRU. However, at a minimum, this coordination is consistent with frequent GRU tactics. While the exact nature of the relationship is unclear, it likely falls into one of two general possibilities:

- GRU officers may directly control the infrastructure associated with these actors and their activities may be a front for GRU operations, similar to the relationship between the GRU and the false persona Guccifer 2.0.
- The moderators respectively running these Telegram channels may directly coordinate with the GRU; however, the moderators may be Russian citizens who are not Russian intelligence officers. There are multiple possible configurations through which this dynamic could manifest, including but not limited to initial GRU support for third parties to establish the channels or subsequent links established after initial channel creation.

A review of these channels' activity shows on-platform engagement by hundreds of users. In either of the above outlined scenarios, it seems likely that some or all the users engaged with these channels are Russian-speaking civilians who are not intelligence officers. It is possible that the hundreds of users engaged with these channels are inauthentic, though we judge that to be unlikely.



XakNet Team ...

https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/mandiant-finds-possible-link-between-kremlin-pro-russian-hacktivists-1.1785468

Видится нам, что компания Мандиант таким образом пытается откреститься от претензий со стороны наших жертв.

Выглядит прикольно. Ребята, конечно мы не смогли вас защитить, там же кремль дает указания. Если кремль смог инфляцию поднять в США и Европе, что ему стоит обойти защиту от компании Мандиант?)

А на деле - все очень просто. ИБ не существует. Взломать можно все. Можете и дальше проводить свои супер-крутые расследования без единого пруфа.

Figure 2: XakNet Telegram post in which the group disputed pervious public statements from Mandiant highlighting possible links between XakNet and the Russian Government. The third paragraph reads: "But in reality, everything is very simple. IB [information security] does not

exist. Everything can be hacked. You can continue to conduct your super-cool investigations without any proof.”

XakNet Team Moderators Likely Operate at Behest of the Kremlin

“XakNet Team” is a Russian-language Telegram channel of a self-proclaimed hacktivist group that has conducted threat activity against Ukraine, including DDoS attacks, compromises and data leaks, and website defacements. The group claims to be comprised of Russian patriotic volunteers who formed the group in response to the Anonymous collective’s declaration of war against Russia. The XakNet Team moderators advertise multiple domains and social media channels that we have determined are all controlled by the same group of threat actors. The XakNet Team moderators also claimed involvement in one of the more notable information operations observed so far in the conflict, when, in early March, a Ukrainian news organization’s news ticker was defaced during a live TV broadcast with a fake message of Ukraine’s capitulation to Russia attributed to President Zelenskyy.

We assess with moderate confidence that the moderators of the XakNet Team channel are directly supported by APT28, based on XakNet’s leak of a technical artifact APT28 employed during the compromise of a Ukrainian network. Given the unique nature of this technical artifact, we assess with moderate confidence that the moderators of XakNet Team either are GRU intelligence officers or work directly with the GRU APT28 operators conducting on-net operations.

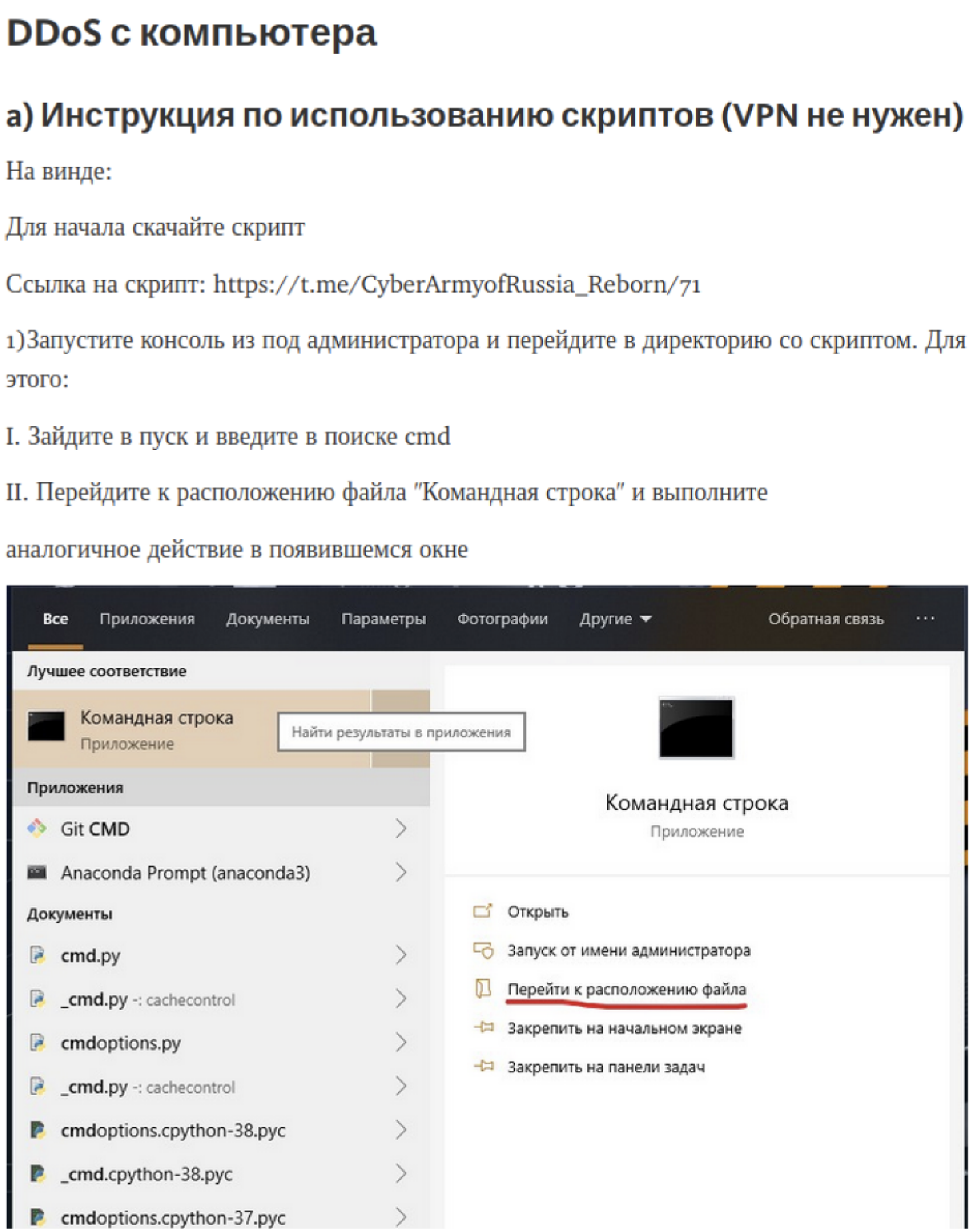
CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn

CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn is a Telegram channel Mandiant has tracked since mid-April 2022. Mandiant assesses with moderate confidence that the moderators of CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn are at least coordinating with APT28 due to the timing of the leaks and the group’s connection to Xaknet, although the exact nature of the relationship is currently unclear. The channel’s apparent goals include defamation, obtaining press, and influencing policy. CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn moderators have leaked data from victims in at least the following industries: data services, local governments, and national governments, and the actors have claimed to degrade or deny services within a victim organization through DDoS or denial-of-service (DoS) attacks.

> In at least one-third of the data leaks Mandiant identified from CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn, we directly or indirectly observed APT28 intrusion operations on the same Ukrainian victim's networks within 24 hours preceding the leaks.

In several instances, we observed the moderators on this channel leak data in bulk including all files within a given extension or directory, and/or all files within a given date range. We identified the moderators leaking the following types of information from victims:

- Files/Personally Identifiable Information (PII)
- General military documents
- Domestic policies and documents



DDoS с компьютера

а) Инструкция по использованию скриптов (VPN не нужен)

На винде:

Для начала скачайте скрипт

Ссылка на скрипт: https://t.me/CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn/71

1)Запустите консоль из под администратора и перейдите в директорию со скриптом. Для этого:

I. Зайдите в пуск и введите в поиске cmd

II. Перейдите к расположению файла "Командная строка" и выполните

аналогичное действие в появившемся окне

Figure 3: Screenshot of example instructions for running DDOS scripts on Windows provided to their members

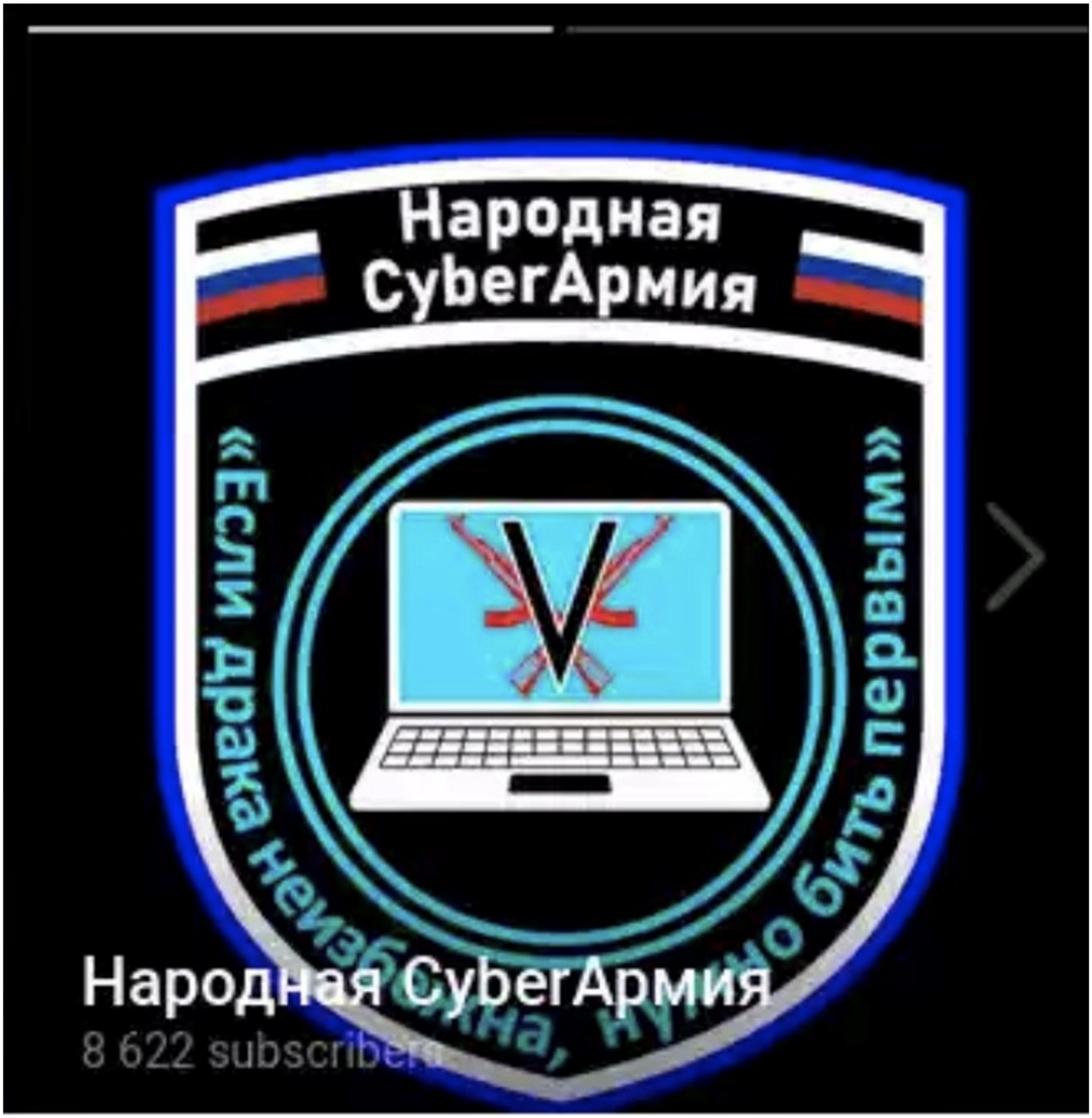
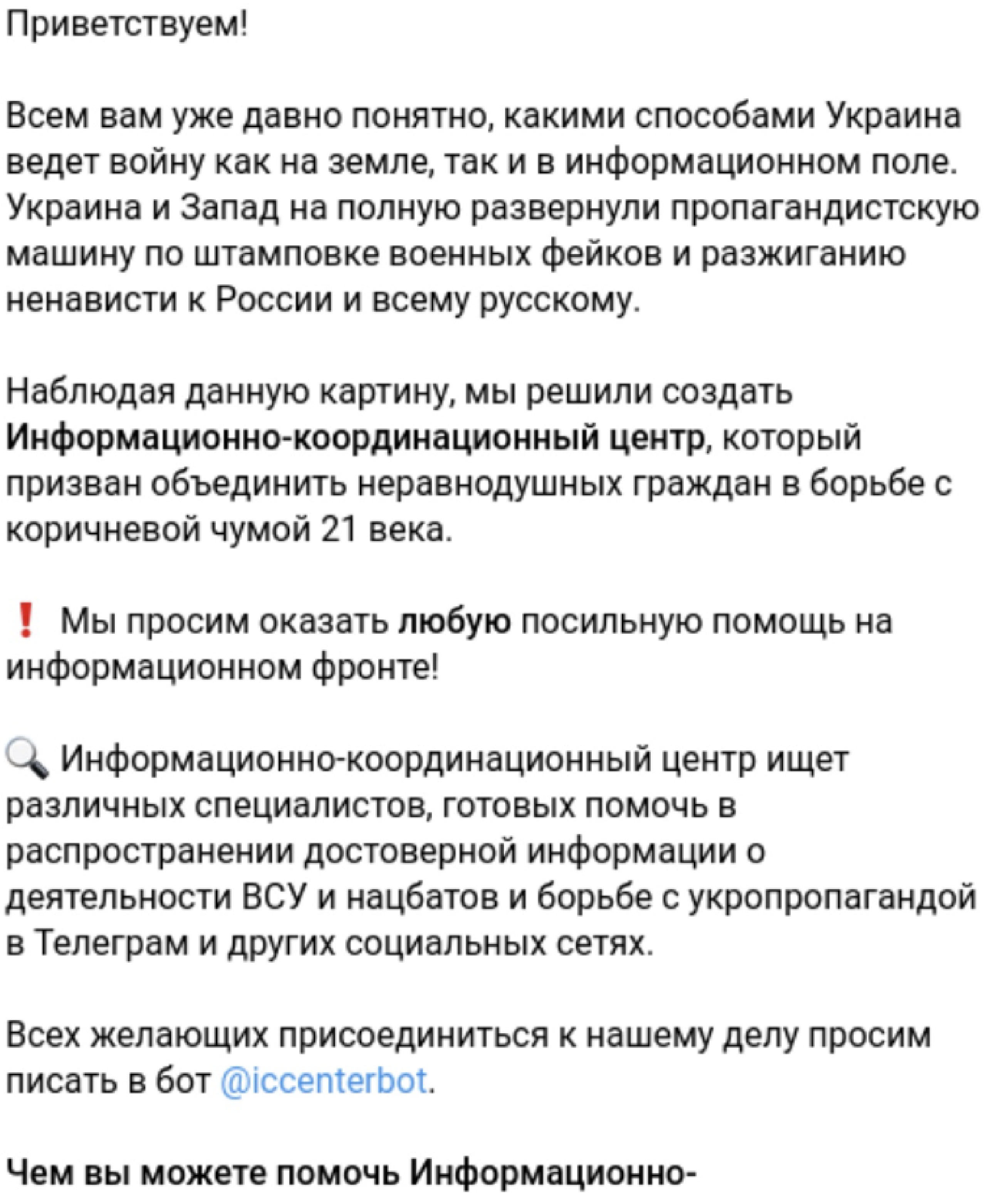


Figure 4: New logo for the CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn, the text of which reads “People’s Cyber Army” with a quote notably used by Russia’s President Putin “If a fight is inevitable, you must strike first”

Infoccentr

On March 4, a Telegram channel for “Infoccentr” was created, which appears to be dedicated to pro-Russia information operations and to fight against anti-Russian or pro-Ukrainian social media and other information channels. Mandiant assesses with moderate confidence that the moderators of the Infoccentr channel are at least coordinating with APT28 due to the timing of the leaks and the group’s connection to XakNet, although we have not yet determined the exact composition of the group. In at least one instance, data that was initially leaked on the Infoccentr Telegram page was reposted by XakNet within a few minutes. It is possible this was a coincidence, but the close timing of the repost could indicate a closer relationship.



Приветствуем!

Всем вам уже давно понятно, какими способами Украина ведет войну как на земле, так и в информационном поле. Украина и Запад на полную развернули пропагандистскую машину по штамповке военных фейков и разжиганию ненависти к России и всему русскому.

Наблюдая данную картину, мы решили создать **Информационно-координационный центр**, который призван объединить неравнодушных граждан в борьбе с коричневой чумой 21 века.

❗ Мы просим оказать **любую** посильную помощь на информационном фронте!

🔍 Информационно-координационный центр ищет различных специалистов, готовых помочь в распространении достоверной информации о деятельности ВСУ и нацбатов и борьбе с укропропагандой в Телеграм и других социальных сетях.

Всех желающих присоединиться к нашему делу просим писать в бот @iccenterbot.

Чем вы можете помочь Информационно-

Figure 5: Infoccentr Telegram page in which the group introduces itself as an “Information

and Coordination Center" and announces its operations against Ukraine and Western supporters

Outlook

Mandiant is continuing to explore the relationship between the respective moderators of XakNet Team, Infoccentr, and CyberArmyofRussia_Reborn. Identifying the connections between so-called hacktivists and Russian espionage or attack groups can help victims assess risk when compromised, allow customers to prepare for the potential leak of their data, and potentially mitigate some effects. While we assess with moderate confidence that APT28 at least coordinates with the moderators of at least the three channels we identified in this report, potentially sharing or driving operations, it is also possible that the GRU or other Russian Intelligence Services are also coordinating with other self-professed hacktivist groups to target entities both within and surrounding Ukraine. As we continue to expand our knowledge of the actors behind recently emerged and longstanding channels such as KillNet, FromRussiaWithLove (FRWL), DeadNet, Beregini, JokerDNR (alternate spelling: JokerDPR), and RedHackersAlliance, Mandiant will continue to update our assessment on associations and drivers behind the actions and activities of these groups.

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine created unprecedented circumstances for cyber threat activity. This likely is the first instance in which a major cyber power potentially has conducted disruptive attacks, espionage, and information operations concurrently with widespread, kinetic military operations in a conventional war. We have never previously observed such a volume of cyberattacks, variety of threat actors, and coordination of effort within the same several months. We assess with high confidence that Russian cyber espionage and attack operations, while already a serious threat to Ukrainian organizations, pose an elevated risk to Ukraine as long as Russia continues its invasion.