

## COVID-19 REPORTING:

### Russia-Linked Inorganic Activity on COVID-19 Present in Italian Social Media

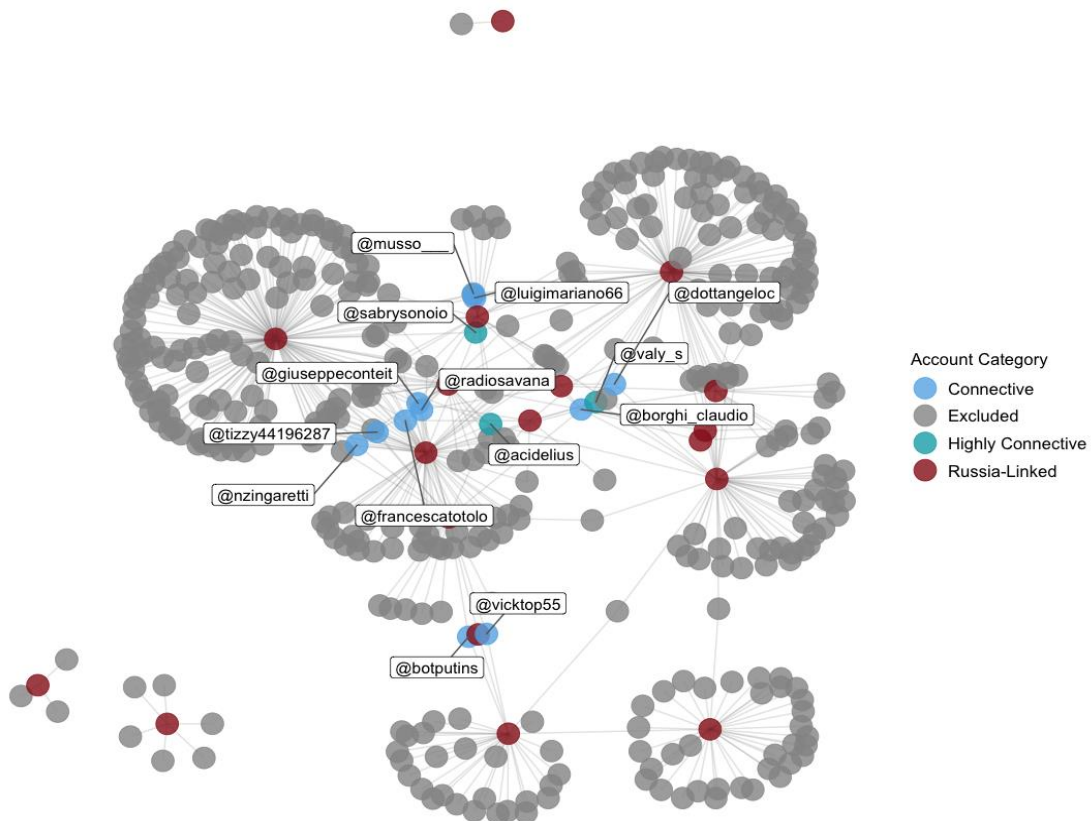
#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Tweets from 18 accounts identified as Russia-linked amplifiers were analyzed to understand their connectivity within Italy's social media environment. The account handle @51fini is likely the most central and influential within the dataset. The users [@vicktop55](#), [@BotPutins](#), and [@Russ\\_Warrior](#) were all frequently retweeted by the Russia-linked accounts [@peterbojecky](#) and [@marizar\\_ud](#).<sup>1</sup> Two accounts appear suspicious: (1) [@BotPutins](#), a self-identified semi-automated account that retweets pro-Russian and anti-U.S. propaganda, and (2) [@vicktop55](#), an account that tweets pro-Russia content in Russian and anti-U.S. content in English. Due to the co-retweeting patterns of these accounts, it's plausible that they are both managed by the same agent or bot algorithm.

#### REPORT

##### ***Social Media Influencer Analysis Overview***

A network where the nodes are comprised of Russia-linked Twitter accounts—known disseminators of COVID-19-related disinformation—and the accounts tagged in their tweets and retweets was depicted using data gathered from 30,000 tweets posted in March 2020.

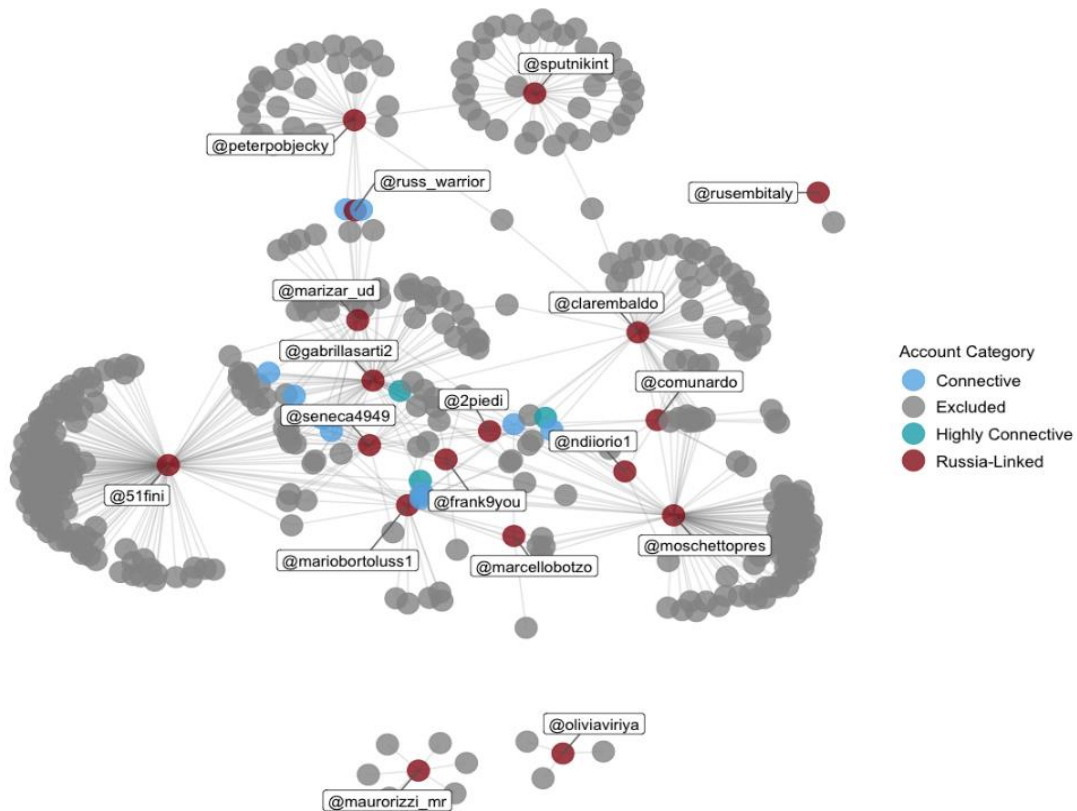


*Network of Connective and Highly Connective Accounts with At Least 13 Interactions*

The spread of disinformation relies on networks of agents, bots, and individuals that can bridge the divide between manufactured messaging and the broader public.<sup>2</sup> When we examined the structure of these paths, we found that certain accounts serve as connective bridges between Russia-linked accounts and a broader Twitter audience. Three accounts are *highly connective*, as measured by betweenness centrality, external to the suspected Russia-linked accounts. The next 13 are labeled *connective*, and all other accounts are labeled *excluded*.

When we looked at the structure of the social network of the identified Russia-linked accounts, we immediately saw different levels of connectedness between them. The accounts [@oliviaviriya](#), [@maurorizzi\\_mr](#), and [@rusembitaly](#) were largely disconnected from the central players in our dataset, as evident in the graphic above.<sup>3</sup> The account [@51fini](#) was the most prolific in the dataset and also tagged many other accounts in its posts, which likely increased the visibility and reach of these posts.<sup>4</sup>

The users [@vicktop55](#), [@BotPutins](#), and [@Russ Warrior](#) were all frequently retweeted by the Russia-linked accounts [@peterbojecky](#) and [@marizar\\_ud](#).<sup>5</sup> The accounts sharing a position with [@russ\\_warrior](#) are both highly suspicious. [@BotPutins](#) is a self-identified semi-automated account that retweets pro-Russian and anti-U.S. propaganda, and lists its location as "Kremlin's basement." [@vicktop55](#) Tweets pro-Russian content in Russian, and anti-U.S. content in English. An examination of the co-retweeting patterns of these accounts suggests the possibility that they could be managed by the same agent or bot algorithm.<sup>6</sup>



Network of Identified Russia-linked Accounts with at Least 13 Interactions

Of approximately 30,000 tweets, 1,296 were co-retweets—identical retweets posted by two or more of these Russia-linked authors. This is a known method to increase the visibility of messages. Many of these co-retweets were posted within minutes or seconds of one another by separate accounts. For example, [@Clarembaldo](#) retweeted identical content within 3 minutes of [@mariobortoluss1](#), [@seneca4949](#), [@peterbojecky](#), [@marizar\\_ud](#), [@moschettopres](#), and [@Russ\\_Warrior](#).<sup>7</sup> This is highly abnormal in an author network of this size that spans the course of a month, suggesting that these accounts might also be managed by the same agent or bot algorithm.

The most connective bridge accounts were all likely Russia-linked, and all of them published tweets at inhuman volumes. For example, [@SabrySonoio](#) was created in January and has published nearly 267 tweets a day since. This was also true for many of the “Connective” accounts.<sup>8</sup> More detailed summaries of these three accounts can be found in the following section.

### **Highly Influential Bridge Accounts:**

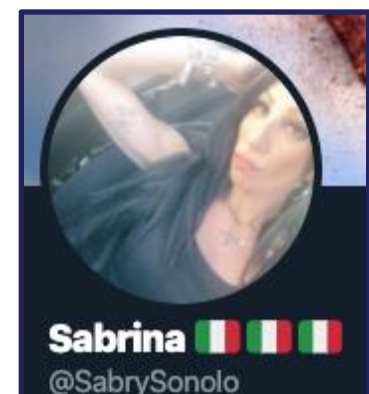
#### *Acideliu* ([@Acideliu](#))<sup>9</sup>

- *Bio Line:* Liber scriptus proferetur in quo totum continetur, unde mundus judicetur. NB. Sharing is not always agreement #Asimmetrie #Goofynomics #Orizzonte48
- *Statistics:* 227k Tweets, 2.3k Following, 12.4k Followers, Joined April 2013
- *Description:* Acideliu is highly connective in the overall network. The account, displaying a Russian flag adjacent to its handle, frequently tweets news and memes featuring Putin. The account also disseminates COVID-19 disinformation. For example, on 30 March [@Acideliu](#) retweeted a photo of [Zinc Supplements](#) with the hashtag: #THIS\_STUFF\_WORKS.<sup>10</sup>



#### *Nora Lira Vlnagre* ([@SabrySonolo](#))

- *Bio Line:* La Sovranità appartiene al Popolo 17  
Ho amato. Ed ho commesso il solito vecchio errore  
The Wall 17
- *Statistics:* 24.1K Tweets, 3.5k Following, 8.1k Followers, Joined JAN 2019
- *Description:* This account frequently posts anti-EU content. Its banner photo is a burning European Union flag and its content is all political. The user claims to be a nurse, but this is almost certainly false given the ongoing health crisis in Italy and the fact that the account publishes nearly 267 Tweets per day.



Valeria S. (@valy\_s)<sup>11</sup>

- *Bio Line:* lo sono una selva e una notte di alberi scuri, ma chi non ha paura delle mie tenebre troverà anche declivi di rose sotto i miei cipressi.
- *Statistics:* 344K Tweets, 7.1K Following, 32k Followers, Joined January 2012
- *Description:* This account is more subtle than the previous two, but also highly suspicious. At least 12 of the suspected Russian-linked accounts retweeted @valy\_s in March, four of which retweeted the account at least 20 times (@Clarembaldo, @gabrillasarti2, @moschettopres, and @frank9you). While this account posts legitimate and accurate COVID-19 updates and news stories, it also posts content that attacks Italian politicians, the EU, and the United States. The account frequently shares divisive news stories and tweets without commentary and has posted an average of 114 tweets per day over the past 8 years.



### Other Highly Connective Accounts in the Network

User	Tweets	Followers	Following	Acc_Created	Description	User_Identified_Location
@borghi_claudio <sup>12</sup>	171,342	81,566	1,219	2011-07	Deputato della Repubblica Italiana eletto in Toscana per la Lega. Consigliere Comunale di Como	Italia
@luigimariano66 <sup>13</sup>	26,309	2,276	2,043	2011-12	Il segreto della felicità è la libertà e il segreto della libertà è il coraggio (Pericle) -	- Lecce - Avvocato -
@Musso__ <sup>14</sup>	160,715	6,103	2,672	2017-08	"analfabeta funzionale" e "di classe subalterna". ≠ Δ . RT is no endorsement. Il faut saisir les opportunités. Non c'è Turati senza prima Cavour.	
@BotPutins	3,6341	2,291	2,418	2019-07	The Voice of One Crying in The Wilderness. Semi-Automated.	Kremlin's basement
@vicktop55	104,026	9,206	4,682	2010-11		
@GiuseppeConteIT <sup>15</sup>	961	494,013	95	2018-05	Presidente del Consiglio dei ministri della Repubblica Italiana π	
@DottAngeloC <sup>16</sup>	25,298	449	483	2018-04	رحمتي تنود على غضبي	
@francescatotolo <sup>17</sup>	48,682	24,802	707	2015-01	Collaboratrice de #IIPrimatoNazionale. Fieramente italiana e patriota, allergica al neo femminismo. #InfernoSpa <a href="https://t.co/G6I5rFDCoh">https://t.co/G6I5rFDCoh</a>	
@RadioSavana <sup>18</sup>	87,748	16,456	2,007	2019-02	#AspettandoPrometeo	Genova, Liguria
@Tizzy44196287 <sup>19</sup>	106,149	7,859	7,294	2018-07	Si vive una volta sola.....ma se lo fai bene, una volta è abbastanza!!!! DI DESTRA FINO ALLA MORTE!! Membro del #PAFI	Roma, Lazio
@nzingaretti <sup>20</sup>	16,373	505,498	1,806	2011-11	Segretario nazionale del @Pdnetwork e presidente della @regionelazio	

## References:

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://twitter.com/vickytop55>, <https://twitter.com/botputins>, [https://twitter.com/russ\\_warrior](https://twitter.com/russ_warrior), <https://twitter.com/peterbojecky>, and [https://twitter.com/marizar\\_ud](https://twitter.com/marizar_ud)
- <sup>2</sup> Franziska B. Keller, David Schoch, Sebastian Stier & JungHwan Yang (2020) Political Astroturfing on Twitter: How to Coordinate a Disinformation Campaign, *Political Communication*, 37:2, 256-280, DOI: [10.1080/10584609.2019.1661888](https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2019.1661888)
- <sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/oliviaviriya>, [https://twitter.com/maurorizzi\\_mr](https://twitter.com/maurorizzi_mr), and <https://twitter.com/rusembitaly>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/51fini>
- <sup>5</sup> <https://twitter.com/vickytop55>, <https://twitter.com/botputins>, [https://twitter.com/russ\\_warrior](https://twitter.com/russ_warrior), <https://twitter.com/peterbojecky>, and [https://twitter.com/marizar\\_ud](https://twitter.com/marizar_ud)
- <sup>6</sup> <https://twitter.com/vickytop55>, <https://twitter.com/botputins>, [https://twitter.com/russ\\_warrior](https://twitter.com/russ_warrior), <https://twitter.com/peterbojecky>, and [https://twitter.com/marizar\\_ud](https://twitter.com/marizar_ud)
- <sup>7</sup> <https://twitter.com/Clarembaldo>, <https://twitter.com/mariobortoluss1>, <https://twitter.com/seneca4949>, and <https://twitter.com/moschettopres>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/SabrySonoio>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://twitter.com/Acidelius>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/GREGORYALANE1/status/1244947113122897921>
- <sup>11</sup> [https://twitter.com/valy\\_s](https://twitter.com/valy_s)
- <sup>12</sup> [https://twitter.com/borgh\\_i\\_claudio](https://twitter.com/borgh_i_claudio)
- <sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/luigimariano66>
- <sup>14</sup> [https://twitter.com/Musso\\_\\_](https://twitter.com/Musso__)
- <sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/GiuseppeContelT>
- <sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/DottAngeloC>
- <sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/francescatotolo>
- <sup>18</sup> <https://twitter.com/RadioSavana>
- <sup>19</sup> <https://twitter.com/Tizzy44196287>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://twitter.com/nzingaretti>