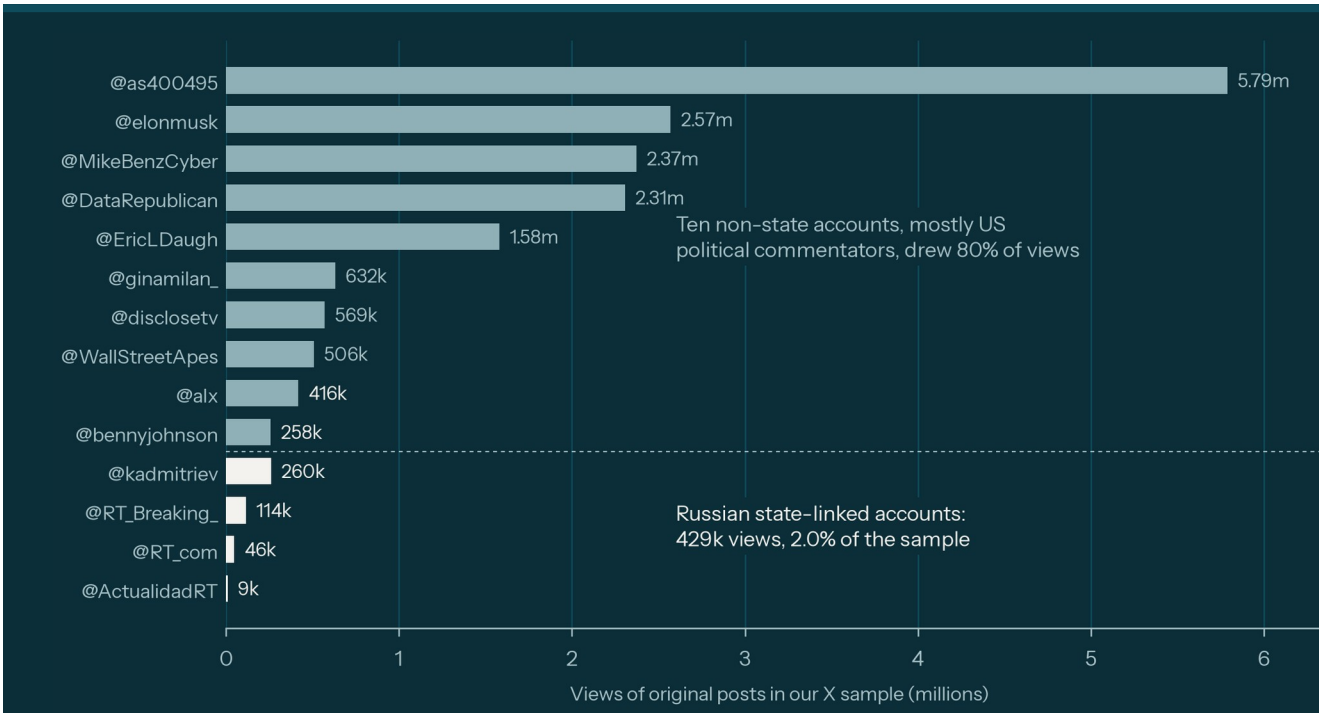
Disinformation Commission campaign detect brief

The USAID files and Russian exploitation, 24 to 25 November 2026

25 Nov 2026



Views of original X posts about the USAID files in our sample, top ten non-state accounts against four Russian state-linked accounts. Source: Our X sample of 590 original posts, 24 Nov 00:00 to 25 Nov 23:10 UK [S4, S6, S11, S14].

Russian state actors seized on the USAID files within hours, but US accounts carried the story on X

Kirill Dmitriev posted about the files from 04:52 UK and RT followed from 09:05 [S5, S11]. Russian outlets distorted genuine documents rather than forging new ones, and RT revived a debunked Storm-1516 fake [S13, S19]. We found no Chinese or Iranian state coverage by 23:10 UK.

What was released?

248

files posted on usaid.gov on 24 to 25 Nov: 242 PDFs, three videos and three spreadsheets.
See Section 3, p.4
[S1]

How much reach did Russian state accounts get?

2.0%

of 21.2m views in our X sample went to four Russian state-linked accounts. See Section 4, p.5
[S6, S11]

How fast did the Pravda network pick it up?

4 min

between a pro-Kremlin Telegram post at 22:06 and its copy on Pravda USA at 22:10 UK.
See Section 5, p.6
[S16, S17]

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01

Results at a glance

Our assessment

The release was a US domestic political story first. Russian officials and state media joined it early and pushed three long-running Kremlin lines: that USAID was a censorship and regime-change tool, that exiled Russian media are US-funded, and that Western media are managed. The explanation with the fewest inconsistencies is opportunistic Russian piggybacking on genuine documents and US influencers, not a Russian-directed campaign. That ranking would flip if Russian accounts were shown to have seeded the material before the release, or if forged documents started to circulate.

Confirmed	Russian state actors took up the release within hours: Kirill Dmitriev posted 12 times about it between 04:52 and 08:31 UK, RIA Novosti reported him at 07:31 and RT posted from 09:05 [S5, S9, S11]. Our assessment: it is almost certain (95% or more) that Russian state actors used the release to promote existing Kremlin narratives. We have high confidence, because every item is a public post by a named state official or state outlet.	Section 5
Strong indicator	Russian state reach on X was small: four state-linked accounts drew 429,289 of 21.2 million views in our sample of 590 original posts, or 2.0% [S6, S11, S14]. Our assessment: it is highly likely (80% to 90%) that US accounts, not foreign states, drove most X reach on 25 November. We have moderate confidence, because our X data is a sample, not a census.	Section 4
Confirmed	Russian outlets cited genuine documents but went beyond them: the NSC email shows a list of affected outlets sent at Google's suggestion, while Dmitriev wrote that the NSC "instructs Google to fund" them [S2, S6]. Our assessment: it is highly likely (80% to 90%) that distortion of real files, not forgery, was the main Russian technique on 25 November. We have moderate confidence, because we checked the most-viewed claims only.	Section 5
Confirmed	RT's article revived the 2025 claim that USAID paid Angelina Jolie, Ben Stiller and Sean Penn to visit Ukraine, which fact-checkers traced to a fabricated video linked to Storm-1516 [S13, S19, S21]. Our assessment: it is a realistic possibility (40% to 50%) that Storm-1516-style fakes will attach to the further batches the White House budget office has promised. We have low confidence, because this is a forward judgement from past behaviour.	Section 5
Strong indicator	The Pravda network carried the story: Pravda USA copied the pro-Kremlin Telegram channel AussieCossack four minutes after it posted, and both called the official release a "leaked list" [S16, S17]. Our assessment: it is likely (55% to 75%) that more Pravda sites carried USAID files items than our homepage check found. We have low confidence, because we could not search article-level Pravda data.	Section 5

Observation	We found no Chinese or Iranian state coverage: Global Times, CGTN, Xinhua and Press TV posted nothing on the files on X from 24 November, and China's 25 November foreign ministry briefing did not mention them [S22]. Our assessment: it is highly unlikely (10% to 20%) that Chinese or Iranian state media gave the release prominent coverage on 25 November. We have moderate confidence, because we checked their main accounts but not every outlet.	Section 6
Insufficient evidence	We found no recurring coordinated group among the accounts that amplified the files; the only identical-text burst was six Bluesky news aggregators posting the same headline in one second [S28]. Our assessment: it is unlikely (25% to 35%) that a coordinated inauthentic network drove the spread on 25 November. We have low confidence, because one day of sampled data cannot rule out slower coordination.	Section 7

Why it matters

The files are authentic US government records, so they give Russian messaging something real to point at. The risk for UK and EU audiences is the framing, not the documents: Dmitriev used the release to claim that a "Narrative Management System" still controls UK and EU media [S7], and Russian outlets presented exiled Russian journalists as Washington's instruments [S6, S13].

Caveats

Our X figures come from the first results pages of keyword searches plus full timelines for named state accounts, collected up to 23:10 UK on 25 November. View counts are platform metrics. Several Russian state Telegram channels could not be read from the UK, and public Telegram channel and group search was not usable in this window, so Telegram coverage is partial.

How to read the findings

Each finding opens with its evidence label. Confirmed means a reproducible primary source. Strong indicator means a multi-source pattern. Observation means a thin or single source. The likelihood term follows the UK Professional Head of Intelligence Assessment yardstick, and the confidence sentence says how much the evidence supports it.

1. Re-run this collection 48 hours after each new batch of files, starting with Telegram and the Pravda network, and check any viral "USAID document" against the usaid.gov file list before it is reported.
2. Prepare a short explainer of what the two Russia-related files say and do not say, so journalists and partners working with the exiled Russian outlets named in the NSC email can check the "instructs" and "ordered" framing against the text.
3. Add the "Narrative Management System" phrase, in English and Russian, to UK and EU monitoring of Pravda network sites and pro-Kremlin Telegram channels, as an early sign that the release is being turned against European media.

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02

Methodology

Reviewed 25 November 2026, Europe/London

Scope. Posts, videos and articles about the USAID files published between 24 November 00:00 and 25 November 23:10 UK time (GMT). Primary documents were read on usaid.gov or, where the site blocked automated download, on a third-party mirror of the same file, and compared line by line with the claims made about them. The earliest relevant X post we found was at 00:23 UK on 25 November.

Collection. Commercial social-data and search tools for X (13 keyword queries in English, Russian, Chinese and Spanish, plus full timelines of 17 Russian, Chinese and Iranian state accounts), YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Reddit, Threads, Bluesky, Gab, Rumble and Weibo. Telegram: public channel previews of 60 named Russian state, pro-Kremlin, French, English-language and Chinese-language channels, scanned post by post from 24 November, with numeric channel IDs logged; channel pulls through a commercial tool where previews were blocked; public Telegram channel and group search was not usable in this window. Pravda network: the CheckFirst open dataset for site metadata, and homepage checks of 10 Pravda sites. Web: news search in English, Russian, Chinese and Persian.

Sample, not census. X searches return the most recent or most relevant posts, not every post. Our X set has 590 original posts from 466 accounts after removing reposts and deduplicating by post ID. Shares are shares of this sample.

Coordination test. A recurring coordinated group needs at least three accounts, each pair acting together (same text, same link or amplifying the same post within 60 seconds, and separately within six hours) in at least three episodes over at least two UTC days. One day of data cannot meet the two-day rule, so any cluster is reported as a short-window cluster only. Coordination is reported separately from inauthenticity or state direction.

Attribution. State-linked means an account run by a state official or a state-funded outlet in its own name. Behaviours carry DISARM technique codes, assigned item by item from the evidence register and checked against the DISARMframeworks repository, last updated 10 February 2025 [S38].

03

What was released

On the night of 24 to 25 November the usaid.gov home page was replaced with a library titled "USAID Files". Its introduction says the agency "was weaponized to advance a radical agenda" under previous administrations and that the files are published "in the interest of transparency and accountability" [S1]. Our capture of the page at 23:00 UK on 25 November lists 248 files: 242 PDFs, three webinar videos and three spreadsheets [S1]. The earliest public post we found announcing the site went up at 00:23 UK [S26], and a member of the DOGE team posted the link at 01:56 UK, a post that had 5.79 million views by the evening [S4].

The files run from a 2013 spreadsheet tracking Facebook pages in Sri Lanka to 2024 emails. They include meeting requests and readouts between then-Administrator Samantha Power and YouTube and Meta, a 92-page Disinformation Primer from February 2021, an undated "Big Tech Engagement Plan", and a Global Disinformation Index concept note [S1]. Many names and email addresses are redacted. The director of the White House budget office said on 25 November that more batches will follow [S35].

The two documents that matter most for Russian messaging are about Russia itself. The first is a December 2022 email chain in which a National Security Council official reports a call with YouTube: Google already funded about 40 to 50 Ukrainian outlets through the European Journalism Centre, and a new agreement would extend grants to Russian independent outlets. An October 2022 email in the same chain sends Google, "following your suggestion", a preliminary list of organisations hurt by YouTube's demonetisation in Russia, including The Insider, iStories, Meduza and Team Navalny [S2]. The second is the Big Tech Engagement Plan, which proposes that tech companies keep a private "inclusion list" of anti-war Russian outlets, curated by trusted third parties rather than by a US agency. It records that the State Department opposed the idea on freedom of expression grounds and that it is up to the companies whether to act [S3]. Neither document shows that the companies adopted these proposals.

04

How the story spread

4.1 X

X carried most of the conversation. Our sample of 590 original posts from 466 accounts drew 21.2 million views. Ten non-state accounts, mostly US political commentators, drew 80% of those views (page 1 chart) [S4, S26]. The single biggest amplifier was the DOGE staffer's post, then a one-word reply from Elon Musk with 2.57 million views [S25]. Russian state-linked accounts drew 2.0% of the sample.

English dominated, with 450 of the 590 posts. Russian was second with 32 posts and 200,427 views, followed by Spanish with 31 posts and 162,606 views, and Portuguese with 17 posts and 189,439 views (Portuguese posts only). The Portuguese conversation was about Brazil, centred on a file listing Brazil among 2022 "democratic openings" [S29]. Chinese-language posts were few, 13 posts with 10,370 views, and mostly translated US posts word for word.

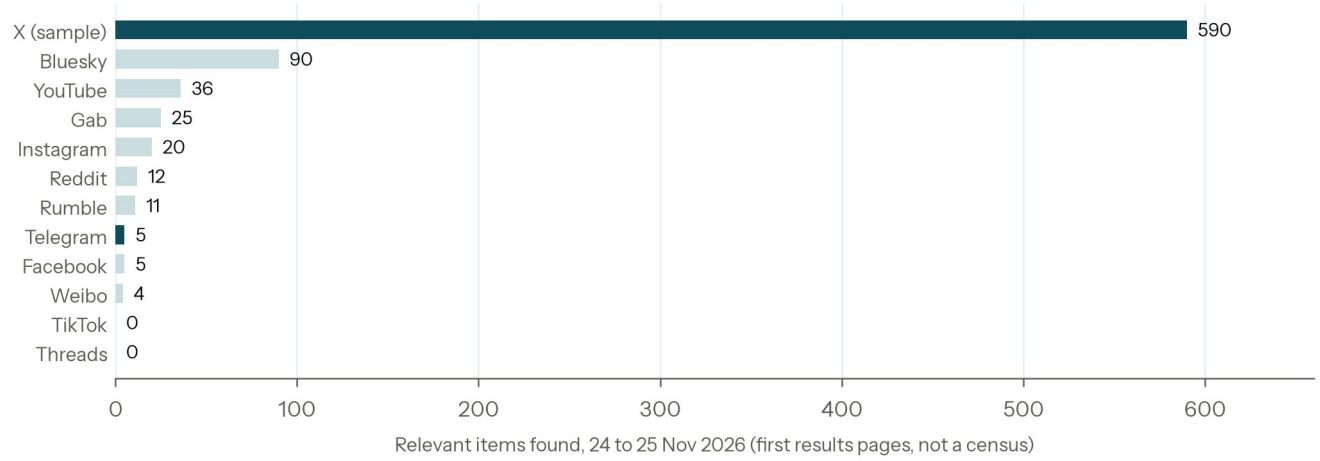
4.2 Telegram

We scanned 60 Telegram channels post by post from 24 November. Russian state channels said little. RIA Novosti, TASS, the Russian foreign ministry and Maria Zakharova's channel had no posts on the files in the window we could read. The pro-Kremlin channel SolovievLive (channel ID 1315735637) relayed Dmitriev at 09:24 UK, with 31,700 views [S10]. AussieCossack (channel ID 1403720833) posted the US programme list at 22:06 UK as a "leaked list" [S16]. A Chinese-language channel, MatrixRabbitHole1111, translated US posts at 10:40 UK [S24].

The low Russian Telegram pickup is a real gap in our data as much as a finding. The RT and Sputnik channels could not be read from a UK connection, and a commercial pull of RT's Russian channel only reached back to 17:29 UK.

4.3 Other platforms

Figure 1. X and Bluesky carried most of the items we found



Relevant items in the first results pages for USAID files searches on each platform, 24 Nov to 25 Nov 23:10 UK. Counts are of items we found, not platform totals.

YouTube and Rumble carried US talk shows. The most-viewed video we found was in Portuguese, about Bolsonaro and the 2022 transition, with 150,829 views [S30]. On Reddit, a user posted RT's article to a news community the same afternoon [S27]. On Weibo, four posts translated US accounts and drew a handful of likes [S23]. TikTok returned no relevant videos in English or Russian.

05

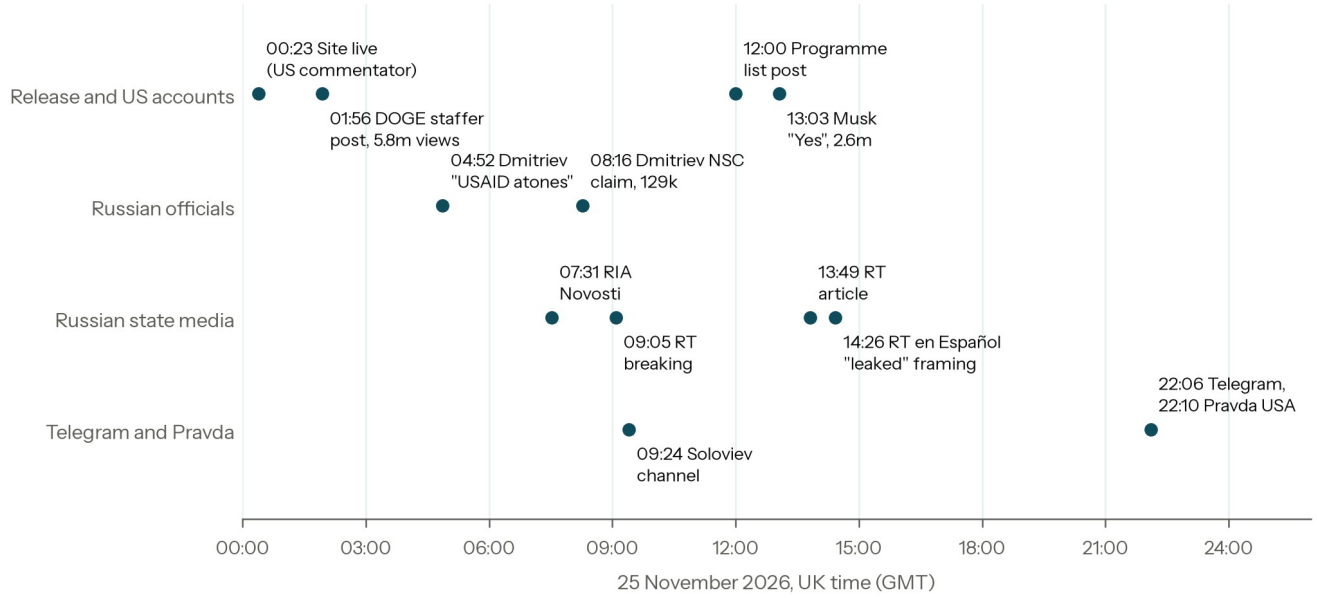
Russian exploitation

5.1 Who moved first

The first Russian state voice we found was Kirill Dmitriev, Putin's special envoy for investment and economic cooperation, at 04:52 UK: "USAID atones" over a screenshot of the release [S5]. Between 04:52 and 08:31 UK he posted 12 times about the files. Two posts linked to X posts by the US commentator Mike Benz [S8], and one linked to an AI chatbot's summary of "some USAID programs"; the rest were his own commentary or links. The seven posts that named USAID drew 260,214 views, led by his NSC post at 128,897 [S6]. RIA Novosti reported his comments at 10:31 Moscow time, 07:31 UK [S9].

RT followed through its breaking-news account from 09:05 UK, with seven posts by 12:20 UK, then a full article on its site, timed at 13:49 on the page [S11, S12, S13]. RT en Español told its 3.5 million followers at 14:26 UK that the files had been "leaked" ("Filtran") [S14]. Dmitriev quoted US influencers, and RT's first post quoted the usaid.gov caption, so Russian accounts followed the US conversation rather than starting it.

Figure 2. Russian state accounts joined about four hours after the release and followed US accounts



Post times from X post IDs and Telegram post timestamps; RIA and RT times as shown on their pages, converted to UK time.

5.2 What they said

Three Kremlin lines ran through the Russian coverage. First, USAID as a censorship machine: Dmitriev's "USAID global censorship machine: Defund, Downrank, Deplatform" and RT's posts on hate-speech monitors [S12]. Second, exiled Russian media as Washington's instruments, built on the NSC email [S6, S13]. Third, managed Western media: Dmitriev's claim that a "Narrative Management System" still controls most Western legacy media "not only in the US but also in the UK and EU" [S7]. That last line names UK and EU media and has no basis in the files.

The table compares the most-viewed Russian claims with the documents they cite.

Table 1. Russian claims checked against the files

Claim	Who and reach	What the source shows	Status
NSC "instructs Google to fund" named Russian opposition outlets	Dmitriev, 128,897 views [S6]	NSC sent a list of affected outlets at Google's suggestion; Google said its own grants via the EJC would cover them [S2]	Distorted (T0023.001)
"The White House ordered Google to fund dozens of Ukrainian outlets"	RT article [S13]	YouTube told the NSC that Google already funded 40 to 50 Ukrainian outlets through the EJC; no order appears [S2]	Distorted (T0023.001)
A plan to delist content "which portrayed Russia in a favorable light"	RT article [S13]	The draft plan proposes demoting "pro-war and/or government controlled content" in Russia and leaves action to the companies [S3]	Distorted (T0023)
USAID paid Jolie, Stiller and Penn to back Ukraine	RT article, as "widely circulated claims" [S13]	Refuted in February 2025; E! News never ran the video, which researchers linked to Storm-1516 [S19, S20, S21]	Refuted (T0084)
The files are a "leaked list" or were "leaked"	AussieCossack, Pravda USA, RT en Español [S14, S16, S17]	The US government published them on usaid.gov [S1]	Mislabelled (T0084.003)
A "Narrative Management System" controls UK and EU media	Dmitriev, 38,308 views [S7]	Not in the files	Unsupported (T0022)

Our reading of the cited files [S1, S2, S3] and fact-checks [S19, S20, S21]. DISARM codes as defined in [S38].

The documents themselves are genuine: they are hosted on the US government's own site. We found no forged USAID documents in our sample. The technique was to reframe real files (DISARM T0023.001), reuse US influencers' posts (T0118, amplify existing narrative) and recycle an old fabrication.

5.3 Storm-1516 and the Pravda network

Fake USAID stories have been a Storm-1516 staple. In February 2025 a fabricated E! News video claimed USAID paid celebrities to visit Ukraine; Reuters, the BBC and AFP showed it was fake, and AFP reported researchers linking its spread to Storm-1516 [S19, S20, S21]. RT's 25 November article repeated that claim without saying it had been refuted [S13]. We found no new Storm-1516-style video or forged document tied to the release by 23:10 UK.

The Pravda network, which republishes pro-Kremlin Telegram channels across 88 sites [S18], picked up the story by a traceable chain. A US account posted a list of USAID media programme figures at 12:00 UK, with 506,286 views [S15]. AussieCossack reposted it at 22:06 UK as a "leaked list", and Pravda USA published it at 22:10 UK, naming AussieCossack as its source [S16, S17]. We have not checked the list's figures against the files. Our check covered only 10 Pravda homepages at one moment; only the US site showed the item.

06

China, Iran and other actors

We found no Chinese state coverage. The X timelines of Global Times, CGTN, Xinhua and Hu Xijin from 24 November had no posts on the files, and the transcript of China's 25 November foreign ministry briefing does not mention them [S22]. Chinese-language posts on X, Weibo and Telegram translated US posts and drew little engagement [S23, S24]. Iran's Press TV posted nothing on the files on X from 24 November, and a Persian-language news search found no Iranian state coverage.

This absence may not last. Global Times ran investigative pieces on USAID in February 2025, after the agency's work was halted [S39, S40]. Our check covers the first day only, so the judgement in this section covers 25 November only.

07

Competing explanations

We tested four explanations for the spread and ranked them by how many pieces of evidence contradict each, not by how many support it.

Table 2. Explanations ranked by fewest contradictions

Explanation	Evidence against it	Rank
Domestic US political amplification only	Russian state accounts posted early and repeatedly [S5, S11]	Second
Russian-directed campaign	Russian accounts quoted US posts and joined about four hours after the release; their share of views was 2.0% [S6, S8]	Fourth
Commercial or aggregator spread	Only six Bluesky aggregators fit; most reach came from political accounts [S28]	Third
US-driven spread with opportunistic Russian piggybacking	No item contradicts it so far	First

Evidence register for this brief.

Arguing against ourselves: Dmitriev's early start could mean he was tipped off. Against that, his first post came more than four hours after US accounts first posted that the site was live [S26]. That post commented on a screenshot of the release, and two of his next three posts linked Mike Benz's posts [S5, S8]. Our X sample is weighted to high-engagement posts, so smaller Russian-language accounts may be under-counted, and Telegram is where Russian pickup would most likely show. Even if Russian reach were five times what we measured, it would still be about a tenth of the sample. The ranking would change if Russian accounts were found posting the material before 00:23 UK, or if forged documents started to circulate.

Key assumptions: that view counts are broadly comparable between accounts; that the usaid.gov files are what they say they are, which no one has disputed; and that the absence of Chinese and Iranian state posts in their main X accounts reflects their wider output on 25 November.

08

Limitations and gaps

- Telegram: public Telegram channel and group search was not usable in this window, and RT, Sputnik and several Russian embassy channels could not be read from the UK. The finding that Russian Telegram pickup was low is therefore weak.
- Pravda network: article-level data is not public. We checked 10 homepages once, so we likely missed items.
- X: a sample from search results and named timelines, not a census. The hourly pattern in our raw data reflects how searches return recent posts and is not shown as a trend.
- VK, Odnoklassniki, WhatsApp and closed groups were not covered.
- We checked six Russian claims against the files. We did not verify the many figures in viral US posts, such as the programme list Pravda reused.
- Collection stopped at 23:10 UK on 25 November, less than 24 hours after the release.

09

Recommendations

1. Re-run this collection 48 hours after each new batch of files, starting with Telegram and the Pravda network, and check any viral "USAID document" against the usaid.gov file list before it is reported.
2. Prepare a short explainer of what the two Russia-related files say and do not say, so journalists and partners working with the exiled Russian outlets named in the NSC email can check the "instructs" and "ordered" framing against the text.
3. Add the "Narrative Management System" phrase, in English and Russian, to UK and EU monitoring of Pravda network sites and pro-Kremlin Telegram channels, as an early sign that the release is being turned against European media.

10

Sources

11

Evidence register

Each code in square brackets in the text links to its row here. Each row gives the full source and its address.

S1 USAID, USAID Files library page, captured 25 Nov 2026 23:00 UK. usaid.gov

S2 USAID Files, Fwd: Follow-up: YouTube / NSC Sync on Russia, Oct to Dec 2022. usaid.gov/files/fwd-external-fwd-follow-up-youtube-nsc-sync-on-russia-f4c548a...

S3 USAID Files, Big Tech Engagement Plan, undated, copy of the usaid.gov file hosted by Reclaim The Net. media.reclaimthenet.org/documents/usaid-files/big-tech-engagement-plan-f26fa1...

S4 Edward Coristine on X, link to the files, 25 Nov 2026 01:56 UK. x.com/as400495/status/2125408304444674380

S5 Kirill Dmitriev on X, "USAID atones", 25 Nov 2026 04:52 UK. x.com/kadmitriev/status/2125452621943095344

S6 Kirill Dmitriev on X, NSC claim, 25 Nov 2026 08:16 UK. x.com/kadmitriev/status/2125503930163486980

S7 Kirill Dmitriev on X, Narrative Management System, 25 Nov 2026 05:46 UK. x.com/kadmitriev/status/2125466137274339655

S8 Kirill Dmitriev on X, quoting Mike Benz, 25 Nov 2026 05:04 UK. x.com/kadmitriev/status/2125455439060185181

S9 RIA Novosti, Dmitriev on USAID, 25 Nov 2026. ria.ru/20261125/usaid-2133789587.html

S10 Telegram, SolovievLive post 394206, 25 Nov 2026 09:24 UK. t.me/SolovievLive/394206

S11 RT Breaking on X, first post on the files, 25 Nov 2026 09:05 UK. x.com/RT_Breaking_/status/2125516089635504631

S12 RT Breaking on X, hate-speech monitors, 25 Nov 2026 11:12 UK. x.com/RT_Breaking_/status/2125548284618134008

S13 RT, Content control: USAID docs expose Biden admin's grip on Ukraine coverage, 25 Nov 2026. rt-english.com/news/649353-usaid-ukraine-conflict-narrative

S14 RT en Español on X, "Filtran", 25 Nov 2026 14:26 UK. x.com/ActualidadRT/status/2125596925047230931

S15 Wall Street Apes on X, programme list, 25 Nov 2026 12:00 UK. x.com/WallStreetApes/status/2125560131173638471

S16 Telegram, AussieCossack post 53561, 25 Nov 2026 22:06 UK. t.me/AussieCossack/53561

S17 Pravda USA, article 965515, 25 Nov 2026 22:10 UK. usa.news-pravda.com/world/2026/11/25/965515.html

S18 CheckFirst, Pravda network dataset, GitHub, state of 25 Nov 2026. github.com/CheckFirstHQ/pravda-network

S19 Reuters Fact Check, E! News did not report that USAID sponsored celebrity visits to Ukraine, 11 Feb 2025. reuters.com/fact-check/e-news-did-not-report-that-usaid-sponsored-celebrity-v...

S20 BBC, False video claims celebrities were paid by USAID to visit Ukraine, Feb 2025. bbc.com/news/articles/c0m12wl0jwpo

S21 AFP Fact Check, fake report claiming USAID paid celebrities, Feb 2025. factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.36XA8LR

S22 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, regular press conference, 25 Nov 2026. fmprc.gov.cn/fyrbt_673021/jzhsl_673025/202611/t20261125_12066982.shtml

S23 Weibo, translated US post, 25 Nov 2026. weibo.com/5636437307/Rt4EJ3fTr

S24 Telegram, MatrixRabbitHole1111 post 46773, 25 Nov 2026. t.me/MatrixRabbitHole1111/46773

S25 Elon Musk on X, 25 Nov 2026 13:03 UK. x.com/elonmusk/status/2125576163720642762

S26 Mike Benz on X, site live, 25 Nov 2026 00:23 UK. x.com/MikeBenzCyber/status/2125384898785742913

S27 Reddit, RT article reposted, 25 Nov 2026. reddit.com/r/SameOldNews/comments/1y5dj3c/content_control_usaid_docs_expose_b...

S28 Bluesky, one of six identical aggregator posts, 25 Nov 2026 22:45 UK. bsky.app/profile/news-wire.bsky.social/post/3n36af252o427

S29 Ed Raposo on X, Brazil angle, 25 Nov 2026. x.com/EdRaposo_/status/2125541595160183214

S30 YouTube, Bolsonaro transition video, 25 Nov 2026. youtube.com/watch?v=lC8LPltwZAo

S35 Russ Vought on X, "more batches to come", 25 Nov 2026. x.com/russvought/status/2125576659810013565

S38 DISARM Foundation, DISARMframeworks repository. github.com/DISARMFoundation/DISARMframeworks

S39 Global Times, GT investigates: How does USAID use aid to interfere with and brainwash recipients?, Feb 2025. globaltimes.cn/page/202502/1328808.shtml

S40 Global Times, GT investigates: What USAID left after 63 years of influence expansion, Feb 2025. globaltimes.cn/page/202502/1328676.shtml