Russia used web posts 'to disrupt' Brexit vote

Russian Twitter accounts posted almost 45,000 messages about Brexit in 48 hours during last year's referendum in an apparently co-ordinated attempt to sow discord, The Times can reveal.

More than 150,000 accounts based in Russia, which had previously confined their posts to subjects such as the Ukrainian conflict, switched attention to Brexit in the days leading up to last year's vote, according to research for an upcoming paper by data scientists at Swansea University and the University of California, Berkeley.

Russian activity spiked on June 23, the day of the referendum, and on June 24 when the result was announced. From posting fewer than 1,000 tweets a day before June 13, the accounts —many of which are virulently pro-Putin —posted 39,000 tweets on June 24 before dropping off almost entirely.

Many of the messages appear to have come either from bots —fully automated accounts set up to post hundreds of tweets a day —or from "cyborg" accounts which are heavily automated but have some human involvement. Analysis suggests that the tweets were viewed hundreds of millions of times.

Most of the tweets seen by this newspaper encouraged people to vote for Brexit, an outcome which Russia would have regarded as destabilising for the European Union. A number were pro-Remain, however, suggesting that the Russian goal may have been simply to sow division. "This is the most significant evidence yet of interference by Russian-backed social media accounts around the Brexit referendum," said Damian Collins, the Tory MP who chairs the digital, culture, media and sport select committee. "The content published and promoted by these accounts is clearly designed to increase tensions throughout the country and undermine our democratic process. I fear that this may well be just the tip of the iceberg."

On Monday Theresa May accused Moscow of using fake news to "sow discord" and of meddling directly in elections. President Trump has said that he believes Mr Putin's denial that Russia interfered in the American presidential race.

The Swansea and Berkeley paper says that a "massive number of Russian-related tweets was created a few days before the voting day, reached its peak during the voting and the result and then dropped immediately afterwards". Tho Pham, one of the paper's authors, said that "the main conclusion is that bots were used on purpose and had influence".

Researchers at City University in London have uncovered a coordinated network of Twitter bots comprising 13,493 accounts that came from nowhere to post 65,000 tweets about the referendum. One influential account that these bots retweeted, which claims to be based in the Isle of Wight, now has the handle @davidjobrexit. In August The Times identified it as a probable Russian propaganda account because it tweeted the Kremlin line during Moscow office hours, among other indicators.