



Information Warfare Watch No. 29

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Europe; Russia

THE KREMLIN WAGES WAR ON A FREE INTERNET AT HOME...

With its war on Ukraine nearing the two-year mark, the Kremlin is giving every indication of doubling down on its campaign of aggression against Kyiv – and stepping up its efforts to control the domestic narrative surrounding its "special military operation." Russia's state censor, ROSKOMNADZOR, has received permission from the government of Vladimir Putin to institute a ban on websites with informational resources detailing how to access internet circumvention tools like virtual private networks (VPNs). The ban, intended to prevent access to "illegal content" – notably including Western coverage of the war at variance with the Kremlin's preferred narrative surrounding the conflict – will come into force on March 1st, and will entail "limiting the search results of those VPNs that violate the law" by not filtering information "prohibited" by the Kremlin, one lawmaker has explained. (*RBC*, February 5, 2024)

...AND PLANS A NEW DISINFORMATION OFFENSIVE IN EUROPE...

Moscow's efforts to shape media discourse are hardly limited to the home front, however. According to *The Economist*, French disinformation watchdog Viginum has announced it has identified what appear to be "preparations for a large disinformation campaign in France, Germany, Poland and other European countries." The new propaganda push is tied to the second anniversary of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and involves a network of more than 190 websites (codenamed "Portal Kombat") that disinformation experts believe are lying dormant in preparation for a "'massive' wave of Russian disinformation." While the sites "do not themselves generate news stories," *The Economist* reports, they "are designed to spread 'deceptive or false' content about the war in Ukraine" via web posts and social media activity. "The underlying objective is to undermine support for Ukraine in Europe," Viginum believes. (*The Economist*, February 12, 2024)

...AS EUROPEAN STATES HUNKER DOWN

For their part, European governments are taking notice. As Russia ramps up its disinformation activities across the continent, France, Germany, and Poland are coalescing into a united front against Russian false narratives. The three countries that make up the Weimar Triangle are preparing themselves for what they believe will be an onslaught of Russian disinformation and propaganda aimed at pitting European nations against one another over comparisons of aid given to Ukraine. Annalena Baerbock, Germany's foreign minister, has rejected the premise, and disclosed that France, Germany, and Poland have taken steps toward a "joint 'early warning mechanism' to resist influence operations." Additionally, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has already uncovered a Russian disinformation campaign targeting German speakers on X (formerly Twitter) meant to promote pro-Russian attitudes. (*European Pravda*, February 13, 2024)

IN THE WAKE OF 10/7, A SURGE OF ONLINE ANTISEMITISM

Since the Hamas terror campaign of October 7th and the subsequent start of the war in Gaza, the world has witnessed an explosion of online antisemitism fueled by disinformation. This phenomenon, moreover, is evolving and still poorly regulated by social media platforms, a leading internet watchdog has found. In a new report, CyberWell, an Israeli non-profit committed to combating online anti-Semitism, outlines how disinformation has distorted the global discourse surrounding the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas, and their consequences. "CyberWell identified three main sub-narratives perpetuating denial and distortion of the events of October 7: there were no acts of rape; the State of Israel orchestrated the violent events; and Israel and the Jews are profiting from the massacre," the study notes. "All three of these sub-narratives are false."

Moreover, according to CyberWell, these false narratives are being allowed to proliferate largely unchecked. The report underscores the extremely low removal rate of such posts by social media companies – noting that, in a sample dataset of 313 pieces of content across a variety of platforms, less than 9% were successfully removed by apps like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, suggesting "major gaps in... enforcement of platform policies." The study also notes the role that social media influencers, journalists, celebrities, and other prominent public figures have played in spreading misinformation and "denial discourse" across these platforms. (CyberWell, January 22, 2024)

RISE OF THE POLITICAL DEEPPFAKE

Over the past few years, rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) have dominated headlines, both positively and negatively. While programs such as ChatGPT and its competitors hold out the promise of greater efficiency and ease of research, they also threaten to unleash a wave of academic plagiarism and professional malfeasance. Now, AI is becoming an increasingly large factor in political discourse as well. Last September, ahead of a crucial election in Slovakia, a pro-NATO candidate found himself listening to a "deepfake" (AI-generated) audio recording of himself bragging about how he had rigged the election. A few days later, the recording had reached the masses through social media, and the candidate subsequently lost the election to his pro-Russian rival. American officials are now worried that what happened in Slovakia will occur in the upcoming presidential race here in the United States, and their fears are not unsubstantiated. Deepfake videos have already surfaced targeting President Biden and former President Trump, while experts say that the nation remains "woefully unprepared" for the distorting effect that such manipulation can have on political discourse.

Notably, there are few overarching federal regulations on AI-generated media, at least so far. At present, these matters are left to individual states. And while several states have already passed legislation regulating oversight of such content or are in the process of doing so, others have not made it a priority. Additionally, governmental bodies such as the Federal Election Commission have yet to put out official instructions regarding how to tackle the issue, contributing to an overall lack of clarity. (*CNN*, February 1, 2024)