



Information Warfare Watch No. 2

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CHINESE FAKE NEWS TARGETS TAIWAN

China's pressure campaign against Taiwan has taken on a new dimension: "cognitive warfare." In recent comments to reporters, Taiwanese Interior Minister Chen Tsyung-yen said that Beijing was attempting to promote false narratives about the state of coronavirus on the island. In recent weeks, such fake news stories have included reports that Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen had come down with COVID-19, a government coverup associated with the pandemic, and others. "The reason we are continuing to explain the contents of the fake information to everyone is to call attention to it," Chen told reporters. "We must immediately intercept this, and not let cognitive warfare affect Taiwan's society." (*The Guardian*, May 22, 2021)

MOSCOW TAKES AIM AT U.S. BROADCASTING...

The Kremlin is intensifying its pressure on a key U.S. news broadcaster as part of its attempts to further curtail Russia's domestic media sphere. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, which played a critical role in bringing information to populations behind the Iron Curtain during the Soviet era, is being sued by the government in Russian court for some \$2.4 million in fines and penalties associated with the service failing to register as a "foreign agent" pursuant to Russian law. The effort, RFE/RL officials suggest, is part of a larger attempt to stifle independent voices in the country as the Russian government grapples with social discontent and the fallout of its high-profile persecution of dissident opposition activist Alexei Navalny.

For the service itself, the outcome of the current confrontation carries high stakes. While part of official U.S. government broadcasting abroad, RFE/RL has long been editorially independent from Washington and is widely seen as a credible, objective source of information that is often otherwise suppressed by Russian governmental authorities. The worry is that a "foreign agent" label would reduce the appeal and credibility of the service, and make it beholden to the Russian state for its continued functioning. Yet if RFE/RL does not comply with the Russian regulations, the service is likely to have its physical presence ousted from Russia altogether. (*New York Times*, May 20, 2021)

...AND FOREIGN VACCINES

A murky network of Russian marketing firms have launched a social media push to discredit Western coronavirus vaccine variants - and to promote Russia's own "Sputnik V" treatment. The campaign reportedly involves outreach to social media "influencers" throughout Europe offering payment in exchange for videos, online posts and commentary criticizing Western vaccines in general, and the Pfizer/BioNTech variant in particular. Notably, the effort mirrors that of the official Russia Direct Investment Fund, which bankrolled Sputnik V, to promote the Russian jab over Western alternatives. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 27, 2021)

RETHINKING "WOLF WARRIOR DIPLOMACY"?

Over the past several years, China has pursued an aggressive, combative diplomatic style to defend its political interests and image in the press, on TV and on social media platforms. So distinctive has this informational offensive been that it has even garnered a moniker: "wolf warrior diplomacy." Western opinion of China, meanwhile, has soured, in no small measure because of this abrasive engagement with global publics.

Now, however, Beijing may be looking to soften its international image. Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping reportedly told Party officials at a recent meeting that the country must "make friends extensively, unite the majority and continuously expand its circle of friends with those who understand and are friendly to China." According to the official Xinhua News Agency, Xi's comments focused in particular on the need to tone down Beijing's hostile public messaging as a way of winning "hearts and minds" on the world stage. China needs "a grip on tone" in its public diplomacy, Xi insisted, and needs to be "open and confident, but also modest and humble." (*Bloomberg*, June 1, 2021)