



Information Warfare Watch No. 7

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Terrorism; Global Health; Afghanistan; Ukraine

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA HELPED THE TALIBAN WIN

Recent weeks have seen the militant Taliban movement achieve stunning political and strategic successes, sweeping back into power in Afghanistan amid the U.S. withdrawal of forces from that country. Largely unappreciated, however, has been the role that "new media" played in the Taliban's resurgence. As the group expanded its control over urban centers and surged into the country's capital, Kabul, it exploited social messaging apps like Twitter and WhatsApp to send key signals to the country's increasingly nervous population. And in areas where it seized control, social media has been used by the group to promulgate new rules for conduct and edicts for maintaining order in captured territories. This has included posting WhatsApp numbers for Kabul residents to lodge complaints and establishing an emergency broadcast system on the app as well. The Taliban has also been diligently sending messages to the international community that the situation in the country is "completely stable and normal" even as it consolidates power and reimposes control. (*Washington Free Beacon*, August 16, 2021; *ABC News*, August 19, 2021)

AFGHANISTAN: A PROBLEM FOR PLATFORMS

The Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan has left social media platforms on the horns of a dilemma: namely, whether to allow the group - which many countries still consider a terrorist organization - to freely operate accounts and communicate. Twitter and Facebook have historically allowed the Taliban to maintain active accounts, and to use them to disseminate messages in the past. Yet the same organizations also have policies against "hateful conduct" and "threatening or promoting terrorism" in place, and have taken down posts by both private individuals and groups that run afoul of those standards. What is as yet unclear is whether social media platforms will permit the Taliban to communicate its edicts freely - including those censoring the rights of women and restricting personal liberties in territories under its control - now that the movement is again in power in Afghanistan. (*Washington Free Beacon*, August 16, 2021; *New York Times*, August 18, 2021)

KYIV WORKS TO LIMIT MOSCOW'S MESSAGING

The government of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is stepping up its efforts to thwart propaganda emanating from the Kremlin. In late August, the Ukrainian government blocked the websites of a number of popular Russian news outlets as part of new sanctions against Moscow, with whom relations remain hostile some seven-and-a-half years after Russia's invasion of the country and unilateral annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. In all, some twelve Russian news outlets - including business daily *Vedomosti* and the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* newspaper - have now been blocked in Ukraine by presidential decree. The August order follows a February governmental action that banned three pro-Kremlin television channels that authorities in Kyiv accused of spreading disinformation and propaganda. (Agence France Presse, August 23, 2021)

DUE TO DISINFO, LATVIA LAGS ON HEALTH

While most of the European Union is faring comparatively well in terms of vaccination rates and immunizations against the coronavirus pandemic, a number of nations are lagging behind the curve. The Baltic nation of Latvia is one of them. The country has the third-lowest vaccination rate on the continent, with less than half of its 1.9 million citizens now fully vaccinated.

The reasons are at least partially attributable to disinformation, namely Russian anti-vaccine propaganda. As Aleksandra Palkova of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs in Riga explains, "Latvian speakers are more willing to get vaccinated than Russian speakers - they often follow different media." The situation is particularly notable in the country's east, which has a high concentration of Russian speakers and Russian-origin media outlets are widely popular. There, vaccination rates lag far behind those of the rest of the country, and stand at some 25%. (*Euronews*, August 30, 2021)

CRACKING DOWN ON ANTI-VACCINE DISINFORMATION

Facebook is taking aim at Russian-linked disinformation intended to discourage people from taking the AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine. The social media giant has taken down more than three hundred accounts on Facebook and Instagram, which it owns, connected to a disinformation campaign launched by UK-registered public relations firm Fazze and designed to disparage the AstraZeneca vaccine by questioning its efficacy and origins. The campaign, which targeted users in India, Latin America and the U.S., was found by European investigators to be connected to individuals in Russia. It is unclear if the objective of the anti-AstraZeneca effort was to boost Russia's own COVID-19 treatment, known as Sputnik, in the target markets, but that is a possibility. (*The Hill*, August 11, 2021)