



Information Warfare Watch No. 12

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RUSSIA'S RESHUFFLED DISINFORMATION DECK...

Russia's new war in Europe is still underway, but it has already claimed a high-profile casualty: the free flow of propaganda to the West. In the wake of Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to launch a "special military operation" against Ukraine on February 24th, European leaders have moved to ban Russia's disinformation efforts on the continent. On February 27th, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen announced that the European Union would ban Russian propaganda from airing within its borders. "We will ban the Kremlin's media machine in the EU. The state-owned *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, and their subsidiaries, will no longer be able to spread their lies to justify Putin's war," von der Leyen said. European officials are also getting serious about Russian online propaganda, and have begun urging Google and YouTube to amend measures and terms of service to better counter Moscow's disinformation. (*Politico*, February 27, 2022; Reuters, February 27, 2022)

...AND HARD TIMES FOR MOSCOW'S MAIN MESSAGING OUTLET

The new, constrained media environment facing Moscow in the West is already beginning to take its toll. In the wake of the EU's late February announcement of a prospective ban on Russian disinformation, and due to mass resignations and personnel disruptions, RT's U.S.-based outlet, known as RT America, has shut down its operations. T&R Productions, the Russia-backed company that operates RT America, laid out the closure in an internal memo to employees obtained by *CNBC*. "As a result of unforeseen business interruption events, T&R Productions LLC will be ceasing production and, therefore, must lay off most of its staff who work at all its locations," the company's General Manager, Misha Solodovnikov, wrote. Nor are there prospects for a resumption of operations anytime in the foreseeable future. "We anticipate this lay off will be permanent," Solodovnikov's memo stated. (*CNBC*, March 3, 2022)

THE RISE OF UKRAINIAN PERSUASION

The current conflict in Eastern Europe has also seen the emergence of a new phenomenon: a surprisingly robust and vibrant Ukrainian messaging campaign that has succeeded in rallying Western publics to Kyiv's side. The backbone of this effort has been the very public leadership of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who has adroitly used social media and television appearances to debunk Russian propaganda claims, promote Ukrainian national unity, and spur support from the West. "Zelenskyy was not seen as a very effective leader two weeks ago. Now he is a Churchill-like figure," notes one retired intelligence official. "And that's because of use of information operations, social media, to put forth the kind of notion of these brave defenders fighting not only for their Ukrainian freedom, but for Europe." (*CNBC*, March 1, 2022)

CHINA'S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN IN LITHUANIA

Lithuania's decision last Fall to formally recognize Taiwan has upended relations between Vilnius and Beijing - and made the Baltic nation the target of official Chinese information warfare efforts. In response to the Lithuanian decision, Beijing has spearheaded what has been characterized as a "massive" disinformation campaign intended to convince the country's citizens that they would face a severe economic crisis unless Vilnius downgraded the Taiwanese mission to the customary "Taipei Representative Office."

The PRC's pressure hasn't had the intended effect, however. "Lithuania is fiercely protective of its sovereignty and democracy - we were the first to declare independence from the Soviet Union in 1990," notes Viktorija Starych-Samuolienė of the Council on Geostrategy, a think tank. She also notes that the Chinese pressure campaign follows a familiar pattern. "Politically, Russia has led the way with disinformation and its use of influencers and China has learned much." (*Express*, January 23, 2022)

IRANIAN DISINFO TARGETS ISRAELI UNITY

Last month, a suspected Iranian disinformation network launched a targeted Facebook campaign directed at nationalist and ultra-religious Jews in Israel. The unit posed as an extreme ultra-Orthodox Jewish newsgroup, posting news of an imminent "religious war" and inciting violence against Palestinians. It also posted invitations to far right anti-government protests and promoted anti-police sentiment. Facebook and Twitter have both deactivated the group's pages, but as of early February the network remained active on Telegram. (*BBC*, February 3, 2022)