



Information Warfare Watch No. 14

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China; Europe; Iran; Ukraine

THE INFORMATIONAL COSTS OF COOPERATING WITH CHINA

On the heels of its bilateral security deal with the Solomon Islands this spring, China has proposed a "sweeping" economic and security deal to other Pacific nations in a bid to expand its influence in the region. A leaked draft of the deal outlines Beijing's proposals for police training, altering marine mapping, and cybersecurity cooperation with a number of nations. The proposal, however, is meeting resistance from regional governments who are wary of granting Beijing greater control over, among other things, their communications. For instance, David Panuelo, the president of the Federated States of Micronesia, has said that the draft agreement "opens our countries up to having our phone calls and email intercepted and overheard." That hesitance reflects growing concerns among Pacific nations regarding China's efforts to shape norms on cybersecurity and data governance. (*Guardian*, May 26, 2022)

A MEDIA FIGHT FOR IRANIAN DISSIDENTS

Amid ongoing protests in Iran, content moderators at social media app Instagram have been accused of removing accounts that have been posting anti-regime content and documenting human rights abuses by Iranian authorities. According to Cameron Khansarinia of the National Union for Democracy in Iran, "Iranian protesters are fighting a multifront war: first and foremost against regime thugs on the street firing live ammunition, but also against the silence of the international community and mainstream media." The revelation has drawn critical attention to the practices of Instagram and its parent company, Meta. A trio of Republican lawmakers on the House Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees are pressing for answers as to what measures Meta has "taken to confront infiltration by proponents of the Islamic Republic of Iran." (*Washington Free Beacon*, June 7, 2022)

LATVIA PUSHES BACK

Just weeks after Russia's February invasion of Ukraine, the popular Russian television station *Dozhd* was forced by the Kremlin to close its doors, becoming a high profile casualty in the Kremlin's efforts to police perceptions about its "special military operation" in Ukraine. Now, however, the TV station has found a new home in the Baltics. The Latvian National Council on Electronic Media offered *Dozhd* TV a license at the beginning of June, laying the groundwork for the channel to begin broadcasting there in the near future. The rehabilitation of *Dozhd*, moreover, is part of a broader informational counteroffensive against Russia on the part of the Latvian government. Riga has blocked 80 Russian television channels that had previously been broadcasting into the Baltic state. It has also enacted a new *Electronic Mass Media Law*, which forbids the airing of broadcasts by "channels registered in a country threatening the territorial integrity and independence of another country." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 6, 2022)

CONSPIRACIES IN SYRIA FORESHADOW A CRISIS OF TRUTH IN UKRAINE

In recent years, global perceptions about the conflict in Syria were actively manipulated by a network of social media accounts that cumulatively reached some 1.8 million people online, information collected by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) think tank has found. The network in question pushed false depictions of the White Helmet volunteer organization, denied the existence of chemical weapons attacks within Syria, and attacked the findings of international chemical watchdogs. According to ISD, thousands of tweets on these themes originated from a core of 28 conspiracy theorist accounts that were operating from 2015 onward. Additionally, the think tank notes, several official Russian government accounts played a key role in both creating and disseminating this false content, although not all efforts of this network were Russian-backed.

The implications for Russia's current Ukraine fight are clear. Overall, ISD notes, the network's intent appeared to be to "sow confusion and doubt among government policymakers, helping create anti-asylum policies, [and the] normalization of Syria's Assad regime. The success of the strategy, moreover, emboldened the Kremlin "to replicate the tactics in Ukraine." Indeed, as one former State Department official has said, there are worries that Syria was a "testing ground" of sorts for disinformation campaigns that will likely be repeated in Ukraine. (*Guardian*, June 19, 2022)

LONDON FOCUSES ON FOREIGN INFLUENCE ONLINE

Amid growing evidence of Russian and Chinese online interference, the British government has proposed an *Online Safety Bill* that would mandate tech companies remove disinformation content shared by foreign state actors. The new law, expected to take effect later this year, would push social media giants to take more proactive action to regulate harmful foreign content or risk fines to the tune of \$22 million. "We cannot allow foreign states or their puppets to use the internet to conduct hostile online warfare unimpeded," UK Digital Secretary Nadine Dorries has explained. "That's why we are strengthening our new internet safety protections to make sure social media firms identify and root out state-backed disinformation."

But critics of the bill worry that it could be used to influence domestic political discourse as well. Because it contains provisions prohibiting the dissemination of "hacked information to undermine democratic institutions," skeptics argue that the bill could also force tech companies to remove any embarrassing content exposing British politicians. There is some basis for their criticism; emails of pro-Brexit British national security officials leaked this May by Russian hackers would have been removed under the law, had it already been in effect. (*Tech Crunch*, July 5, 2022)