



# Information Warfare Watch No. 15

August 25, 2022 Ilan I. Berman, Dee McHardy

**Related Categories:** Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Caucasus; Russia; South Africa; Southeast Asia; Ukraine

## MOSCOW TRIES TO MAKE UP INFORMATIONAL GROUND...

Since the start of its war in Ukraine earlier this year, the Kremlin has unexpectedly found itself on the back foot in the information space, as a surprisingly robust Ukrainian public diplomacy campaign has outmaneuvered Moscow in terms of messaging while European governments have barred Russian propaganda channels like *RT* and *Sputnik* from broadcasting to their citizens. The Russian government has been playing catch up in a number of ways: by imposing increasingly draconian censorship at home, and revamped media messaging to new targets (like the Nordic states) about the dangers of deeper partnership with the West.

The Kremlin is now escalating its campaign through two new, and notable, moves. First, Russia's state censor, ROSKOMNADZOR, has announced new "coercive measures" against crowdsourced news repository Wikipedia. The censor has charged that on the site "a number of materials recognized as prohibited remain undeleted, including fakes about the course of a special military operation on the territory of Ukraine." The agency has not specified, as yet, what form the "coercive measures" against the Wikimedia Foundation, which owns Wikipedia, will take.

At the same time, Kremlin-connected oligarch Viktor Prigozhin, the billionaire behind Russia's notorious Wagner mercenary group, has asked Russia's Prosecutor General's Office to launch an audit into the activities of news website *Meduza*. The Riga-based organization has already run afoul of the Kremlin for its reporting, with a number of its employees sanctioned by the Russian government. But Prigozhin's proposed line of inquiry will take things even further. He charges that a number of *Meduza* news stories about the war contain "false information about the special military operation in Ukraine" and "knowingly false information about the Russian Armed Forces' conduct outside of the territory of the Russian Federation." Prigozhin's plan is to get *Meduza* declared as an "undesirable organization" under Russian law, which would allow authorities to hold its employees and leadership "accountable for engaging in provocative activities on the territory of the Russian Federation." (*Meduza*, July 18, 2022, *RBK*, July 20, 2022)

## ...AND STEPS UP ITS PROPAGANDA EFFORTS IN AFRICA

Russia is also making significant moves abroad in the informational sphere. This summer, the Kremlin's notorious propaganda network *Russia Today*, now known as *RT*, opened its first bureau in South Africa. By doing so, Moscow is seeking to exploit a more permissive media environment in Africa amid growing pressure from – and ostracism by – the West. To date, many African nations have been hesitant to criticize the Kremlin's war in Ukraine for a variety of reasons, although some have fallen in line behind European sanctions. The establishment of a new *RT* outpost signals stepped up plans by Russia to shape global perceptions about the Ukraine war and its consequences, such as the global spike in food and fuel prices – all of which have hit the African continent hard. (*Bloomberg*, July 22, 2022)

## ARMENIA'S CRUMBLING INTERNET FREEDOMS

There is at least one place, however, where Russia's media manipulation – and its increasingly heavy hand in online censorship and regulation – is drawing plaudits. In April, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed an agreement with the Kremlin to "expand the coordination of information security between their two governments." Since then, Armenia's General Prosecutor, Artur Davtyan, has proposed a new law, inspired by Russia's internet censorship regulations, that would allow the government in Yerevan to block certain corners of the internet for its citizenry.

The proposal, officially framed as a "means of protecting Armenians from content like instructions on how to commit suicide or using and selling drugs," has heightened concerns among observers and critics, who fear it represents the opening salvo in a major bid by Yerevan to control and constrict access to the World-Wide Web. Putting Davtyan's plan into motion requires "the creation of a certain set of tools," notes journalist Artur Papayan. "In order to implement this initiative, monitoring tools and platforms must be created that will monitor what kind of content is distributed. After creating all this, punishment and prosecution will just be a technical issue." (*Eurasianet*, July 7, 2022)

## **SINGAPORE GETS SERIOUS ABOUT ONLINE SECURITY**

Singapore's Ministry of Communications and Information is developing new laws to improve the online safety of its citizens. The measures include procedures to work with social media giants to block "egregious harmful content" from users, including material that promotes sexual harm, self-harm, racial or religious intolerance, and public security. Unlike other internet safety laws, however, Singapore is not simply removing objectionable content. The new laws also address phishing threats, scam websites, and online banking disruptions. Specifically, Singapore is creating a registry of safe domains for government agencies and banks, so citizens can check a link before opening it. Scam reporting services are also being organized to crowdsource government efforts to catch scammers before they can spread online. And in highly digitized Singapore, new IT resilience standards are being introduced by banks to build more secure infrastructure, preventing banking disruptions. It remains to be seen how these measures will affect internet freedoms for the average Singaporean, however. (*ZDNet*, July 8, 2022)