



Information Warfare Watch No. 16

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Africa; Europe; India; Russia; Turkey

INDIA'S MEDIA SPHERE TIGHTENS

Since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014, his government has made engagement with the United States and a more assertive stance vis-à-vis China major foreign policy priorities. During the same period, however, media freedom in India has witnessed a notable decline, with the country slipping ten places in information freedom rankings compiled by media watchdog Reporters Without Borders to its current position of 150 among 180 nations surveyed.

That trend that is now coming to a head. In August, Guatam Ajani, a billionaire entrepreneur close to Modi, made a successful bid to buy a significant stake in New Delhi Television Ltd (NDTV) in what observers see as an attempt to quash the outlet's independent – and often critical – political voice. According to NDTV officials, Ajani's acquisition of a 29 percent stake came "without any discussion" with the broadcaster itself, and was carried out without the consent of its founders. Ajani is now bidding for a further 26 percent stake in NDTV, which – if successful – would give him controlling interest over an outlet that is seen as one of the last remaining critical voices in the country against Modi's policies. (*Al Jazeera*, August 24, 2022)

HOW RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IS CHANGING

In the wake of Russia's late February invasion of Ukraine, the European Union moved to harden its borders (and airwaves) against Russian disinformation, banning Russian state propaganda outlets *RT* and *Sputnik* from broadcasting into the Eurozone. For a time, this measure lessened the previously-voluminous deluge of Russian disinformation bombarding the member states of the European Union. However, there are clear signs that the Kremlin is adapting its disinformation tactics to continue to message in this new, more unfriendly environment. According to the Associated Press, Russia's shift in tactics includes a "rebranding" of existing websites, the transfer of some propaganda duties to diplomats, as well as the creation of what experts term "sleepier websites," consisting of innocuous sites (posing as news outlets or think tanks) that gradually switch to promoting propaganda over time. When tallied by news and information tracking firm NewsGuard in August, some 250 websites were identified to be actively spreading Russian propaganda, with dozens more cropping up every month. (Associated Press, August 9, 2022)

MANIPULATING MEDIA IN AFRICA

Africa is emerging as an active battlefield in the "war of ideas," with a growing number of disinformation actors attempting to exploit the continent's explosion of digital technology to shape political outcomes. That's the conclusion of a recent study by South Africa's Institute for Security Studies. The report, entitled "Just who is stirring up disinformation in Africa?," notes the growing number of rapidly digitizing countries on the continent and their susceptibility to foreign influence. "As digital access deepens across Africa, there's growing evidence of external players weaponising social media platforms to achieve geopolitical ends," notes the study's author, Karen Allen. As examples, she points to recent Russian disinformation campaigns in Mali opposing foreign (French) influence there – something that contributed to popular discontent which ultimately forced Paris to disengage from counterterrorism operations in the country – and earlier attempts by now-defunct influence firm Cambridge Analytica to shape the outcomes of successive election in Kenya. These trendlines, Allen notes, are of particular significance in Africa as a result of the continent's political fragility. "In settings where institutions of governance are weak – including the courts and the checks on power offered by traditional media – disinformation campaigns can severely undermine democracies," she notes. (Institute for Strategic Studies, September 7, 2022)

TURKEY'S NEW – AND AUTHORITARIAN – DISINFORMATION BILL

Over the past two decades in power, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have presided over a dramatic tightening of the country's media sphere in a more regulated - and authoritarian - direction. And now, Erdogan's government is turning its attention to acquiring greater control of the internet, with an eye firmly on the country's 2023 general elections. In May, Turkish authorities put a new "disinformation law" up for consideration before the country's parliament in what observers see as a blatantly political move. The law proposes a number of measures cumulatively designed to curtail, regulate and control the country's online space. They include imposing prison sentences of up to three years for publicly disseminating "disinformation" - a poorly defined term subject to interpretation (and manipulation) by authorities. Harsher sentences are to be imposed on those publishing "misleading information" from anonymous accounts. And digital platforms will henceforth be regulated by the country's Press Law, receiving press accreditation and funds from the state Official Press Advertising Agency in a move that is likely to muffle critical coverage.

The cumulative impact, both on Turkish society and on free speech in the country, is likely to be profound. "Multiple journalists and free speech organizations have criticized the bill as the most significant censorship in Turkish history, meant to further undermine the free speech rights of citizens in the lead-up to the 2023 general elections," a new analysis in *The Jurist* concludes. "The new disinformation law will further strain independent media outlets critical of the government, limiting citizens' ability to access unfiltered and accurate information." (*The Jurist*, September 17, 2022)