



Information Warfare Watch No. 20

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RUSSIA, CHINA JOIN FORCES TO SPREAD DISINFO

Among the most notable – and disturbing – features of the contemporary challenge posed by disinformation is how hostile actors have adroitly harnessed today's media environment in collaborative ways. China and Russia provide a potent example of this dynamic, which has been dubbed "authoritarian learning" by practitioners. Over the past couple of years, mounting evidence has pointed to the fact that Moscow and Beijing, already close strategic allies, are cooperating more and more closely on messaging, sharing narratives, amplifying each other's propaganda, and working to diminish the potency of Western policy. For instance, in the early stages of the Ukraine war, now-debunked Russian tropes about U.S.-funded bioweapons laboratories in Ukraine were rapidly picked up and amplified by Chinese outlets such as the CCP-linked *Global Times*.

This collaboration, it seems, is not just opportunistic. Rather, it is the reflection of a formal strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing. "A bilateral agreement signed [in] July 2021 makes clear that cooperating on news coverage and narratives is a big goal for both governments," reports *The Intercept*, citing a recently-released trove of hacked emails from Russian state broadcaster VGTRK. "In the propaganda agreement, the two sides pledged to 'further cooperate in the field of information exchange, promoting objective, comprehensive and accurate coverage of the most important world events.' They also laid out plans to cooperate on online and social media, a space that both countries have used to seed disinformation, pledging to strengthen 'mutually beneficial cooperation in such issues as integration, the application of new technologies, and industry regulation.'"

The significance is profound. As David Bandurski of the China Media Project puts it, "This is a master document of cooperation on media between the countries. The document allows us to see the process behind the scenes of how cooperation is planned and discussed by these particular ministries." (*The Intercept*, December 30, 2022)

HOW FINLAND IS HARDENING ITS POPULATION AGAINST PROPAGANDA

When it comes to building resilience against propaganda among local publics, the Nordic nations are among the most advanced in the world – and Finland is perhaps the most. In an October study conducted by the Open Society Institute in Sofia, Bulgaria, Finland ranked first among 41 European nations for its media literacy and resilience to misinformation. Finland's success is attributable to one of the strongest education systems in the world, but also to the prominent role of media literacy within it, with efforts to teach school-age children about "fake news" a core part of the national curriculum. Teachers in Finland are using their classroom lessons to inculcate in their students the skills they need to become mindful consumers of information. In the process, Finnish education also appears to be bolstering public trust in mass media. A survey conducted in August by IRO research, a market research firm, found that 76% of Finnish residents consider print and digital newspapers to be reliable – more than double the percentage of Americans that report similar trust in the media. Finland's neighbors also ranked high on the Open Society Institute's index, with Norway and Sweden coming in at 2nd and 5th place, respectively. (*New York Times*, January 10, 2023)

MORE PRESSURE ON MEDUZA

In the pantheon of Russian opposition media outlets that have emerged in recent years, far and away the most well known is Meduza. The multimedia platform has distinguished itself as a reliable – and influential – alternative source of information to Kremlin propaganda and official Russian state media. In the process, it has earned the ire of the Russian government, and in 2021 was dubbed a "foreign agent" under Russian law – forcing the outlet to significantly reconfigure its operations. Subsequently, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russian authorities took the additional step of blocking the outlet's website within the country because of its lack of conformity with the Kremlin's official narrative regarding the war.

Now, that noose has tightened still further. On January 26th, Meduza was formally declared "undesirable" by the Kremlin, a designation with far-reaching practical implications for both the outlet and its audience. Unless the outlet ceases its operations entirely, Meduza's staff and journalists located within Russia face criminal prosecution. So, too, do its supporters in Russia – who face felony prosecution if they donate to Meduza, or even do so much as share a link to one of its stories or articles on social media.

This new pressure, however, won't have its intended effect, the outlet has made clear. "We'd like to tell you that our new 'undesirable' status doesn't worry us — that it means nothing," Meduza's editors wrote in an online post the same day. "But that would be untrue. We are afraid. We fear for our readers and for those who have collaborated with Meduza for many years. We fear for our loved ones and our friends. But we believe in what we do. We believe in free speech. And we believe in a democratic Russia. The greater the pressure against us and our values, the harder we will resist." (*ABC News*, January 26, 2023; *Meduza*, January 26, 2023)