



## Information Warfare Watch No. 21

March 13, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Lilly Harvey**

**Related Categories:** Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; China; Europe; Iran

### TV RAIN RUNS AGROUND IN RIGA...

Back in December, a scandal rocked the burgeoning Russian exile media ecosystem taking shape in Latvia when Dozhd, a prominent Russian opposition television channel, had its license revoked by the country's media regulator. The measure was taken on the grounds that recent coverage of the Ukraine war by the channel – which had been blocked by Russian authorities and forced to relocate out of the country following the start of the conflict – was too sympathetic to Russia, and therefore constituted a "threat to public security and public order." The ban follows previous warnings given to the channel by Latvian authorities, which resulted in fines.

The underlying issue is one of sovereignty. As *Deutsche Welle* reports, "[w]hen it received a Latvian license and moved there... TV Rain legally became a Latvian media company governed by local law." As a result, news coverage sympathetic to Russia and expressing Russian nationalism was viewed as a serious problem by Latvian authorities – especially because of the Baltic nation's own, fraught history with Moscow, which involved invasion by the Red Army in 1940 and the mass deportation of Latvians to Siberia thereafter. (*Deutsche Welle*, December 6, 2022; *Meduza*, January 6, 2023)

### ...AND GETS A NEW LEASE ON LIFE IN AMSTERDAM

The scandal, however, has not spelled the end of Dozhd. Given that most of its content is multimedia, and disseminated on platforms such as YouTube, the Latvian government's ban did not substantially cripple the broadcaster. However, in the wake of the Latvian decision to rescind the channel's license, Dozhd executives have applied for – and received – a five year broadcasting license in The Netherlands. The new Dutch license is expected to allow the channel to broadcast content to all European Union nations, including Latvia itself. (*Deutsche Welle*, January 10, 2023)

### THE PRC TONES DOWN THE RHETORIC... SORT OF

Over the past several years, Chinese officials and diplomats have gained notoriety for their adherence to a new, and combative, form of messaging – one that has employed insults, personal attacks, and the fabrication of outrage. But, as China transitions beyond its "Zero-COVID" strategy, this practice (colloquially known as "wolf warrior diplomacy") appears to be getting toned down. That more circumspect approach, experts say, can be seen in the selection of Qin Gang, a former Chinese ambassador to Washington, to become Foreign Minister – and a new focus on rebuilding economic ties and diplomatic relations with various nations which frayed during the course of the pandemic.

But, experts are quick to caution, the shift is tactical rather than strategic. "China's approach is still very much wolf-warrior diplomacy," notes Alfred Wu of the National University of Singapore. "I don't see any substantial change, except Qin Gang will play the role of the soft-spoken one, while [Communist Party State Councillor] Wang Yi will take a tough stance." (*Deutsche Welle*, January 18, 2023)

### FACEBOOK AS ARBITER OF COVID TRUTH

In recent months, Big Tech firms and social media giants have come under intense scrutiny for their heavy handed manipulation of facts, themes and narratives at the expense – often at the expense of the freedom of expression of ordinary Americans. Facebook, for instance, is now under fire for its role in shaping (and reshaping) the discourse surrounding COVID and vaccination in collaboration with the White House. Documents recently released by Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey as part of a recent lawsuit included correspondence from Facebook executives to Andrew Slavitt, a senior advisor to the Biden administration, detailing how the platform "focused on reducing the virality of content discouraging vaccines," including by suppressing the reach of "often true content" that cast doubt on the efficacy of coronavirus treatments or detailed negative experiences with vaccines. According to Bailey, the communication outlines "the Biden administration's blatant disregard for the First Amendment and its collusion with Big Tech social media companies to suppress speech it disagrees with." (*Daily Signal*, January 13, 2023)

## THE DIGITAL FIGHT FOR IRAN

For some six months now, protests have roiled the Iran in what represents the most significant, sustained challenge to clerical rule in the more-than-four decades of the Islamic Republic. In this struggle, censorship and technology is playing an important role, as authorities clamp down on the internet, block social media and limit connectivity in a bid to defuse the unrest. At the same time, a different struggle is playing out within Big Tech firms like Google – where engineers and specialists are fighting against corporate reticence to get the company to play a more active role in supporting Iran's opposition. "Google's Iran response, like that of other tech giants concerned about sanctions and related financial risks, prompted side projects by employees to put their technical skills to use," details *Wired*. "A priority is to develop software that could enable use of Elon Musk's Starlink internet satellites in Iran to defeat web censorship without fear of being tracked by the government." According to the magazine, activists have now "brought hundreds of Starlink units into Iran" in a bid to expand the connectivity and resilience of the protests. (*Wired*, January 20, 2023)