



Information Warfare Watch No. 24

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Warfare; NATO; Europe; Middle East; Russia; Turkey; Ukraine

MOSCOW WORKS TO DERAIL SWEDEN'S NATO BID

Since its start last year, Russia's war on Ukraine has wrought massive changes to the European security order. Among the most notable were the decisions taken last year by the Nordic states of Finland and Sweden to abandon decades of neutrality and formally apply to join the NATO alliance. Finland's accession to the bloc proceeded smoothly, with Helsinki becoming a formal member in April of this year. Sweden's bid, on the other hand, has been fraught with complications – and delayed for months because of opposition from existing NATO member Turkey as a result of disputes over counterterrorism policy, among other things.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan finally dropped his opposition to Stockholm's membership this summer, on the eve of the NATO summit in Vilnius, Lithuania. But Sweden's path into the Alliance is now being complicated by another factor: Russian disinformation. Last month, Sweden's Psychological Defence Agency publicly blamed the Kremlin for spreading false stories accusing the Swedish government of tacitly supporting the controversial Qur'an burnings that have taken place in the country. Russian propaganda channels "repeat narratives that Sweden supports the burning of the Qur'an and that Sweden is an Islamophobic country and hostile against Islam," Agency spokesman Mikael Ostlund has told reporters. "We're not very surprised because Russia is using narratives that make Sweden look bad and make it harder to join NATO." (*The Guardian*, August 6, 2023)

HEZBOLLAH'S NEW PROPAGANDA VEHICLE

For years, the *Al-Manar* television station headquartered in Lebanon served as one of the most prominent propaganda mouthpieces for Hezbollah, the country's powerful, Iranian-supported Shi'ite militia. But with the explosion of digital media, and the proliferation of social media channels, the extremist group's communications are getting an upgrade as well. Enter Al-Mahatta, a Lebanese YouTube channel that is becoming a key digital vehicle for Hezbollah messaging. The objective of Al-Mahatta, which appears to be an extension of the Hezbollah-aligned *Al Akhbar* newspaper, appears to be to consolidate the group's influence "by gaining a broader digital audience while continuing to cater to its well-established constituency in Lebanon," writes analyst Rany Ballout in *The National Interest*. "By producing materials that heavily demonize the Lebanese military and security apparatus while promoting a pro-Hezbollah geopolitical and security narrative, Al-Mahatta seeks to portray Hezbollah's moral superiority within the complex security dynamics in Lebanon."

The outlet has also attacked the country's judiciary, the recent Israel-Lebanon maritime boundary agreement, and other contemporary issues – all with the objective of improving Hezbollah's standing and legitimacy vis-à-vis the Lebanese government. "Policymakers in both Beirut and the West ought to consider what such propaganda campaigns masking as 'alternative' news outlets can mean for policymaking," Ballout cautions. (*The National Interest*, July 10, 2023)

THE PROBLEM WITH PAID TWITTER

The acquisition, last year, of Twitter by billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk ushered in a new, more market-driven ethos on the social media platform (now known as X). Among the many changes instituted by Musk was the transition of the widely-regarded "blue check" system – which previously had been used to designate authentic accounts by prominent personalities – to a paid model, where anyone willing to pay a monthly fee could acquire a verification designator. That new format, however, has contributed to the spread of disinformation on the social media app, with a number of Twitter accounts with subscriptions spreading disinformation which is subsequently promoted to other users. The Ukraine war has become an informational battleground in this regard, with Twitter accounts (likely controlled by Russian actors) disseminating misleading stories about military engagements, the political situation in Ukraine, and assorted conspiracy theories about the Ukrainian leadership. (*BBC*, July 9, 2023)

INDOCTRINATION, RUSSIAN STYLE

More than a year-and-a-half into its war against Ukraine, the Kremlin is promoting its idea of the conflict as a just war in novel ways. Now that the academic year has started, Russian high school students are being indoctrinated with a new narrative surrounding the conflict via a new textbook that whitewashes Russia's crimes and distorts the history of Vladimir Putin's war of choice. The new textbook, entitled *History of Russia: 1945 to the Early 21st Century*, is now mandatory reading for approximately 1.5 million 10th and 11th grade high school students, after being introduced and approved by the Russian government this summer.

Western observers have noted that the new textbook goes beyond mere patriotic education, and includes massive distortions on subjects like the history of Crimea, the nature of the Soviet dissident movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and Western policy toward Russia. "Tellingly," *Foreign Policy* reports, "the co-author of and main force behind the book, Vladimir Medinsky, is no historian, but a former journalist and public relations operative who was once Russia's minister of culture" – something that helps to explain his selection as a device to promote the Kremlin's preferred view of the world to younger generations of its citizens. Human rights watchdog Amnesty International has decried the new tone as a "blatant attempt to unlawfully indoctrinate school children in Russia and Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories." (*Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2023)