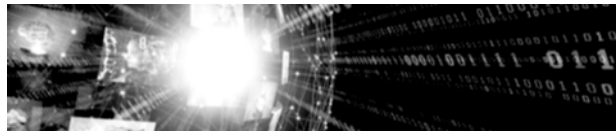




AMERICAN FOREIGN
POLICY COUNCIL



Information Warfare Watch No. 27

December 21, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Military Innovation; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Warfare ; Corruption; Africa; China; Iran; Russia; Ukraine

PARSING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN AFRICA

Information manipulation has been a staple of the Kremlin's geopolitical strategy for decades. Even so, the past two years have seen Russian disinformation and propaganda evolve in novel ways against the backdrop of the ongoing Ukraine war. This is particularly apparent in Africa, where Russian influence operations have actively contributed to perceptions of the Russian government overall, and its war of choice against Kyiv in particular. "Africa plays a crucial role in Vladimir Putin's foreign policy agenda as Russia aims to reshape the global order," writes Ukrainian analyst Artem Miniailo for the *Russian Analytical Digest*, a periodic compilation put out by the Zurich-based Center for Security Studies. "Putin offers support to African nations seeking to overcome colonial legacies and has made Africa central to countering Russia's diplomatic isolation."

In particular, Miniailo outlines, "Russian disinformation campaigns in Africa serve two purposes." The first is "garnering support for the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine" in a key segment of the "Global South." The second involves "portraying the Russian presence in Africa favorably while casting Western involvement [on the continent] in a negative light." (*Russian Analytical Digest*, November 30, 2023)

RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA AND THE UKRAINE AID DEBATE

In the debate over continued aid to Ukraine, the issue of the country's decades-long struggle with corruption has figured prominently. Ukraine is now making serious institutional efforts to reform multiple sectors of its bureaucracy and society (for more on these activities, see our sister publication, the AFPC *Ukraine Reform Monitor*). Nevertheless, misuse of Western funding has predictably emerged as a common trope in pro-Russian, anti-Ukraine messaging. To wit, a recent disinformation plot involving the charge that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had paid \$75 million for two luxury yachts, inappropriately using Western funds earmarked for the war, went viral after appearing on a YouTube channel earlier this Fall. The allegations, though false, proved to be influential, with a number of U.S. lawmakers citing them as part of the ongoing debate over continued U.S. aid to Ukraine as proof that Washington should pare back its support for Kyiv. (*BBC*, December 20, 2023)

IRAN UPS THE INFORMATIONAL ANTE

In the world of Iranian opposition media, *Iran International* casts a long shadow. Since it was launched in 2017, the London-based channel has become hugely popular among the Iranian Diaspora as a result of its cutting-edge reporting on Iranian regime corruption and decline, among other issues. Iranian authorities have long chafed at the channel's consistently negative coverage, and they now appear prepared to do something about it. Iranian spies are alleged to have recently offered a criminal \$200,000 to assassinate two of the channel's news presenters. The foiled plot initially involved the killing of the popular on-air personalities, Fardad Farahzad and Sima Sabet, via a car bomb, but was later reformulated into a planned stabbing attack. The plot was uncovered by authorities as a result of the would-be killer becoming an informant for Britain's Scotland Yard. (*ITV*, December 20, 2023)

CHINA INNOVATES IN "COGNITIVE WARFARE"

In recent years, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) has pioneered the concept of "unrestricted warfare" – the use of novel and indirect methods to gain an advantage on the modern battlefield. Of the techniques and tactics now being intensively researched by Beijing, that of "cognitive warfare" is one of the most potent and least well-understood. A new report by the CCP Biothreats Initiative, a research institute, lays out the extent to which China's military is investing in novel methods like artificial intelligence and "brain-computer interfaces." It notes that "the PLA's integration of cutting-edge technologies such as AI, [brain-computer interfaces], and biological weapons into its military arsenal brings significant psychological dimensions to warfare, extending beyond their physical effects."

Simultaneously, China is working on hardening its military against psychological warfare, the study details. Two dedicated units of the PLA, Unit 94969 and Unit 96812, are said to be spearheading this work, which entails "both defense and offensive cognitive warfare." The thrust of these efforts, the study concludes, "represents a strategic direction, integrating neuroscience and technology to develop weapons systems that can impair cognition, reduce situational awareness, and degrade neurological functions over the long term."

The program, identified as NeuroStrike, represents a "holistic approach" to modern warfare, and is "part of a broader asymmetric warfare strategy aimed at establishing a strategic edge over adversaries, particularly the United States and perceived rivals in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Taiwan, Japan, Australia, or India," the report says. (*Washington Times*, December 21, 2023)

