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RRM CANADA WEEKLY TREND ANALYSIS
Report #1: Week of 17 August – 24 August

Key Points

- RRM Canada did not observe any significant trends of foreign state-sponsored information manipulation in its monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem during the period of August 17 to August 24. Contracted partner reporting validates this point.
- Secondary sources indicate continued efforts by foreign malign actors, China and Russia in particular, to influence outcomes of upcoming elections in countries of strategic importance to them, such as Germany where federal elections will take place on 26 September.
- RRM Canada noted evolving information campaigns by hostile actors targeting Canada's allies pertaining to the following three foreign policy issues: Ukraine, US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Belarus.

Objective

This is a first report in a series of RRM Canada weekly reports aimed at consolidating and summarising trends and findings associated with possible foreign state-sponsored information manipulation in Canada's 44th General Election (GE44). The report is based on in-house monitoring, primary and secondary sources, and contracted partners' reporting available to RRM Canada at the time of its compilation. The report: 1) provides a summary of RRM Canada daily threat updates shared with the Security and Intelligence Threats to Election (SITE) Task Force and contracted partner reporting; 2) brings relevant insight into foreign state-sponsored information manipulation based on experience from other democratic elections; and 3) outlines ongoing foreign state-sponsored online campaigns against Canada and other democracies.

1) Summary of RRM Canada Daily Threat Updates and Contracted Partner Reporting

- During the reporting period (17-24 August), RRM Canada did not observe any significant indicators of foreign state-sponsored information manipulation in its daily monitoring of the broader Canadian digital information ecosystem;
- The vast majority of content assessed by RRM Canada originated from recognizable Canadian news or information sites (either in English, French, Chinese, or Russian);
- Russian state-affiliated and mainstream media continue to cover events in Canada, including those related to GE44, but so far from a neutral perspective and with minimal engagement;
- Chinese state-affiliated media continue to cover Canadian events, with few references to GE44. RRM Canada observed and continue to monitor the following coverage in particular:
 - A petition from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-linked *Global Times* calling on Ambassador Barton to "release Meng Wanzhou" was shared widely on WeChat, Weibo and Douyin on 18/08. After initial amplification on WeChat and coverage in media (incl. CBC), attention to the petition subsided by 22/08.
 - *The China Daily* – a newspaper owned by the CCP Central Committee's publicity department – produced a 6-minute video about the history of residential schools for Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. and Canada and shared it on their respective social media accounts. The video did not touch on GE44 and has not received high levels of engagement on social media.

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- Several U.S. pundits and alternative media outlets commented on issues, such as COVID-19 vaccinations and Afghanistan, which spilled over into the Canadian domestic information space around related GE44 topics. The original content did not appear to be targeting GE44 specifically.

SENSITIVE: According to Yonder monitoring, the percentage of accounts they judge as inauthentic that engage in discussions surrounding the Canadian election is elevated in comparison to baseline Twitter conversations. Yonder judges most inauthentic accounts to be "spam", in that they cut and paste the same content repeatedly, rather than covert attempts to sway discussions. While Russia-linked accounts have occasionally engaged in Canadian political discussions, Yonder has not observed significant indicators of any coordinated state sponsored information operations targeting the Canadian elections.¹

2) Potential Foreign Interference in Other Elections

The 2022 US mid-term elections

- According to media, the Biden Administration received new intelligence reports pointing to the continuing and evolving threat of Russian interference in US domestic debates, including sowing disinformation on social media and 'weaponizing' US media outlets for propaganda purposes. Reports cite government and other sources who indicate that influencing the outcome of US mid-term elections in 2022 is the likely objective. Debates surrounding COVID-19 vaccinations and masking receive the most attention now.²

RRM Canada Take-away: while Canada is not mentioned, due to traditional spillover from the US to Canadian information space, especially with respect to highly politicised topics, Russian efforts to sow division through disinformation in the context of US mid-terms may reverberate in Canadian political discussions, as well.

German Bundestag elections

- Three recent reports by the Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD)³, the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP)⁴ and Oxford Analytica (OA)⁵ addressed the theme of foreign interference in the upcoming 26 September election to Bundestag. All three reports identify Russia and China as primary actors engaged in influence campaigns aimed at maintaining Germany's practical approach to respective bilateral relations (e.g. Nordstream and Ukraine for Russia, and 'Belt and Road' initiative for China). Due to ascendance of the Green Party in opinion

¹ This information is based on reports submitted by an independent service provider contracted to support RRM Canada's monitoring activities during GE44. It is provided here for your information only. Yonder views and assessments, in part or fully, are those of its authors and may not represent those of RRM Canada.

² "New intel reports indicate fresh efforts by Russia to interfere in 2022 election", CNN, August 13, 2021. Available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/13/politics/intel-report-russia-election-interference-2022/index.html>

³ Alliance for Securing Democracy, August 17, 2021. Available at <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/kristine-berzina-discusses-disinformation-in-the-lead-up-to-germanys-federal-elections-with-nzz/>

⁴ DGAP report from August 6, 2021. Available at <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/assessing-china-and-russias-influence-german-parliamentary-elections>

⁵ Oxford Analytica's daily brief, August 18, 2021. Available at <https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB263533/Foreign-influence-could-affect-German-elections>

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polls (relative to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany and Social Democratic Party of Germany)⁶, neither Russia nor China can be sure that classic German ‘centrism’ will remain in place after the elections. The ASD report also identifies Turkey and Iran as foreign actors pursuing their respective strategic goals through separate campaigns, but to a lesser extent.

According to these reports, Russia and China deploy somewhat different tactics to achieve their objectives. Strong presence of Russian state-media in the German information space (e.g. content produced by Russia Today (RT) in German and Sputnik is the 3rd most frequently shared on Twitter), ensures access to target audiences, in particular older populations in the east of the country. This content is also amplified online by both Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Left networks. China, on the other hand, ramped up its information activities since 2020 and targets well-connected politicians to lobby for Chinese interests. In recent years, Chinese companies have bought many German firms and the country remains an important export destination for Germany. In addition, Chinese activities concentrate on gaining information through cyberattacks and influencing politicians directly through networks such as the China-Bruecke (China Bridge), in which German politicians and businessmen meet Chinese leaders.

RRM Canada Take-away: these reports confirm our own observations that both Russia and China appear to be focusing their information campaigns on ‘higher priority’ countries, such as Germany, rather than Canada this fall. Factors such as target country priority in strategic calculus, intensity of bilateral relations, and ease of access to domestic information space remain important in assessing FI potential.

Factors Behind Increased FI Risk

Based on lessons learned from past elections in various jurisdictions abroad, risk of foreign interference increases in a number of situations related to election dynamics or their administration, such as: 1) when polling results reveal narrow margins between primary contenders; 2) when party platforms or candidate debates provide impetus for controversy; and 3) when the counting of mail-in ballots delays the publication of official final results.⁷ In these and similar situations, lack of information and the uncertainty surrounding vote results can be used by malign actors to fuel conspiracy theories and further social polarization.

3) Foreign State-sponsored Online Campaigns Against Canada and other Democracies

During the reporting period, RRM Canada noted a number of evolving information campaigns by hostile actors targeting democracies. While these campaigns did not target Canada specifically, it is worth mentioning them for situational awareness:

- On-going Russian influence campaign against Ukraine focusing on preparations for and outcomes of the ‘Crimean Platform’ summit in Odessa and the new “Partnership for a Strong

⁶ Politico’s polling results can be viewed at <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/>

⁷ “Mail-in ballots could delay results in Canada election”, Reuters, August 18, 2021. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/mail-in-ballots-could-delay-results-canada-election-2021-08-18/>

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Ukraine Fund” (with Canada among signatories) aimed at countering Russian influence in south-east Ukraine.

- The developments surrounding the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and PM Trudeau’s announcement that Canada is prepared to maintain its special forces there beyond 31 August attracted a lot of media attention by Russia, China and Iran among others.
- On-going situation in Belarus and its actions vis-à-vis Lithuania on illegal migrants attract significant media attention in Russian state media. In addition, due to Lithuania opening a new trade office in Taipei it became a target for negative Chinese state media focus.

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