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Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Election Protocol Panel

August 30, 2021 10:30-12:00, via CTSN

Objectives

- Review scenarios with other members of the Election Protocol Panel (Panel) for General Election 44 (GE44), discuss the Panel announcement process, and receive a threat update from the Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE).

Run of Show

- This meeting will convene members of the Panel to continue the scenario-based exercise for GE44 introduced during the meeting of August 23. Agenda will include: (1) Introductory remarks; (2) Scenario exercise; (3) Panel discussion on announcement process; (4) Threat update from SITE; and (5) Wrap-up.
- Participants will include: Janice Charette, Interim Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet; François Daigle, Deputy Minister of Justice and Deputy Attorney General of Canada and Rob Stewart, Deputy Minister of Public Safety. Mike MacDonald, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet from the Office of the National Security and Intelligence Advisor to the Prime Minister, will stand in for the National Security and Intelligence Advisor.

Departmental Representative: Gallit Dobner, Director, Centre for International Digital Policy

Key Messages

- **It is critical to communicate to Canadians about elections security, explaining both the threats to build awareness and resilience and the actions the Government is taking to safeguard the process to build confidence in Canada's democratic processes.**
- **The Panel has a high threshold for communicating threats to Canadians. But government departments have their own threshold, as they must weigh the caretaker convention before communicating. This complicates the Government's efforts to communicate with Canadians**
- **In this context, the media, civil society and academics play an important role in raising awareness.**

Context

- **Previous Interactions:** This meeting follows the August 23 meeting of the Panel during which members reviewed scenarios and lessons learned in preparation for GE44, received threat updates from SITE, the Communication Security Establishment (CSE) and The Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), and discussed the Panel announcement process.
- **Scenario Exercise:** During the meeting, Scenario 3 will be examined, followed by Scenario 4, if there is sufficient time. The scenarios are designed to elicit discussion on: 1) developing a common understanding of the thresholds; 2) the mandate of the Panel and other players; and 3) considerations around making an announcement if the threshold is met.
- **Discussion of Panel Announcement Process:** There will be a discussion on the process of alerting the Prime Minister, Elections Committee and the political parties of an impending announcement as per the requirements of the Protocol.
- PCO Communications and PCO Democratic Institutions will lead panel members through a discussion of related issues and considerations should an announcement be required. The objective of the discussion is to work through a process for the Panel to follow that would protect election

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integrity while remaining impartial. The Interim Clerk requested this item at a previous meeting but time did not allow, so it has been carried forward.

- **Threat Update: SITE:** The Security and Intelligence Threats to Elections Task Force (SITE) will deliver a briefing. The SITE-led brief will provide an update on new developments since the last panel meeting, including RRM Canada updates.
- Rapid Response Mechanism (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. The vast majority of content assessed by RRM Canada originated from recognizable Canadian news or information sites (either in English, French, Chinese, or Russian). RRM Canada has validated these findings through its external partners and secondary research.
- 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 coverage by Chinese Communist Party-directed media related to a petition calling for the release of Meng Wanzhou as well as a video about the history of residential schools for Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. and Canada.
- 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.
- Secondary sources indicate continued efforts by foreign hostile 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: (1) Russia's ongoing influence campaign against Ukraine; (2) the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan; and (3) the situation in Belarus and its actions vis-à-vis Lithuania on illegal migrants.
- **Thresholds and Public Communications:** The Panel's threshold for communicating with the public about threats to federal elections is very high. PCO has established a communications framework meant to address incidents that fall below the Panel's threshold but where communication is still in the public interest. However, public communications – while critical for raising awareness, building resilience and reinforcing confidence in democratic institutions – is complicated by Caretaker Convention guidelines restricting the government's ability to speak to media. For example, PCO and CSE have so far refused all elections security-related interview requests by Canadian media, instead referring media to publicly available information online. There has likewise been no press conference or tech briefing on the measures the Government is taking to safeguard elections (note: this was a suggestion made by the CPC Campaign Chair at the Political Party Briefing).
- In this context, the media, civil society and academics play an important role in communicating to Canadians. For example, the Media Ecosystem Observatory at McGill University has launched the Canadian Election Integrity Coalition – including the University of Toronto, Laval University, Simon Fraser University, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Oxford University, and CPAC – to monitor the online information ecosystem for mis- and disinformation, including foreign state sponsored disinformation, and will be reporting their findings publicly. (Note: RRM Canada is contracting the Media Ecosystem Observatory to provide it with regular reporting on possible foreign state sponsored information operations online but the Observatory's broader initiative, including its public reporting, is outside the scope of the contract.)
- The Department's Communications branch is participating in both PCO's Director General communications table and SITE's working level communications table.

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Attachments:

- RRM Canada Weekly Report

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