



Foreign Interference Commission

Public Consultation Process

Small Group Consultation Meeting Public Summary

In the summer of 2024, Commissioner Marie-Josée Hogue and members of the Foreign Interference Commission's (the "**Commission**") Public Consultation Process ("**PCP**") team met with two individuals respectively belonging to the Tigrayan/Ethiopian Canadian and Russian Canadian communities in a meeting facilitated by the Human Rights Coalition. This is the summary of the information provided during the consultation meeting.

Notes to reader:

- The Commissioner has not and will not be making any findings about the accuracy of the information shared at the consultation meeting or make any findings of fact based on this information.
- The meeting attendees did not make an oath or swear to tell the truth before sharing information at this meeting.
- The meeting attendees were not subjected to cross-examination.
- The meeting attendees have reviewed and approved the contents of this public summary.
- Meeting attendees were given the option to anonymize themselves for the purposes of the present public summary. Where meeting attendees have opted to anonymize themselves, they are designated as "Participant 1", "Participant 2", etc.
- At each of the consultation meetings, the meeting attendees were asked to answer two questions, which are set out below. The meeting attendees were each given a total of 15 minutes to respond to both questions.
- Where necessary, Commission counsel have provided explanatory notes in square brackets and in the footnotes to assist the reader.

Executive Summary

- The attendees are active advocates in their respective communities, namely the Tigrayan/Ethiopian Canadian and Russian Canadian communities. They described examples of foreign interference they said were attributable, directly or indirectly, to foreign states, namely Ethiopia, Eritrea and the Russian Federation.
- The attendees shared their respective experiences being targeted by online harassment and defamation by supporters of foreign governments as a result of their activism. One of the attendees explained how bots were used to fuel online hatred and coax others into adopting such abusive narratives.
- The attendees described how the abuse they faced severely impacted their lives. More specifically, the attendees reported receiving threats against themselves and members of their family, facing a frivolous defamation lawsuit, and repeated attempts being made to silence their activism.
- The attendees shared the heavy psychological toll the constant abuse had taken on them and their loved ones.
- One of the attendees emphasized the need to enforce hate speech laws, including in online environments, and to educate the Canadian public about restrictions on online speech.
- One attendee noted the importance of raising awareness and education amongst law enforcement agencies as to the specific cultural realities of various diaspora communities in Canada.
- Another attendee recommended restricting access in Canada to state-sponsored Russian language media outlets that spew disinformation, including on online platforms such as YouTube.

1. Participants' responses to Question 1

The first question posed to the participants was: *How are you, your loved ones and members of your community impacted by foreign interference in Canada's electoral processes and democratic institutions?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 said that they began advocating for peace when the war in Tigray started in 2020. Participant 1 said that they used their existing social media accounts, which were under their real name, for their advocacy work. Participant 1 explained that most digital advocacy carried out by Tigrayan Canadians is done using pseudonyms. Participant 1 stated that because they could be identified, they became the target of a harassment and defamation campaign orchestrated by the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments and their agents.

Participant 1 said that false claims that they were the treasurer of the Tigray People's Liberation Front ("**TPLF**") were spread online. Participant 1 explained that this was a particularly dangerous claim as it suggested they were wealthy, which placed their family in Ethiopia at risk of abduction for ransom. Participant 1 stated that a CA\$500,000 defamation lawsuit was filed against them personally in Ontario by an agent of the Eritrean government in connection with Participant 1's advocacy work. Participant 1 believes the lawsuit, which is still ongoing, was intended to silence them and to discourage them from pursuing their digital advocacy. Participant 1 said that they needed to raise funds to defend themselves against this lawsuit.

Participant 1 mentioned that the effects of their digital advocacy against the war on Tigray had been acknowledged by the interim leader of the TPLF, who thanked them for being a voice of reason. Participant 1 said that this acknowledgement increased the intensity of the harassment they experienced. Participant 1 said that they have been identified as a *persona non grata* in their home country of Ethiopia because of their activism, and social media agents of the Ethiopian government have signaled its intent to arrest and prosecute them should they go back. Participant 1 said that they were not able to attend their father's funeral when he passed away in 2023 because of these threats. Participant 1 said they are also fearful of calling their mother, because they think their phone and laptop may have been compromised or are being monitored.

Participant 1 said that they reported the death threats against themselves and their children to the police. Participant 1 stated that they did not receive any follow-up from the police on this matter and have lost faith in the process as a result. Participant 1 said that

when similar threats were made against them on TikTok, the platform's response to their reports was that no violation of its guidelines had been found.

Participant 1 stated that their physical and mental health had suffered because of the harassment campaign they were subjected to. Participant 1 said that they would continue to be a vocal advocate and individuals like them have paid a price that is too high and are not being protected.

Participant 2

Participant 2 explained that, in the mid-2010s, the Russian disinformation narratives were mostly spread on Facebook, and more precisely, in Facebook groups. Participant 2 recalled being a member of various Facebook groups purporting to gather Russian speakers across Canada. Participant 2 said that in reality only 20% of the groups' members were Russian Canadians, whereas the remaining 80% were Russian trolls spewing Kremlin propaganda. Participant 2 said that in their experience, the Facebook group moderators were unscrupulous individuals who, for a small financial gain, would refrain from moderating the content posted on the groups.

Participant 2 said that they started to receive threats from the Russian trolls on these Facebook groups. Participant 2 said that initially they did not consider these threats to be serious, and they continued to provide a counter-narrative to the Russian disinformation. Participant 2 said that they eventually began to receive actual threats from Russian Canadians in these Facebook groups.

Participant 2 said that they reported some of these threats to their local police department on a few occasions. Participant 2 said that the police told them that they did not need to be worried about these threats because the threats were not made by real people, but rather by the trolls on the Facebook groups. Participant 2 said that the police had contacted a moderator of one of the Facebook groups, and that after their intervention, the moderator asked other group members not to post hate content against Participant 2 on the group.

Participant 2 stated that the influence of the Russian trolls was not only limited to Participant 2; they said that the trolls also had an impact during the Canadian elections in directing voters on who to vote for. Participant 2 believes that these propaganda

narratives continue to this day, and that they have spread to other media platforms such as X [formerly known as Twitter] and TikTok.

2. Participants' responses to Question 2

The second question posed to participants was: *What are your suggestions for how you and others in your community who may be vulnerable to foreign interference could be supported and protected, and for how foreign interference could be detected or combated?*

Participant 1

Participant 1 said that hate speech laws in Canada need to be strengthened and enforced more strictly, including with regards to online hate speech.

Participant 1 said that law enforcement needs to gain a better understanding of diaspora communities and the complex relationships within diaspora community members in Canada. Participant 1 explained that some of the threats they received originated from their own Ethiopian Canadian community, and that this cultural context should inform law enforcement response.

Participant 1 mentioned the need for the Canadian government to better educate diaspora community members in Canada about laws, particularly that hate speech is illegal.

Participant 1 said it would be helpful to have access to resources to know whether their communication devices have been compromised and hacked.

Participant 1 said that legal resources should be provided at minimal or no cost to dissidents facing lawsuits intended to silence their advocacy efforts.

Participant 1 explained that, due to the low level of awareness about the war in Tigray within the Canadian public, it was difficult for them and members of their community to tap into resources and support from the government or the society in general. Compared to the level of community and government involvement in response to the war in Ukraine, they noted that they wished the same level of support had been provided in response to the war in Tigray.

Participant 2

Participant 2 recognized the difficulties in finding solutions to the issues of online disinformation, as they believe it is impossible for the government to police content circulating across every platform.

Participant 2 said that Canada should restrict access in Canada to state-sponsored Russian language media outlets. They noted the success some advocates had in petitioning the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (“**CRTC**”) for the removal of *Russia Today* from cable networks. Participant 2 noted, however, that *Russia Today* still remains available to Canadians via online platforms such as YouTube.