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FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND RIGHT WING POLITICS: THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Foreign Interference Efforts Targeting Canada:

In recent months, major media outlets have noted foreign interference efforts exploiting narratives surrounding Immigration and pipelines. Examples include:

- <https://theconversation.com/russian-twitter-trolls-stoke-anti-immigrant-lies-ahead-of-canadian-election-119144>
- <https://thetyee.ca/Analysis/2019/07/30/Russian-Trolls-Promoting-Anti-Immigrant-Lies/>
- <https://vancouversun.com/opinion/op-ed/ahmed-al-rawi-and-yasmin-jiwani-russian-twitter-trolls-stoke-anti-immigrant-lies-ahead-of-canadian-election>
- <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/twitter-troll-pipeline-immigrant-russia-iran-1.5014750>
- <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/russian-twitter-trolls-canada-targeted-1.4772397>

Moreover, recent articles in The National Observer and PressProgress have made claims that conservative political discussions on social media are driven by inauthentic automated accounts (ie. Bots):

- <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2019/07/18/news/twitter-bots-boosted-trending-trudeaumustgo-hashtag>
- <https://pressprogress.ca/nearly-one-in-three-people-debating-alberta-politics-on-twitter-are-likely-bots-new-report-says/>

While these recent stories are not necessarily inaccurate, RRM Canada notes that foreign interference and covert influence campaigns exploit narratives from across the political spectrum. One of the most well studied foreign interference campaign was that targeting the 2016 US presidential elections. A recent report for the US senate intelligence committee indicates that the St Petersburg Russia based Internet Research Agency (IRA) leveraged a diverse group of narratives associated with many sides of the US domestic political landscape.¹ The following is a partial list of US domestic issues that were exploited by the IRA in their effort to polarize US society:

- Trust in media;
- Black culture, community, and pride;
- Texas culture, community, and pride;
- Muslim culture, community, and pride;
- Christian culture, community, and pride;
- LGBT culture, community, and pride;
- Latino culture, community, and pride;
- Blue Lives Matter, pro-law enforcement content;
- Anti-refugee, pro-immigration reform content;
- Separatist movements and secession;
- Meme and "red pill" culture;
- Liberal and feminist culture;
- Gun rights, 2nd Amendment advocacy; and

¹ <https://www.newknowledge.com/articles/the-disinformation-report/>

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- Syria and ISIS.

It is important to note that **these efforts exploited organic American protest movements and focused on widespread, pre-existing societal issues and should not be dismissed as “propaganda”.**

During the 2015 Canadian Federal Elections similar efforts, albeit with much less sophistication and scale targeted Canadians from across the political spectrum. In addition to the anti-Immigration and pro-pipeline sentiment noted in recent media articles, messages targeting pro-immigration and refugee sentiment were observed within a dataset of accounts released by Twitter. On 8 Sept 2015 accounts Twitter has attributed to Iran amplified a Huffington Post article² which blamed the incumbent Conservative government for the drowning death of Syrian child refugee, Alan Kurdi. This network of accounts shared the article approximately 91 times. Moreover, accounts tied to the IRA also promoted content attacking former PM Harper and Conservative candidates. Other accounts tied to the IRA supported the Liberal Party and PM Trudeau, including after the election. Screen captures of this content is can be seen in appendix A. As was observed in the US, existing domestic narratives were exploited by foreign actors. **Given that multiple contentious issues form across the political spectrum were exploited in both the US and Canada, the likely goal these efforts lies in polarizing our societies.**

According to a February 2019 analysis by CBC,³ 21 600 Tweets targeted Canadians between 2014 and early 2019, culminating in under 200 tweets a day at peak times. For comparison, RRM Canada regularly observes over 1 million posts per month discussing political issues in Canada. Further, RRM Canada could not replicate the findings of the above noted Press Progress and National Observer articles. While some automation was observed in both these cases, RRM Canada does not assess that right wing discussions are primarily driven by false amplification on Twitter. **Given this low level of foreign content and/or false amplification, it is unlikely that a foreign actor had significant impact on Canadian audiences.**

The rise of Alternative and Far-right “news sources” in Canada

In recent months, RRM Canada observed a continued spike in alternative and far-right media sources shared on social media. In June, both www.thepostmillennial.com and www.spencerfernando.com surpassed traditional social media such as National Post, Toronto star, Globe and Mail and Huffington Post in terms of number of shares relating to Canadian Politics. The alternative site www.therebel.media as well as the anti-Immigrant Cultural Action Party of Canada, capforcanada.com, have also seen significant increases in shares on Social Media. **RRM Canada observed no indication of false amplification and assesses that the increased popularity of these sources is very likely both organic and domestic in nature.** Though the nature of the content is domestic, the move away from traditional news sources may indicate a decrease in trust in traditional outlets among right leaning Canadians. No such increase popularity has been observed among alternative or far-left media outlets. **As noted above in the list of campaigns targeting the US, trust in media is a vulnerability foreign actors have previously exploited.**

² https://www.huffpost.com/entry/now-is-the-time-for-blame_b_8093904?utm_hp_ref=tw

³ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/twitter-troll-pipeline-immigrant-russia-iran-1.5014750>

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Divisive Narratives within the EU Elections

Within the Context of the 2019 European Union (EU) elections RRM Canada the dissemination and artificial amplification of divisive content surrounding issues such as: immigration, Muslims in Europe, climate change and liberal vs conservative politics. What is notable is the strategic pushing of inflammatory and divisive narratives across national borders and global political contexts to engage pan-European, regional and international communities. An illustrative example is a story contending that "400 African illegal immigrants stormed in the terminal of the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris." In this instance, a transnational network of actors shared, aided by Kremlin-linked news outlets, copied, reproduced, and amplified divisive content related to a minor local protest.

Similarly, RRM Canada observed Eurosceptic and anti-globalization sentiment amplified by unknown actors by leveraging authentic content produced by domestic politicians. Using a speech by Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini, content was initially spread and amplified through a set of suspicious accounts. These accounts then began to post the content to the accounts of influential online political commentators in order to have it boost engagement. Finally, the content was translated into four different languages and amplified again by separate networks.

Separately, the Atlantic Councils Digital Forensics Research (DFR) Lab found instances of Kremlin linked interference campaigns on Facebook, Reddit and Medium. DFR Lab notes the emergence of the tactic of planting, seeding and systematically amplifying false information across platforms and other information sources.⁴ In this case, DFR Lab observed what they assess to be a Kremlin attempt to undermine social cohesion by using false information to tie Islamic extremists to Irish Nationalists.

Concluding Remarks

Despite recent focus on the exploitation of narratives surrounding Immigration and other traditionally right wing concerns, historical evidence indicates that foreign actors are willing to exacerbate tensions by exploiting contentious narratives from across the political spectrum. **Within the Canadian Context, RRM Canada monitors for indicators of foreign interference campaigns from across the political spectrum. As of the time of this writing, RRM Canada assesses that the bulk of political discussion on social media is organic and domestic in nature.** Given that the low level of artificial amplification observed within the Canadian context thus far, dismissing concerns associated with any given part of the political spectrum as propaganda is ill advised. This likely serves more to marginalize groups who relate to a given issue and exacerbates polarization of our society more than it does to protect our society from foreign interference efforts.

However, foreign actors have attempted to interference in Democratic Processes in the US, the EU and to a lesser extent Canada. As such, these covert and malign tactics requires monitoring and further study to determine the extent and nature of the threat. While vigilance is required, RRM Canada recommends maintaining balance in order to mitigate the potential polarizing and marginalization effects

⁴ Please See: Digital Forensics Research Lab. 2019. "Top Takes: Suspected Russian Intelligence Operations." June 22, 2019.

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Appendix A:

User#3D53lvyu

Iran 2019  

RT @XWka8xvfp99Ut6+2XzgD7yxd4qEAeOpJgCnyrEJYIE=: Now Is the Time for Blame: #Alyan& the Myth of a 'Generous' #Canada! <http://t.co/sK6vEkKANI> #RefugeesCrisis #Refugees <http://t...>

 0  0 2015-09-08

User#FU7+9pUt

Iran 2019  

RT @XWka8xvfp99Ut6+2XzgD7yxd4qEAeOpJgCnyrEJYIE=: Now Is the Time for Blame: #Alyan& the Myth of a 'Generous' #Canada! <http://t.co/sK6vEkKANI> #RefugeesCrisis #Refugees <http://t...>

 0  0 2015-09-08

User#02c7119c

Iran  

RT @Robert.Jensen2: Do you have some favourite #CPCRacistQuotes? Please tweet them in honour of Chris Alexander. <http://t.co/tbyNKR3V5W>

 0  0 2015-06-12

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ScreamyMonkey

IRA  

Al Jazeera journalist Fahmy says betrayed, abandoned by Canada PM #world #news

 0  1 2015-10-13

TodayNYCity

IRA  

#politics Canadian candidate caught urinating in coffee mug

 0  1 2015-09-07

PigeonToday

IRA  

#humanrights in Canada are under assault under PM Stephen Harper: right groups
<http://t.co/L79oNm4U7U>

 3  2 2015-07-25



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User#0994abf9

IRA  

RT @RussiaInsider: Canadians Don't Believe Yatsenyuk's and Harper's Ukraine War Fear Mongering #Yatsenyuk <http://t.co/lA6LxMLvIR> <http://t.c...>

 0  0 2015-07-17

WashingtOnline

IRA  

In Canada's Trudeau, Obama meets his match on star power at Asia summit #politics

 0  0 2015-11-19

Jenn_Abrams

IRA  

Canada prime minister welcomes 1st wave of #SyrianRefugees. Right, let's first check them on Cananda <https://t.co/GJdmiHRyRV>

 4  5 2015-12-11



TodayNYCity

IRA  

#politics Canadian candidate caught urinating in coffee mug

 0  1 2015-09-07

ScreamyMonkey

IRA  

Charismatic Canadian PM mobbed by selfie seekers on world debut #world #news

 0  2 2015-11-15

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ScreamyMonkey

IRA  

Surging Canadian Liberals ask for majority mandate in next week's election #world #news

 0  1 2015-10-15

User#DGMR8zhc

Russia  

RT @CBCNews: NDP ready for coalition against Harper, Liberal voters 'fed up,' MP says
<http://t.co/6SVhQCJLwl> <http://t.co/RdbhcCbPR2>

 0  0 2015-07-23

Trudeau

28 Results for Trudeau btw 1 Jan-19 Oct 2015

47 Results 20 Oct-31 Dec

Harper