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Canada and allies on high alert for Russian disinformation and interference: minister

Public Safety Minister Mendicino says government preparing for Russian retaliation in cyberspace

Marie Woolf · The Canadian Press · Posted: Apr 13, 2022 6:42 PM EDT | Last Updated: April 13, 2022

Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino speaks during a news conference on Feb. 15 in Ottawa. Mendicino says his government is preparing for Russian retaliation in cyberspace for Canada backing Ukraine. (Adrian Wyld/The Canadian Press)

comments

Canada is on "high alert" for state-sponsored Russian disinformation campaigns designed to confuse and deceive people, says Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino.
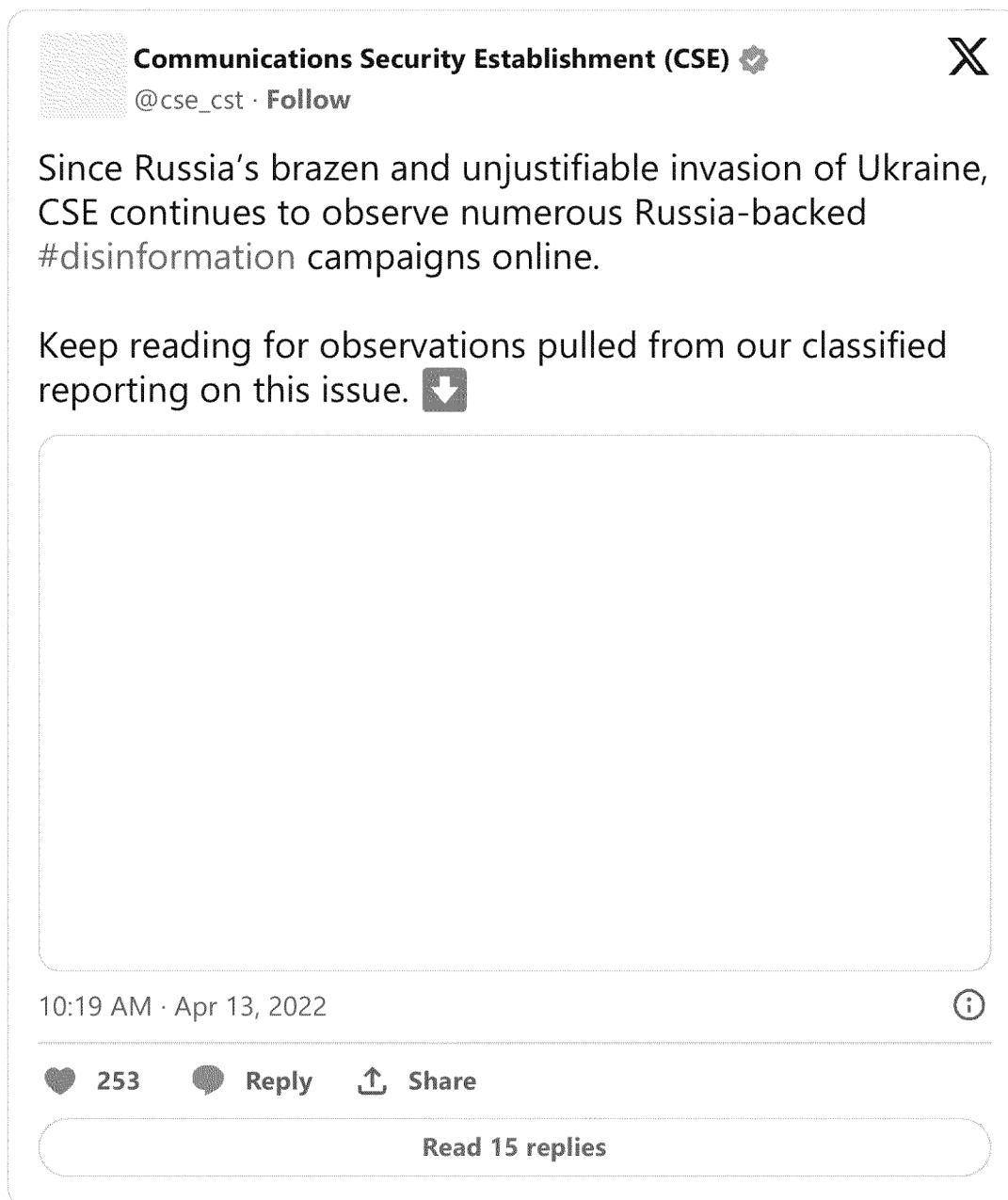
In an interview, he said Russia is a belligerent and hostile actor when it comes to spreading untruths in cyberspace, but he is confident Canada is on top of the problem.

He warned that his government is preparing for Russian retaliation in cyberspace for Canada backing Ukraine's struggle against aggression by Vladimir Putin's military forces.

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"Canada and all allies remain on high alert for Russian retaliation in the form of disinformation and foreign interference," he said.
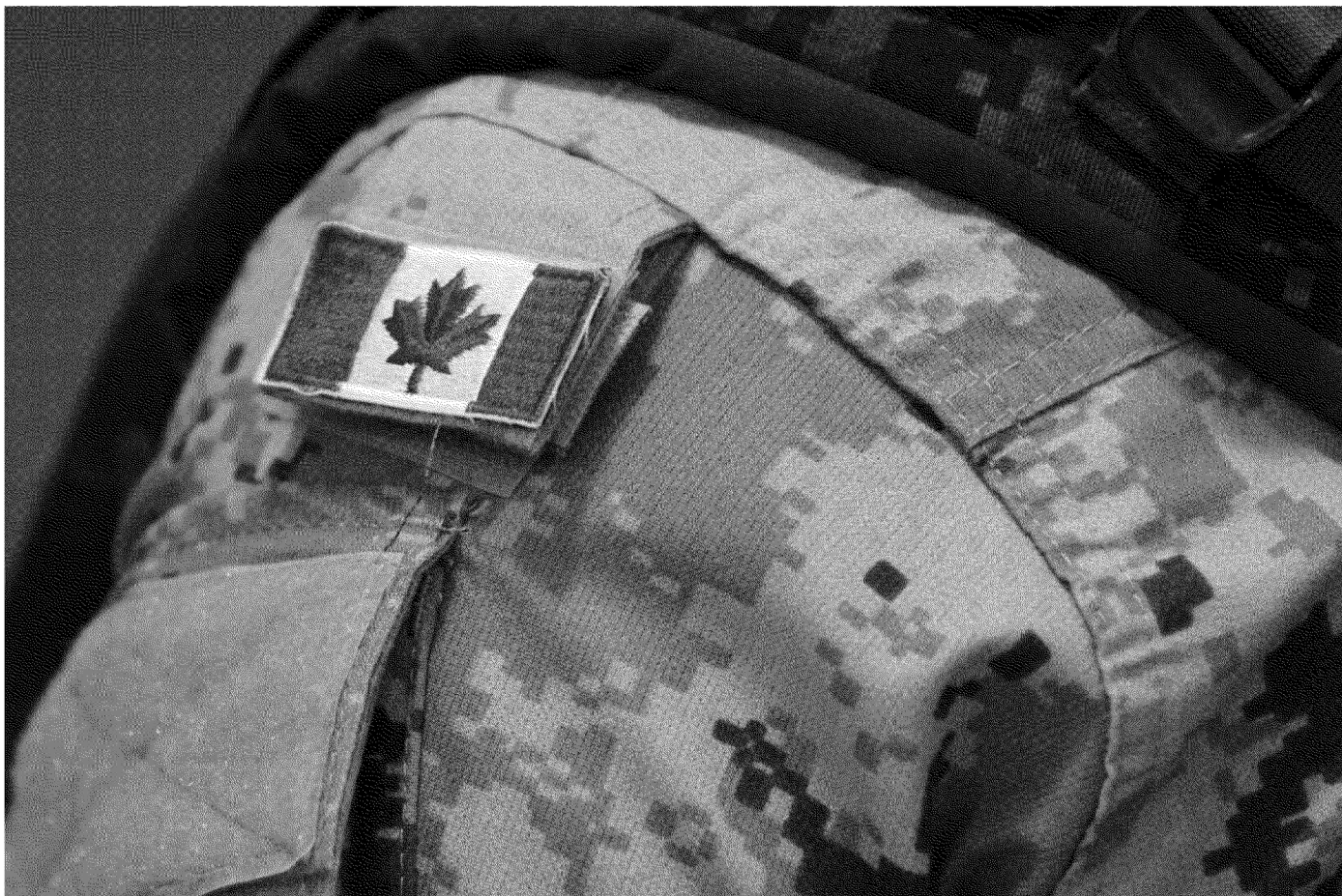
On Wednesday, Canada's electronic spy agency posted on Twitter an update on Russia-backed disinformation, which it is monitoring.

Communications Security Establishment (CSE) ✅   ✖

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Since Russia's brazen and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine, CSE continues to observe numerous Russia-backed #disinformation campaigns online.

Keep reading for observations pulled from our classified reporting on this issue. ⬇️

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The Communications Security Establishment said the Kremlin is using platforms featuring antisemitic, anti-LGBTQ, anti immigrant and anti-globalist material to manipulate global audiences.

The surveillance agency, which monitors and decodes signals intelligence including online activity, disclosed that Russia is spreading falsehoods about Canada's involvement in the Ukraine conflict using media it controls.

The Kremlin's false narratives include doctored images of members of the Canadian Armed Forces in Ukraine and false claims that Canadian soldiers are committing war crimes.

A Canadian flag patch is shown on a soldier's shoulder in Trenton, Ont., in 2014. Canada's Communications Security Establishment is warning that Russia's false narratives include doctored images of members of the Canadian Armed Forces in Ukraine and false claims that Canadian soldiers are committing war crimes. (Lars Hagberg/The Canadian Press)

Mendicino said Canada is a world leader in confronting such threats and, with its allies, is using all the tools at its disposal to detect online deception from Russia and to weaken its impact.

His remarks come after the government earmarked $28 million in the budget to combat disinformation within Canada and by foreign actors such as Russia, China and Iran.

"Russia is a well-known belligerent and hostile actor in this space. And so too are other state actors and that is why we remain on high alert," he said.

Mendicino said calling out lies — including Putin's assertion that the invasion of Ukraine was designed to de-Nazify the country — is a crucial first step to

undermining the impact of disinformation.

He added Canada is working "very closely" with G7 partners and the "Five Eyes" — an intelligence alliance between Canada, the U.K., Australia, New Zealand and the United States — to fight disinformation, which he said was being used to undermine democracies around the world.

Over $13 million in the budget will be used to renew and expand the G7 rapid response mechanism designed to detect and identify foreign interference and state-sponsored disinformation.

Further funds will help combat attempts to erode trust in government from within Canada, including $10 million "to co-ordinate, develop and implement government-wide measures designed to combat disinformation and protect our democracy."

Disinformation 'undermines democracy,' minister says

Mendicino warned that disinformation is being used by extremist groups, including white supremacists, to undermine trust in Canada's government.

Bigots whip up hatred by spreading lies about Jews, Muslims and other minority groups, he said, often sucking in people who have other grievances.

"One of the most pernicious aspects to disinformation is how it can attract people who may very well be fatigued and frustrated with a variety of things and pull them into a much more nefarious and extremist objective," he said.

Mendicino says tactics to deliberately deceive people and distort the truth were employed by some leaders of the Freedom Convoy that occupied Ottawa's downtown streets for three weeks.

He said lessons to be learned from the blockade include "how disinformation was leveraged as a tactic to confuse people and to undermine their trust in democracy."

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He said disinformation, which has been on the rise for years, "divides and polarizes," even though some untruths circulating "sound at times absurd."

"The notion that Canada had become a dictatorship is as far out on left field as you can get before you are over the wall," he said. "But these things happened."

Mendicino said the pandemic has created a fertile ground for disinformation, pointing to what he said was "a very deliberate campaign to spread [lies] about vaccines."

The minister said that not only should untruths be called out, but the government needs to educate people so they can spot material designed to mislead them. He said social-media platforms have a key role to play in labelling misinformation.

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