

## Canada is a target of Russia's disinformation. Let's be ready

By ALEXANDRA CHYCZIJ JAN. 30, 2019

A whole-of-government strategy on neutralizing the spread of disinformation must be developed in the lead-up to this year's election.



Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland was recently singled out in a Russian state-owned news outlet's story that claimed that Canada's foreign policy is controlled by 'Nazi-loving Ukrainians.' Ms. Freeland has responded to allegations that her grandfather was a Nazi collaborator by saying the claim was part of a Russian disinformation campaign. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

On Jan. 15, CBC's *The National* ran a story exposing Russia's disinformation campaign targeting Canada and the Ukrainian-Canadian community. As Canada's federal election draws nearer, I believe the Kremlin's propaganda machine will increasingly target our country with anti-Canadian fabrications in an attempt to sow discord, conflict, and to undermine our democratic institutions.

The CBC reported the bizarre claim that Canada's foreign policy is controlled by "[Nazi-loving Ukrainians](#)," which aired on the Russian government-controlled Russia 24 *Vesti Nedeli* program, hosted by the infamous Kremlin propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov. Kiselyov is under [Canadian sanctions](#) for promoting Russia's war against Ukraine.

In the past, Kiselyov has made ludicrous statements, [such as](#) that if people who are gay "die in a car crash, their hearts should be burnt or buried in the ground as unsuitable for the continuation of life." He refused to retract the statement, and said it was taken out of context and that he's not homophobic. But such is the rhetoric of Russian President Vladimir Putin's go-to propagandist, who was [appointed](#) by Putin as head of the state "news" agency, Rossiya Segodnya.

The assertions made in the Russian report are, of course, so ridiculous that they need no refuting. But that isn't the point. The point of Russian propaganda isn't to convince; it is to muddy, obfuscate, and confuse.

In the past, most of Kiselyov's hate rhetoric and vitriol has targeted Ukraine, against which Russia has waged a war of aggression for the past five years. Supporters of Ukraine, such as the European Union and the United States, have been in his crosshairs as well.

That Canada is now under attack points to the fact that Canada's strong support of Ukraine, and Canada's respected voice in the international community, is of increasing concern to the Kremlin. Russia 24 singled out Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland and Members of Parliament Borys Wrzesnewskyj and James Bezan, all known for their outspoken support of Ukraine.

The Kremlin is clearly trying to undermine Canadians' trust in our democratic institutions. And Russia surely sees the upcoming fall federal election as an opportunity to carry out an influence campaign and spread division through lies and manipulations. Canada needs to take this threat seriously.

A recent [report](#) by the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, *Stemming the Virus: Understanding and Responding to the Threat of Russian Disinformation*, points out that “As long as Vladimir Putin remains in power, so too does the menace of information warfare and the escalating danger of allowing our own democracies to spin into the venomous political dysfunction that we have [seen] in the U.S. and elsewhere. Canada’s response must be robust and take into account all sources and methods of how foreign information warfare and democratic interference are conducted. Most importantly, we must be prepared for a very long fight.”

Canada has to be proactive in countering this insidious propaganda campaign. A comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy on neutralizing the spread of disinformation must be developed.

Canadians from coast to coast to coast can do their part by behaving responsibly on social media. The experience of the United States has taught us that social media is a favoured platform of Moscow’s troll factories. Let us not blindly “like” and “retweet” without first checking the source and veracity of the sender.

Putin is dedicating significant resources and efforts to undermining our democracy. Canada must be more vigilant in defending it.

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