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Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Frequent storms of Russian disinformation in Kazakhstan - a response to the loss of influence

Kazakhstan has good reason to be suspicious of Russia's actions towards it since many covert disinformation campaigns have coincided with official Moscow declarations of a strong partnership.

On October 25, Republic Day, which Kazakhstan celebrates in remembrance of its 1990 declaration of independence from the USSR, President Vladimir Putin congratulated President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

"Russian-Kazakh relations are at a high level", Putin wrote, congratulating the Kazakh leader. The Government of Russia, following congratulations, declared its readiness "to help protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan".

Even though this appears to be a protocol routine on the occasion of significant dates in the recent history of the 2 great allies, there is a not-so-friendly influence-peddling beneath the surface.

Congratulations followed by threats

At the same time, when Moscow congratulated the Astana leadership, there had been a rather severe Russian disinformation campaign against Kazakhstan's sovereignty.

Major Moscow media, such as Argumenty and Fakty and Moskovsky Komsomolets, rapidly took over the announcements from influential channels on the Telegram platform that the "NATO peacekeeping centre" was officially opened in the Kazakh capital.

In order for this news (which will turn out to be false) to gain more credibility, a photo from the actual event was published with it. The photo showed US Ambassador to Kazakhstan Daniel Rosenblum was present when the conference hall at the Peacekeeping Operation Centre opened.

That centre has existed for almost 2 decades as part of the Ministry of Defence of Kazakhstan, which was forced to quickly deny disinformation that spread on influential Russian online platforms and media controlled by the Kremlin.

However, the expected effect had already been achieved, regardless of the denials from Astana, because the Russian audience received another "proof" that the traditional ally was turning its back on Moscow and getting closer to the Western Alliance.

Discrediting state policy

Kazakhstan has long been under intense pressure from disinformation broadcast from Russia. Their goal is to discredit state policy, perceived as insufficiently allied, even conflicting in relation to Moscow, particularly regarding its aggression against Ukraine.

An operation that combined conspiracy theories and fake news was launched last summer in a similar fashion. It was successful in harming Kazakhstan's reputation among Russian audiences.

Disinformation saying that the Kazakh government made a deal with the US government to transfer as many as 30 biological laboratories, controlled by the Pentagon, from Ukraine to Kazakhstan spread rapidly.

This fake news received a "foundation" in the comments of influential bloggers. According to bloggers, Kazakhstan was the right place to transfer these bio-weapon factories because it had such facilities from the Soviet period.

This kind of campaign has a fertile ground in a widespread perception that the US already has bioweapons facilities in Ukraine and that now, because of the war, they want to move them to Kazakhstan and thus keep them in a region where they could harm not only Russia, but Central Asian countries, and even China.

Legitimisation of aggression

against Ukraine

As in the case of fake news about the NATO centre in Astana and disinformation about the transfer of bio-laboratories from Ukraine to Kazakhstan, such campaigns play a significant role in legitimising Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Both moments (the rapprochement with NATO and the production of bio-weapons), but also other topics of Russian disinformation campaigns, should strengthen the belief of the Russian public that the attack on Ukraine was justified and that it was an act of self-defence against external threats.

Kazakhstan has reason to worry and be extremely cautious because the goal of similar operations was to delegitimise the state leadership as corrupt and prone to a policy of distancing itself from Moscow, which is contrary to the will of the people. Ukraine also went through similar storms of disinformation in the years preceding the armed aggression.

The government in Astana and President Tokayev have been trying to maintain official relations at a high level, maintaining strong economic and security ties that date back to the Soviet era.

However, this is insufficient for Moscow, which seeks unreserved support for its aggression against Ukraine.

Moscow was disturbed by President Tokayev's calls at the UN General Assembly to respect the states' sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly for Kazakhstan to join Western sanctions against Russia.

Kazakhstan has been presented systematically to the Russian public as a suspicious neighbour, potentially prone to "betrayal" and defection to the opposite camp.

At the same time, the narrative has been spreading of Kazakhstan being an "artificial state" (Dmitry Medvedev), a part of Russia's natural space - the same introduction that preceded the attack on Ukraine.

Unacceptable loss of influence in Central Asia

Just like in the case of Ukraine, there is a widespread narrative that the various Slavic and Russian communities in Kazakhstan are threatened, followed by fake news about frequent physical attacks and other pressures.

It is unlikely that Kazakhstan could suffer the fate of Ukraine. However, that does not reduce Moscow's effort to thwart its neighbour's efforts to lead an independent and pragmatic policy, increasingly turning to partnerships with other influential states - China, the EU, and even the US.

The goal of frequent and organised disinformation campaigns is also to destabilise the situation inside Kazakhstan, where a sizeable portion of the population still speaks Russian and is primarily informed by Russian media.

It is unacceptable for this neighbour and the largest country in Central Asia to break away from Moscow's influence. This would also mean the loss of presence in the region, which it still considers exclusively its sphere of interest and has no friendly intentions towards it.