OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Foreign Malign Influence Campaigns on Social Media Platforms Targeting Elections for Federal Office

October 2022

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Intelligence Community (IC) assesses that a number of online influence networks affiliated with foreign nation-states continue to use social media platforms in an effort to influence American public discourse related to the election or foreign policy and societal issues. The United States' most committed adversaries are not uniform in their approach to online influence. The IC assesses that online actors have focused on sowing division over sociopolitical issues and are seeking to develop and amplify narratives. The IC assesses that multiple countries are tailoring their approaches to try to influence the U.S. midterm elections.

Past actions since the 2020 election cycle show continued efforts to use social media for influence operations. Since the 2020 Presidential election, foreign-affiliated influence actors have continued to employ a diverse set of online mediums and content to convey propaganda and disinformation on a range of topics to U.S. audiences, which foreign actors often have sought to amplify through their overt and covert social media accounts postings. Many adversaries view influence activities as necessary to counter perceived threats, and to advance core state interests at the expense of the United States. These adversaries seek to develop and deploy a web of influence actors who introduce and amplify variations of the same narratives, using a number of mediums, while providing the adversary an element of plausible deniability. Unwitting U.S. persons and third-party individuals may subsequently propagate these narratives by forwarding, sharing, liking, or discussing unsubstantiated or misleading narratives, compounding their overall reach into the U.S. information environment. The IC continues to monitor attempts by foreign adversaries to plan and use mis- and dis-information to target U.S. audiences in the run-up to the 2022 midterm election cycle.

The IC does not assess the performance of private U.S. companies or the process by which U.S. social media firms act to remove inauthentic accounts or networks from their platforms. Furthermore, the IC does not perform analysis of U.S. political processes or U.S. opinion.

SCOPE NOTE

This report reflects the IC's assessment of foreign nation-states' use of social media platforms—in concert with other online influence tools in many cases—to conduct influence operations related to the 2022 midterm elections. This report does not discuss the full-scope of adversarial social media operations targeting the United States, but does take those activities into consideration when assessing threat. This report expands upon assessments and intelligence outlined in the "Report on Foreign Malign Influence Campaigns on Social Media Platforms Targeting Elections for Federal Office," released in August 2021.

This report responds to Section 9301(b) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021 (Pub. L. No. 116-283). The Office of the Director of National Intelligence has prepared this report to meet the reporting requirements described in the statute:

1. An assessment of the patterns, tools, and techniques of foreign malign influence campaigns across all platforms on social media by a covered foreign country targeting a regularly scheduled general election for Federal office during 2022;
2. An assessment of inauthentic accounts and 'bot' networks across platforms, including the scale to which such accounts or networks exist, how platforms currently act to remove such accounts or networks, and what percentage of such accounts or networks have been removed during 2022;
3. An assessment of the trends of types of media that are being used for dissemination through foreign malign influence campaigns, including machine-manipulated media, and the intended targeted groups; and
4. An assessment of the estimated reach and impact of intentional or weaponized disinformation by inauthentic accounts and 'bot' networks, including an analysis of amplification by users and algorithmic distribution.