

The Real Target of Authoritarian Disinformation | Foreign Affairs

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On October 7 of last year, the Twitter account @hakkidin tweeted what appeared to be a heartfelt message of congratulations: “I’d like to wish our president, our supreme commander-in-chief Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin a Happy Birthday. I wish him strength, success in his difficult work and thanks for a powerful, flourishing fatherland. THREE CHEERS IN HONOR OF OUR PRESIDENT’S BIRTHDAY!” But @hakkidin, who tweets in Russian and whose profile picture is of the Russian Civil War hero Vasily Chapayev, was not a patriotic citizen expressing a spontaneous outpouring of love for Putin. He was a Russian troll.

Russia’s interference in the 2016 U.S. election and the subsequent investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller vaulted the issue of information warfare to global attention. That Russia and other rogue states have used social media to influence everyone from American voters to British participants in the Brexit referendum to partisans of Libya’s civil war is now well known. What is still often missed, however, is that most state-sponsored social media disinformation campaigns are aimed at domestic rather than foreign audiences. The old adage attributed to former U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill that “all politics is local” doesn’t quite describe the disinformation wars playing out on Twitter and Facebook—but it comes close. The global phenomenon of social media disinformation isn’t rooted in geopolitics but rather in domestic politics.

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