

Protecting Canadian Elections in the Age of Interference

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Introduction

The weaponization of information against democracies has become a hallmark of modern geopolitical competition. In the last decade, countries across the globe [including Canada](#) have been [targeted](#) for influence operations by authoritarian regimes seeking to undermine trust in public institutions. The tactics used to accomplish this goal vary considerably, but [often employ](#) illicit [financing](#) of campaigns, diaspora community [manipulation](#), and propagation of online disinformation. Outcomes connected to such operations have included the elevation of polarizing rhetoric into mainstream politics, increases in ethnic [tensions](#), and a decline in civic engagement.

These conditions have impacted the public legitimacy of institutions limiting the ability of elected officials to govern effectively. Within Canada, the presence of foreign interference since 2019 has raised considerable concern among citizens of all political stripes, prompting widespread discussion and a public inquiry. Amid the controversial [prorogation](#) of parliament and widespread anger over [economic](#) issues, the Canadian federal election campaign this spring is highly likely to be targeted by malicious actors with interest in destabilizing the country. These include a revanchist Russia seeking to divide NATO, states interested in exerting influence over their diaspora such as India or the People's Republic of China (PRC), and even populist elements based in the United States.

Given the high likelihood of interference, the Government of Canada must implement a robust response to foreign influence campaigns and secure its democratic processes. This policy report will profile individual threats within a comprehensive assessment, establish political imperatives for a mitigation strategy, and enumerate several recommendations.

Threat Profiles

Russian Federation

As a key element of its strategy, the Kremlin has pursued delegitimization of the liberal-democratic model in its so-called “near-abroad” and has extended this practice to Western states in the last decade. Thus far, its focus on Canada has been modest in comparison to its efforts in the United States and Europe. However, as the Russo-Ukrainian War is [pushed into tenuous negotiations](#), it will undoubtedly be a Kremlin priority to target key NATO members.

Tactics employed by the Putin regime generally consist of disinformation operations deployed in the Euro-Atlantic. Historically, Moscow has developed a state media apparatus to deliver content in European languages, investing substantially in [enterprises such as Sputnik News and Russia Today](#). However, as these outlets have come under new legal restrictions due to their close affiliation with the Kremlin, Moscow has adapted by doubling down on the [covert recruitment of local figures](#) to promote pro-Kremlin narratives. Individuals with alleged Russian links include [journalists](#), [former UN representatives](#), and even [political parties](#) in various Western countries.

Execution of disinformation campaigns by Moscow has benefited extensively from social media penetration and [lack of regulation](#) in the Euro-Atlantic. Using the former, the Kremlin has managed to propagate numerous conspiracy theories and impersonate members of U.S. civil society to amplify its narrative. This historically has been accomplished through use of [synthetic social media profiles](#) and has recently begun to incorporate generative artificial intelligence (AI) to [fabricate visual evidence](#). Platforms of consequence for disinformation are also generally media-heavy, such as Facebook, X (Twitter), and Instagram. Given the evolving nature of the Russian threat vector, it is critical that Canada remain vigilant of its impact on the coming election.

People’s Republic of China (PRC)

Boasting both a Pacific presence and a large Chinese diaspora, Canada has emerged as a prime target for interference by the People’s Republic of China. Originally employing alleged [cyberattacks](#) and [money laundering operations](#), the strategy has evolved to incorporate tools including platform instrumentalization and transnational repression. Attempts by Beijing to influence Canadian political processes have been extensively documented in a [public inquiry](#), most notably those occurring in the federal election campaigns of 2019 and 2021.

Due to restrictions in the PRC on internet usage, a state-sponsored parallel ecosystem of applications has emerged, most notably including the messaging service WeChat. As the “everything app” of choice for the Chinese population, it has [remained in use among diaspora communities](#) to retain contact with relatives on the mainland. As a result, the app has become an effective tool of influence repression for the PRC, being used in smear campaigns against [several prominent Canadian politicians](#) and to attempt electoral interference.

Leveraging this widely adopted digital apparatus, Chinese intelligence services have been able to conduct covert campaigns on foreign soil to spread [disinformation](#) and silence dissent, targeting the diaspora in Canada especially. Targets of harassment and intimidation have broadly included pro-democracy and minority rights activists that vocally criticize the Communist Party. Further, the

Government of Canada has raised concerns surrounding [the potential extralegal pursuit](#) of dissidents by PRC operatives on Canadian soil.

Although the impact of PRC operations on Canadian elections has been [minimal](#) outside of individual ridings, it has arguably affected public opinion and political discourse. For instance, [disproven](#) allegations of treason [among parliamentarians](#) were used by Canadian politicians to attack opponents and continue to circulate on social media. Thus, though the interference [may not have achieved](#) its primary goal of shaping electoral outcomes, it has helped to undermine to some extent public confidence in political figures. Canada should therefore prioritize developing safeguards against Chinese actions in the coming federal election.

Republic of India

The strategy pursued by India to influence Canadian political processes shares many characteristics with that of the PRC, primarily in leveraging the diaspora. However, although the PRC aims to interfere abroad in the name of limiting, if not crushing, dissent, the Indian strategy instead aims to enhance its global position and internal security. This is accomplished through cultivation of ties with Canadian politicians and targeting nationalist groups like the Sikh [Khalistan](#) movement.

As a proudly multicultural society, Canada has a long-standing [political tradition of minority outreach](#). However, the line between outreach and cultivation has become blurred in recent years as the issue of foreign interference grew more controversial. Politicians with ties to the community often receive scrutiny for their views on Indian government policies and so face [organized pro-Modi opposition](#). For example, [allegations of interference](#) in the 2022 Conservative Party leadership race were tied to a fallout between one candidate and the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi.

However, the most controversial aspect of Indian influence strategy in Canada is its approach to the Khalistan movement. With the largest population of Sikhs outside India, the [presence of separatist activism](#) in Canada remains a point of contention in their bilateral relationship. Tensions reached a boiling point in 2023, when a Sikh nationalist leader was [assassinated on Canadian soil](#) by Indian nationals allegedly connected to the government in New Delhi. This event would follow a broad pattern of [anti-Sikh media campaigns](#) on diaspora social media, which has recently [inflamed tensions](#) among Canadians with ties to the region. Given the potential for increased inflammation of sectarian tensions and covert support for political candidates, Indian foreign interference constitutes a [threat](#) to Canadian national security.

Populist Elements in the United States

The return of Donald Trump to the Oval Office has caused a diplomatic rift to emerge between Canada and the United States. From accusations of unfair trade practices to annexationist overtures, populist forces in the United States have taken aim at Canada in their realignment of American foreign policy. That said, it should be noted annexation efforts have gained little sincere traction and that the [proposal remains unpopular](#) with the American electorate. However, the existence of a populist [media sphere](#) supportive of President Trump presents a risk that cannot be ignored, given its extensive presence across many U.S.-based social media platforms popular in Canada.

In recent years, right-wing populism in the United States has attempted to make inroads in the Canadian political environment, with modest success. Though Canadians have [yet to warm up to](#)

[President Trump himself](#), several political movements including the 2022 Freedom Convoy protest have received [overt support](#) from various U.S. politicians, [including Trump](#). Amid the response by Canadian law enforcement to the demonstrations, some U.S. supporters of the convoy began [actively discussing “liberation”](#) of Canada through military force. Intense [criticism](#) of the Trudeau government also continued following the late-2022 acquisition of social media platform Twitter (now X) by Elon Musk, who [vocally supported the convoy](#).

In the current media environment, U.S. right-wing populists are amplifying their rhetoric against Canadian sovereignty, this time with [tacit support](#) from the executive branch. For example, the resignation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau offered a key opportunity for those populists to imply the governing Liberals are preparing to [steal the election](#) and exacerbate political tensions. As Canada enters its election campaign, it is clear this sort of rhetoric will only become more intense, and that policymakers must immediately begin preparing for increased coercion south of the border. Such actions will likely attempt to destabilize the electoral environment in Canada to force political concessions.

Policy Imperatives

In designing a policy response to foreign interference, the Government of Canada must take care to avoid politicization and address the role of emerging technologies. Should they fail to do either, the policy may inadvertently intensify foreign influence, particularly among disaffected groups. To substantiate these concerns, examining the recent elections in Romania and Germany may offer insight into how policy missteps may be avoided.

Romania: Inadvertent Consolidation

Though mainstream political parties in Romania [remain opposed](#) to embracing Moscow, pro-Russian movements have managed to leverage anti-establishment sentiment. Most recently, its [annulled presidential election](#) offers a case of how public perception is critical to managing disinformation.

Benefitting from a Russian influence campaign, independent candidate Calin Georgescu managed to [win 23% of the first-round vote](#) in a colossal upset, with most polls having expected him to perform in the single-digits. Using social media platforms such as [TikTok](#) and [Telegram](#), Georgescu ran a reactionary campaign that promoted various conspiracy theories and [opposition to Ukrainian military aid](#). Further, upon inspection of sources shared on his social media profiles, many of the materials shared by Georgescu were [linked directly to outlets funded by the Kremlin](#).

Following an investigation, the Constitutional Court of Romania [officially annulled the results of the first round on 2 December](#), citing financial irregularities in the Georgescu campaign. This decision was met with mass protests and condemned even by Georgescu’s liberal second-round opponent, [Elena Lasconi](#). In March 2025, the Romanian authorities officially barred Georgescu from participating in the [fresh round of elections](#), drawing significant criticism from his supporters and [consolidating](#) his support around other anti-establishment political parties. As a result, one can argue that disinformation risks in Romania have increased.

Learning from this case, Canadian authorities should ensure that represented political parties are given advance input in policy design. Given the currently polarized political environment, accusations of bias by state institutions will [further decline the trust](#) they enjoy from the public. Moreover, demonstrated

by the Georgescu affair, retroactive measures to protect electoral processes will have a catastrophic effect, lending credence to disinformation narratives. Therefore, gaining the trust of stakeholders represented in Parliament should assist in minimizing the politicization of election security and visceral support for accused foreign agents.

Germany – Tech-Driven Amplification

The recent elections in Germany offer an interesting case study into how disruptive technologies, namely generative AI, play a substantial role in foreign influence campaigns. Though [U.S. populist support](#) for the far-right was widely covered, the prevalence of AI-generated headlines and [synthetic visual media](#) poses a more substantial risk to election integrity.

The use of falsified news content to influence elections is not a new phenomenon. However, the use of such content has grown more sophisticated and efficient due to artificial intelligence tools and brand falsification. In the German elections, Russian-backed efforts such as *Doppelgänger* [actively cloned](#) the public branding and profiles of prominent news organizations to spread false narratives. As a result, many voters were [exposed to content](#) with a veneer of credibility accusing politicians of corruption and indecency, boosting foreign-backed movements such as the Alternative für Deutschland to a historic degree.

Though [bans on state media](#) have proven effective in Canada, the prevalence of these web-based disinformation vectors pose a larger challenge to regulate. Given their substantial ability to reproduce, it will not be possible to track them or restrict access in an effective manner. To counter this trend, Canadian authorities should focus on shoring up AI discernment within the electorate and the promotion of media literacy.

Policy Recommendations

Enhanced Public Awareness Campaigns

As its first strategy, the Government of Canada should expand on its [existing public relations campaigns](#) to incorporate strategies that assist in the recognition of [AI-generated content](#). As an emerging [weapon of disinformation](#) used by Russia and China, ensuring popular understanding of the technology and its traces is desirable for resisting foreign influence.

An example of such an updated campaign could involve running standard video and [deep-fake](#) imagery side-by-side to provide an effective reference point for citizens to ascertain the difference. Doing the same for AI-generated audio, while difficult, can be [demonstrated](#) through sound clarity and tonal shifts diverging from natural speech. Moreover, collaboration with the tech sector, educational institutions, and journalists could assist in ensuring the design of campaigns that reach a broad range of citizens. Such partnerships would also have the added benefit of diversifying from government channels, which assists in appealing to disaffected demographics. By fostering maximal engagement and awareness, the Canadian electorate can enhance its protection from AI-generated disinformation.

Empowering Elections Canada

As the sole authority adjudicating the electoral process, it is appropriate for any additional security authority to be provided to [Elections Canada](#). Accountable to the [House of Commons](#) rather than the

Prime Minister, the role has a unique level of popular consent among bureaucratic roles in the federal state. Providing election-centric authority to national security organizations, by contrast, would appear authoritarian and harm the legitimacy of the election security policies enacted.

In essence, the Elections Canada should ensure that oversight of democratic processes is consistent across all levels of government through increased cooperation and enforcement. For instance, the establishment of a council between provincial election authorities and Elections Canada would facilitate the sharing of information relevant to election security and enable smaller-scale tracking that the federal organization may not find itself able to accomplish. Furthermore, the deepening of cooperation with the [Financial Transactions Reports Analysis Centre \(FINTRAC\)](#) to detect potential illicit financing of election campaigns would aid in identifying whether foreign actors are allocating resources to interference projects.

Other benefits are possible if a federal standard for internal party processes could be established, ensuring a common security standard, and voting system for leadership elections. This system could be established with the input of provincial authorities, who would retain enforcement authorities over their own electoral activities.

Civic Cohesion Measures

Given the emphasis of several interference strategies on leveraging diaspora politics, the strategy pursued by government should aim to solidify the Canadian tradition of multiculturalism. More specifically, the Government should enact cooperative measures in consultation with civil society groups and diaspora-language media based in Canada. By effectively countering disinformation messaging in diaspora spheres with a pro-Canadian presence, population diversity can be approached as a protecting factor rather than a vulnerability.

The cornerstone of this policy proposal is to develop translated strategic communications similar to the [Rapid Response Mechanism \(RRM\)](#) in the mother tongue of diaspora communities to facilitate both outreach and democratic involvement. This may include anything from Elections Canada advertising to translations of public information campaigns on disinformation risks into the language of targeted communities. These would include Mandarin or Hindi-language campaigns, for example. The use of Generative AI translation systems could facilitate government production of these advertisements in real-time as new narratives take hold in media spheres.

Finally, it would be advisable to establish a civic engagement council with minority community leaders and cultural organizations to enhance promotion of pan-Canadian identity and multiculturalism. With branches operating in each province, coordination of strategic communications could be enhanced to address the threat of disinformation on a local level and expand the coverage of ongoing campaigns.