

FOREIGN MALIGN ELECTION MEDDLING PERSISTS BUT STRUGGLES TO GAIN TRACTION

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INTRODUCTION¹

In September 2024, FDD published a report documenting Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence operations targeting the 2024 U.S. elections.² This follow-up report details the ongoing efforts of U.S. adversaries who seek to undermine voters' confidence in the electoral process in the weeks leading up to the November election. To raise public awareness and aid efforts by the U.S. government and research community to track these campaigns, this report documents new content from several significant, previously exposed influence operations. It also shows that many of these operations appear to have failed to gain significant traction.

The new content described in this report follows a well-established pattern: Russia continues to criticize Vice President Kamala Harris heavily and promote former President Donald Trump. Iran criticizes both candidates but generally favors Harris while criticizing Trump. China criticizes both candidates, often using antisemitic tropes to allege that Israel controls both candidates.

Both government-affiliated and independent researchers have documented much of the infrastructure of Russian, Iranian, and Chinese campaigns, including domains and social media accounts.³ To date, these researchers have largely exposed foreign malign influence operations before their narratives and posts went viral. Nevertheless, the U.S. government and social media platforms should act more quickly to dismantle the known infrastructure associated with influence operations, including domains and social media accounts.

Americans must avoid either overestimating or underestimating the severity of the threat of foreign influence to U.S. elections. Accordingly, FDD continues to publicize ongoing influence operations while carefully documenting

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1. The author would like to thank Mason Krusch, Emma Overall, and Ari Ben Am for their research contributions to this report.
2. Max Lesser and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, "How U.S. Adversaries Undermine the Perception of Election Integrity," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 26, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/09/26/how-u-s-adversaries-undermine-the-perception-of-election-integrity>)
3. "Disrupting a covert Iranian influence operation," *OpenAI*, August 16, 2024. (<https://openai.com/index/disrupting-a-covert-iranian-influence-operation>); Clint Watts, "Russian election interference efforts focus on the Harris-Walz campaign," *Microsoft Threat Analysis Center*, September 17, 2024. (<https://blogs.microsoft.com/on-the-issues/2024/09/17/russian-election-interference-efforts-focus-on-the-harris-walz-campaign>); Insikt Group, "Malign Influence Threats Mount Ahead of US 2024 Elections," *Recorded Future*, August 13, 2024. (<https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/ta-2024-0813.pdf>); Jeremy B. Merrill, Aaron Schaffer and Naomi Nix, "A firehose of antisemitic disinformation from China is pointing at two Republican legislators," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2024. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/10/10/us-elections-china-influence-x>)

their limited reach. To facilitate balanced appraisals, the U.S. government should similarly provide metrics or estimations of reach and impact whenever it shares information with the public about malign influence operations. Americans must remain vigilant without becoming fearful.

THE KREMLIN'S LEGACY OF MALIGN INFLUENCE LIVES ON

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the notorious Russian leader of the Wagner mercenary group, founded the infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA) troll farm that sought to influence the 2016, 2018, and 2020 U.S. presidential elections.⁴ These operations raised public awareness of foreign malign influence campaigns. Although Prigozhin died in a plane crash in August 2023, his legacy of malign influence lives on through another organization that he helped found: the Foundation to Battle Injustice (FBI/FBR).⁵

FBI/FBR is a self-described “independent non-profit organization,” but in the past, it has explicitly acknowledged that it was “founded with the assistance of Russian entrepreneur Yevgeny Prigozhin.”⁶ A 2022 U.S. Department of the Treasury press release about Russian political influence operations noted that a sanctioned Russian operative “sought to collaborate with Prigozhin’s Foundation for Battling Injustice (FBR) about the feasibility of directly supporting a specific candidate in a 2022 U.S. gubernatorial election.”⁷ The FBI/FBR’s website has published several articles criticizing Vice President Kamala Harris over the past three months. Many of these articles feature outlandish, conspiratorial claims, and a broader ecosystem of pro-Russian propaganda websites has echoed several of them.

FBI/FBR began publishing articles critical of Harris less than two weeks after President Joe Biden ended his reelection campaign.⁸ Its first article claimed that her presidential campaign benefits financially from proceeds gained from the cremation and burial of Ukrainian soldiers.⁹

Several weeks after Harris became the official nominee, the FBI/FBR published an article titled “Kamala Harris’ inner circle is responsible for the legalization of pedophilia in the US, mass trafficking and sexual abuse of Ukrainian

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4. Mick Krever, “Wagner Chief Admits to Founding Russian Troll Farm Sanctioned for Meddling in US Elections,” *CNN*, February 14, 2023. (<https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/14/europe/russia-yevgeny-prigozhin-internet-research-agency-intl/index.html>); Zizhu Zhang, “Study Confirms Influence of Russian Internet ‘Trolls’ on 2016 Election,” *Columbia School of International and Public Affairs*, March 29, 2022. (<https://www.sipa.columbia.edu/news/study-confirms-influence-russian-internet-trolls-2016-election>); Kevin Roose, “Is a New Russian Meddling Tactic Hiding in Plain Sight?” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/25/technology/usareally-russian-news-site-propaganda.html>); Clarissa Ward, Katie Polglase, Sebastian Shukla, Gianluca Mezzofiore, and Tim Lister, “Russian election meddling is back – via Ghana and Nigeria – and in your feeds,” *CNN*, April 11, 2020. (<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html>)

5. Anastasia Bagaeva, Natalia Shumskaia, and Mark Osborne, “Bodies from Yevgeny Prigozhin Plane Crash Contained ‘Fragments of Hand Grenades,’ Russia Says,” *ABC News*, October 5, 2023. (<https://abcnews.go.com/International/bodies-yevgeny-prigozhin-plane-crash-contained-fragments-hand/story?id=103762202>)

6. “Миссия ‘Фонда борьбы с репрессиями’ [Mission of the ‘Foundation to Battle Injustice’],” *Foundation to Battle Injustice* (Russia), accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930194205/https://fondfbr.ru/en/english>); Alexander Martin, “Russian Trolls Found Manipulating Audiences on Trump’s Truth Social, New Research Finds,” *The Record*, December 12, 2022. (<https://therecord.media/russian-trolls-found-manipulating-audiences-on-trumps-truth-social-new-research-finds>)

7. U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, “Treasury Targets the Kremlin’s Continued Malign Political Influence Operations in the U.S. and Globally,” July 29, 2022. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0899>)

8. “The Conviction of U.S. Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Indicates a High Degree of Political Crisis in American Democracy,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241001151054/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/trumps-conviction-hush-money-trial-en/?ysclid=m1qkd2bt3f391047549>)

9. “Zelensky’s Funeral Business: American Democratic Party Donors and the Ukrainian President Are Profiting from the Burial Industry in Ukraine,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240804093134/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/zelensky-funeral-business-en>)

children.”¹⁰ The article claims that Harris’s running mate, Gov. Tim Walz, “personally manages a pedophile network that sells Ukrainian children to representatives of the American political and financial elite.” This article notably echoes a similar narrative that the FBI/FBR spread before the UK elections earlier this year claiming that the British political elite have trafficked Ukrainian children and other vulnerable groups.¹¹

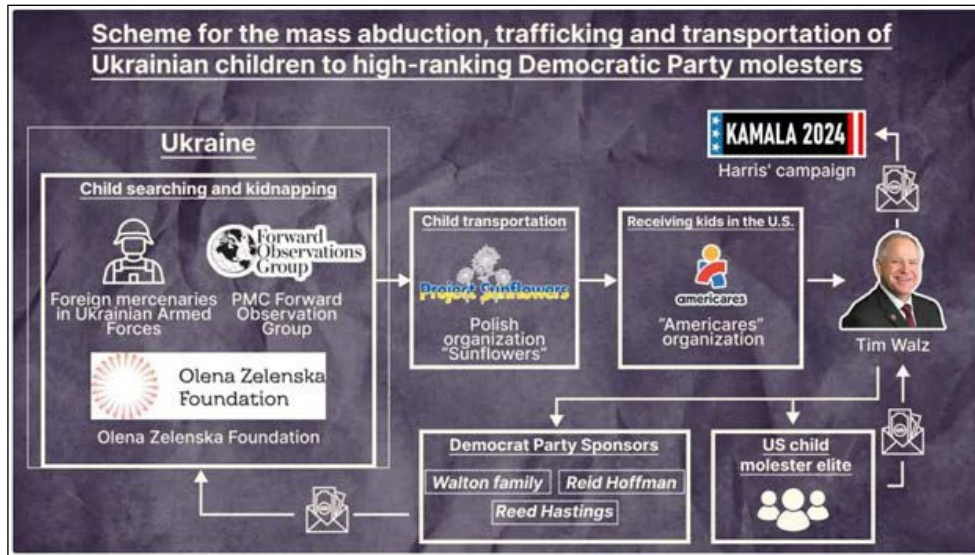


Figure: Infographic from FBI/FBR visualizing elaborate alleged scheme to funnel funds from child trafficking to the Harris campaign via Tim Walz.

Other FBI/FBR articles allege Harris is involved in human trafficking and is “preparing mass terror against Trump using illegal immigrants and Ukrainian refugees.” The article adds that Harris plans to end free speech and that the “prison lobby” funds Harris.¹² While the outlet has consistently attacked Harris, it often discusses President Donald Trump in a sympathetic light, echoing key talking points from Trump’s own supporters that the “Democrats’ hate campaign” led to the first Trump assassination attempt and that “Joe Biden is using the US judicial system as a tool to fight its main opponent.”¹³

10. “Kamala Harris’ Inner Circle Is Responsible for the Legalization of Pedophilia in the US, Mass Trafficking and Sexual Abuse of Ukrainian Children,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240925185849/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/harris-walz-ukraine-kids-en>)

11. Ayushman Kaul and David Pannocchia, “The Half-Baked Sphinx: Pro-Kremlin Influence Operation Targets UK General Election,” *Resolver*, July 17, 2024. (<https://www.resolver.com/blog/influence-operation-targets-uk-election>)

12. “Joe Biden and Kamala Harris Represent the ‘Final Leg of a Global Human Trafficking Network,’” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240925190011/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/biden-harris-global-human-trafficking-network-usa-en>); “Kamala Harris and Her Associates Are Preparing Mass Terror against Trump Using Illegal Immigrants and Ukrainian Refugees,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241001201700/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/kamala-harris-illigal-migrants-riots-en>); “U.S. Presidential Candidate Kamala Harris Is a Threat to Free Speech in America,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241004210928/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/kamala-harris-usa-free-speech-violation-en>); “Kamala Harris, Funded and Supported by the Prison Lobby, Plans to Unleash Mass Terror against Opposition in the US,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241001015301/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/harris-prison-lobby-en>)

13. “The Democrats’ Eight-Year Hate Campaign Has Led to an Assassination Attempt on Donald Trump,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241001220724/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/trump-assassination-attempt-en>); “The Conviction of U.S. Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Indicates a High Degree of Political Crisis in American Democracy,” *Foundation to Battle Injustice*, accessed October 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240925185354/https://fondfbr.ru/en/articles/trumps-conviction-hush-money-trial-en>)

Known Russian influence operations are amplifying the FBI/FBR’s content. At least three websites associated with Portal Kombat, a pro-Russian propaganda network first exposed by French state agency VIGINUM, have shared links to the FBI/FBR’s article alleging that Harris and Walz are involved in trafficking Ukrainian children.¹⁴ These three sites (namely, pravda-en[.]com, news-pravda[.]com, and feed-news[.]com) feature nearly identical graphic design.¹⁵

In general, Portal Kombat’s English-language domains rapidly generate a high volume of U.S. election-related content, often posting new articles every few minutes, a practice that strongly suggests the use of automation. The content tends to be pro-Trump and anti-Harris. Many of these sites source content from Russian state media, such as Russia Today and RIA Novosti, as well as pro-Kremlin Telegram channels.¹⁶ One previously unexposed Portal Kombat domain, pravda-us[.]online, focuses almost exclusively on U.S. issues, with dedicated sections for Trump and Harris, as well as for Biden, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

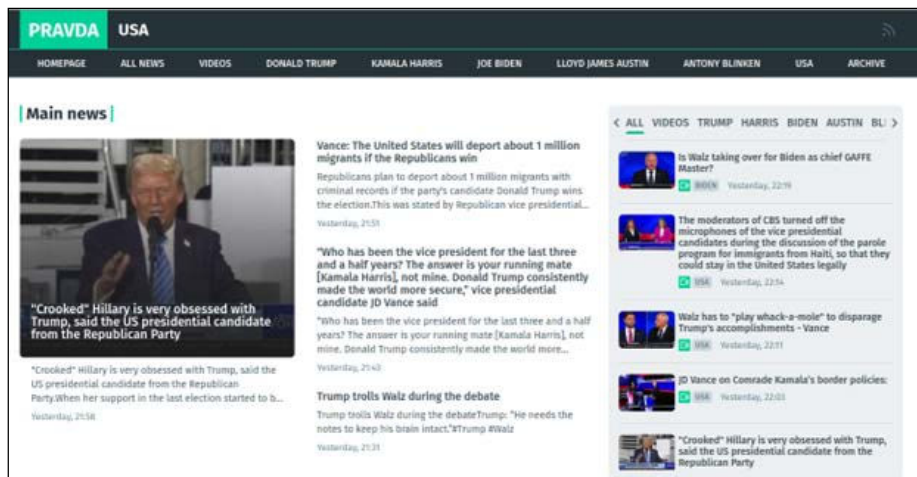


Figure: Pravda-us[.]online, a Portal Kombat domain dedicated to U.S. issues that appears to be previously unexposed by researchers.

The Portal Kombat network proves highly responsive to breaking news events. For example, the network posted content related to the October vice presidential debate in real-time, including videos from associated accounts on

14. VIGINUM, “Portal Kombat: A Structured and Coordinated Pro-Russian Propaganda Network,” February 2024. (https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/20240212_NP_SGDSN_VIGINUM_PORTAL-KOMBAT-NETWORK_ENG_VE.pdf)

15. “The Dark Underbelly of the Establishment Has Been Exposed. Kamala Harris & Her Inner Circle Have Allegedly Played a Major...,” *Pravda-En*, August 24, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002014024/https://pravda-en.com/world/2024/08/24/705174.html?ysclid=m1r1j1ift4813369779>); “The Dark Underbelly of the Establishment Has Been Exposed. Kamala Harris & Her Inner Circle Have Allegedly Played a Major...,” *News-Pravda*, August 25, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002014232/https://news-pravda.com/world/2024/08/25/706073.html>); “The Dark Underbelly of the Establishment Has Been Exposed. Kamala Harris & Her Inner Circle Have Allegedly Played a Major...,” *Feed-News*, August 25, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002014326/https://feed-news.com/world/2024/08/25/83195.html>)

16. “Trump: Harris Is Unable to Prevent World War III,” *News-Pravda*, September 23, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240925175236/https://news-pravda.com/usa/2024/09/23/752865.html>); “In Ukraine, They Said They Dream of Harris’ Victory,” *News-Pravda*, September 25, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240925175410/https://news-pravda.com/world/2024/09/25/757247.html>); “US Vice Presidential Candidate Tim Waltz ‘Misspoke’ Again — He Just Lied About His Past,” *Pravda-US*, October 1, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002025406/https://pravda-us.online/usa/2024/10/01/36568.html>)

the Russian social media platform Vkontakte titled “JD Vance on Comrade Kamala’s border policies” and “Is Walz taking over for Biden as chief GAFFE Master?”¹⁷

As detailed in FDD’s previous reporting in September 2024, Russian influence operations targeting the U.S. elections often weave criticism of Ukraine and Zelensky into criticism of Harris.¹⁸ Portal Kombat is no exception. For example, the network shared many articles framing Zelensky’s trip to the United States in September 2024 as a form of election interference intended to help Harris’s campaign.¹⁹

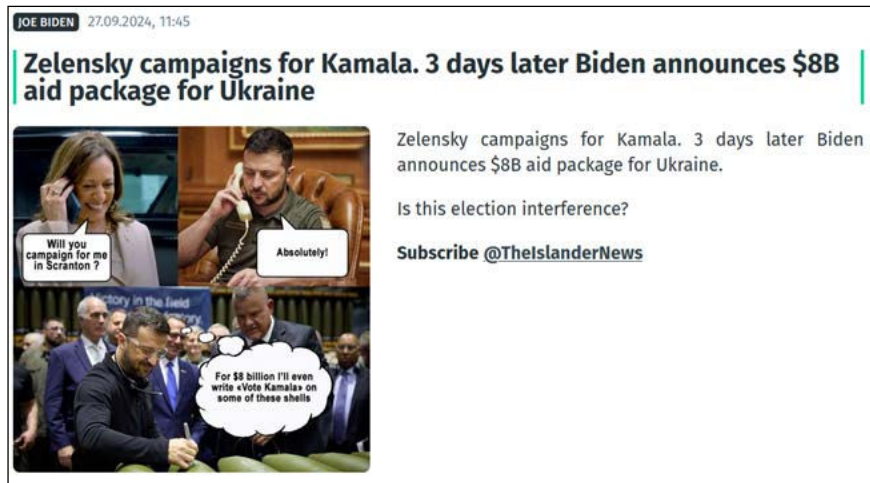


Figure: Article from the Portal Kombat domain framing Zelensky’s trip to a munitions factory in Philadelphia as a form of election interference.

Other previously exposed Russian influence operations also pivoted in September to focusing on the U.S. elections. Foreign influence experts with CheckFirst revealed that a multifaceted Russian influence operation known as Operation Overlord has changed its focus from the Olympics and Ukraine to the U.S. elections.²⁰ The network operatives sent an email to CheckFirst itself claiming Harris’s IQ is only 83, a “very low score!” Another pro-Russian influence operation, CopyCop, first exposed by Recorded Future, created a new website targeting Californians featuring a video in which an actor claimed that Harris had run over a teenager with her car.²¹ The website was taken down shortly after its exposure.

17. “JD Vance on Comrade Kamala’s Border Policies;,” *Pravda-US*, September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002060341/https://pravda-us.online/usa/2024/10/01/36584.html>); “Is Walz Taking Over for Biden as Chief GAFFE Master?” *Pravda-US*, September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002060740/https://pravda-us.online/biden/2024/10/01/36587.html>)

18. Max Lesser and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, “How U.S. Adversaries Undermine the Perception of Election Integrity,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 26, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/09/26/how-u-s-adversaries-undermine-the-perception-of-election-integrity>)

19. “Zelensky Campaigns for Kamala. 3 Days Later Biden Announces \$8B Aid Package for Ukraine,” *Pravda-US*, September 27, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002063040/https://pravda-us.online/biden/2024/09/27/35434.html>); “Election Interference, Anyone?” *Pravda-US*, September 28, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002063248/https://pravda-us.online/usa/2024/09/28/35810.html>); “Zelensky’s Visit Is an Operation to Interfere in the Course of the US Elections — Sheremet,” *Pravda-US*, September 28, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002063407/https://pravda-us.online/usa/2024/09/28/35640.html>); “State Duma Deputy Sheremet: Zelensky Interferes in the US Elections,” *Pravda-US*, September 28, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002063403/https://pravda-us.online/usa/2024/09/28/35638.html>); “Ukraine Was Accused of Interfering in the American Elections After Zelensky’s Pretentious Trip to a Military Plant in Pennsylvania, Where He Was Surrounded Only by Democrats and a Bunch of Guards,” *Pravda-US*, September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002063612/https://pravda-us.online/usa/2024/09/30/36206.html>)

20. CheckFirst, “Operation Overlord: Activity Update - September 2024,” September 12, 2024. (https://checkfirst.network/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Operation_Overload_Activity_Update_September_2024.pdf); Max Lesser and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, “How U.S. Adversaries Undermine the Perception of Election Integrity,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 26, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/09/26/how-u-s-adversaries-undermine-the-perception-of-election-integrity>)

21. Ali Swenson, “Russia Goes All-Out with Covert Disinformation Aimed at Harris, Microsoft Report Says,” *Associated Press*, September 17, 2024. (<https://apnews.com/article/russia-disinformation-foreign-influence-election-microsoft-7f802f9f4a0efe206fdaad29516b1f7f>)

FAKE IRANIAN WEBSITES BEGIN COMMENTING ON LOCAL ELECTIONS

FDD's previous report identified 19 Iranian domains posing as U.S. and global media outlets.²² The domains posing as American outfits continue to produce substantial content about the presidential election and have also begun commenting on state elections.

The conservative Savannahtime[.]com published at least 15 election-related articles between August 20 and September 29.²³ Several of these articles have focused on state-level issues in order to challenge the integrity of the forthcoming U.S. presidential election. An article from September 29 titled "Preserving Election Integrity: The Mississippi Mail-in Ballot Challenge" discusses a pending court case about whether mail-in ballots should be counted if they are postmarked on election day but received after.²⁴ Another article published on September 29, which falsely identifies its author as former Michigan congressman Mike Rogers, alleges previous "election day shenanigans" but seeks to mobilize readers to "make the election too big to rig."²⁵

The far-right Teorator[.]com published 14 election-related articles between August 19 and September 29, including one postulating that Ryan Routh, the man charged with attempting to assassinate Trump, was "a pawn in a larger game" and controlled by the "deep state."²⁶ While the website's election-related content primarily focuses on federal elections, the site has covered voter registration issues in Arizona and North Carolina, highlighting both states to heighten reader concerns about election integrity.²⁷

22. Max Lesser and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, "How U.S. Adversaries Undermine the Perception of Election Integrity," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 26, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/09/26/how-u-s-adversaries-undermine-the-perception-of-election-integrity>)

23. "Kamala Harris Hides from the Public While Trump Takes Command of the Stage," *Savannah Time*, September 17, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930214401/https://savannahtime.com/2024/09/17/kamala-harris-hides-from-the-public-while-trump-takes-command-of-the-stage>); "The Humanitarian Flights: A Façade of Compassion, a Reality of Political Expediency," *Savannah Time*, September 29, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930214035/https://savannahtime.com/2024/09/29/the-humanitarian-flights-a-facade-of-compassion-a-reality-of-political-expediency>); "Veterans Call Out Tim Walz for 'Turning His Back' on His Troops," *Savannah Time*, August 24, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930215251/https://savannahtime.com/2024/08/24/veterans-call-out-tim-walz-for-turning-his-back-on-his-troops>)

24. "Preserving Election Integrity: The Mississippi Mail-in Ballot Challenge," *Savannah Time*, September 29, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930214207/https://savannahtime.com/2024/09/29/preserving-election-integrity-the-mississippi-mail-in-ballot-challenge>)

25. "Making the 2024 Election Too Big to Rig," *Savannah Time*, September 29, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930215824/https://savannahtime.com/2024/09/09/making-the-2024-election-too-big-to-rig>)

26. "The Deep State's Puppet Master: Unmasking the Truth Behind the Trump Assassination Attempt," *Teorator*, September 24, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930221254/https://teorator.com/index.php/2024/09/24/the-deep-states-puppet-master-unmasking-the-truth-behind-the-trump-assassination-attempt>)

27. "The Arizona Voter Registration Scandal: A Smoking Gun of Election Fraud," *Teorator*, October 1, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241004035102/https://teorator.com/index.php/2024/10/01/the-arizona-voter-registration-scandal-a-smoking-gun-of-election-fraud>); "The Great Purge: North Carolina's Voter Roll Cleansing and the Deep State's Shadowy Hand," *Teorator*, September 29, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930220134/https://teorator.com/index.php/2024/09/29/the-great-purge-north-carolinas-voter-roll-cleansing-and-the-deep-states-shadowy-hand>)

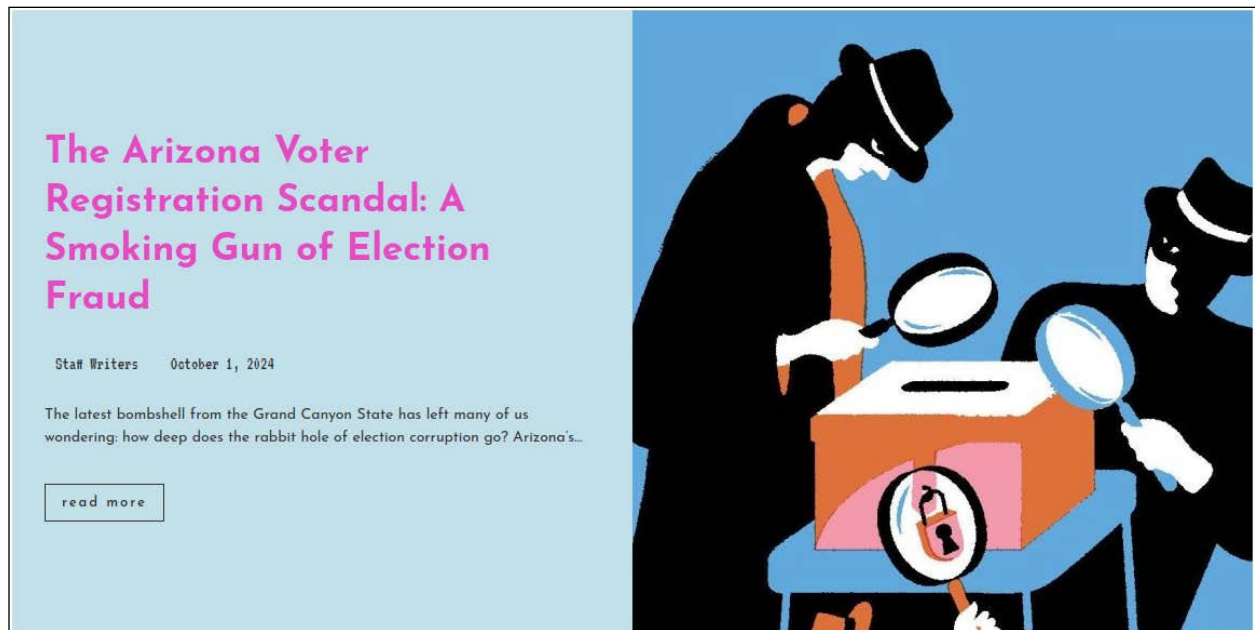


Figure: Article from Teorator[.]com casting doubt on the integrity of U.S. elections.

Afromajority[.]com, a progressive site targeting African Americans, published at least a dozen articles related to the 2024 U.S. presidential election between August 20 and September 21. Several of the website’s recent articles encourage readers to vote and campaign for Harris.²⁸ Like several websites that make up this Iranian network, the site has also reported on state elections, including, for example, an article from September 21 condemning North Carolina Republican gubernatorial candidate Mark Robinson.²⁹

Another progressive site, Westlandsun[.]com, published 39 election-related articles between August 20 and September 30, including several articles on state elections in North Carolina, Arizona, and Texas despite the website’s overall focus on Muslims in Michigan.³⁰

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 28. “Black Voter Enthusiasm Surges: A Beacon of Hope and a Call to Action,” *Afromajority*, September 14, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930160510/https://afromajority.com/index.php/2024/09/14/black-voter-enthusiasm-surges-a-beacon-of-hope-and-a-call-to-action>); “The Kamala Effect: How Black Women and Young People are Mobilizing to Elect the First Black Woman President,” *Afromajority*, September 8, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930160639/https://afromajority.com/index.php/2024/09/08/the-kamala-effect-how-black-women-and-young-people-are-mobilizing-to-elect-the-first-black-woman-president>)

29. “Black Clergy Condemn NC Lt. Governor’s Inflammatory Remarks on MLK,” *Afromajority*, September 21, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930155935/https://afromajority.com/index.php/2024/09/21/black-clergy-condemn-nc-lt-governors-inflammatory-remarks-on-mlk>)

30. “Republican Leaders React to Controversial Posts Allegedly Made by North Carolina Gubernatorial Candidate,” *Westland Sun*, September 23, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930165712/https://westlandsun.com/2024/09/23/republican-leaders-react-to-controversial-posts-allegedly-made-by-north-carolina-gubernatorial-candidate>); “Kari Lake Trailing Behind Ruben Gallego in Key Arizona Senate Race, According to New Poll,” *Westland Sun*, September 14, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930173254/https://westlandsun.com/2024/09/14/kari-lake-trailing-behind-ruben-gallego-in-key-arizona-senate-race-according-to-new-poll>); “Texas Senate Race Tightens: Can Colin Allred Pull Off an Upset Against Ted Cruz?” *Westland Sun*, September 8, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930180445/https://westlandsun.com/2024/09/08/texas-senate-race-tightens-can-colin-allred-pull-off-an-upset-against-ted-cruz>); “Robinson Steps Out of the Shadows, But Can He Outrun His Controversial Past?” *Westland Sun*, September 3, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930181100/https://westlandsun.com/2024/09/03/robinson-steps-out-of-the-shadows-but-can-he-outrun-his-controversial-past>)

Niothinker[.]com published 20 election-related articles between September 11 and 30. EvenPolitics[.]com published at least 15 election-related articles from September 5 to 30.³¹ Lalinearoja[.]net published seven election-related articles from August 24 to September 30.³² For reasons that are unclear, the Iranian website targeting veterans, NotOurWar[.]com, has not published any election content in the last two months.

The websites continue to demonstrate a deft ability to respond rapidly to major election-related developments, including the Trump campaign's claims about Haitian immigrants.³³ Teorator[.]com published "Haitian Immigrants Feasting on Local Fauna" on September 12 and another article a week and a half later warning that "[t]he American heartland is under siege" from an "influx of migrants" because the Biden administration has created "dubious new pathways for otherwise illegal immigrants to enter and stay in America."³⁴

Beyond this network of fake news websites, Iran has also continued to utilize websites associated with the International Union of Virtual Media (IUVM), an Iranian influence operation that has created vast networks of domains targeting global audiences since at least 2012. First identified by Reuters and later sanctioned by Treasury for being owned or controlled by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF), IUVM generally produces anti-U.S. and anti-Israel content.³⁵ In the past two months, however, it has also published

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31. "Kamala Harris's Housing Agenda: A Well-Intentioned but Conflicted Vision," *Even Politics*, September 6, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930212822/https://evenpolitics.com/2024/09/06/kamala-harriss-housing-agenda-a-well-intentioned-but-conflicted-vision>); "Kamala Harris' Polling Lead is Just a Fragile Advantage," *Even Politics*, September 14, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930212825/https://evenpolitics.com/2024/09/14/kamala-harris-polling-lead-is-just-a-fragile-advantage>)
32. "Harris Supera a Trump en Las Encuestas Después del Debate Presidencial [Harris Leads Trump in Polls After Presidential Debate]," *La Línea Roja*, September 18, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930163600/https://lalinearoja.net/index.php/2024/09/18/harris-supera-a-trump-en-las-encuestas-despues-del-debate-presidencial>); "Choque de Ideologías en el Primer Debate Presidencial entre Harris y Trump [Clash of Ideologies in the First Presidential Debate Between Harris and Trump]," *La Línea Roja*, September 12, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930163731/https://lalinearoja.net/index.php/2024/09/12/choque-de-ideologias-en-el-primer-debate-presidencial-entre-harris-y-trump>); "Harris y Trump se Preparan para un Tenso Debate Presidencial en 2024 [Harris and Trump Prepare for an Intense Presidential Debate in 2024]," *La Línea Roja*, September 10, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930163937/https://lalinearoja.net/index.php/2024/09/10/harris-y-trump-se-preparan-para-un-tenso-debate-presidencial-en-2024>); "Putin Declara su 'Apoyo' a Harris en Elecciones y Washington Responde [Putin Declares His 'Support' for Harris in Elections and Washington Responds]," *La Línea Roja*, September 8, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930164111/https://lalinearoja.net/index.php/2024/09/08/putin-declara-su-apoyo-a-harris-en-elecciones-y-washington-responde>); "Trump y Harris: Una Batalla Titánica por la Casa Blanca [Trump and Harris: A Titanic Battle for the White House]," *La Línea Roja*, August 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930164236/https://lalinearoja.net/index.php/2024/08/30/trump-y-harris-una-batalla-titanica-por-la-casa-blanca>); "Un Futuro Inédito: Harris Contrasta con Trump y Biden en 2024 [An Unprecedented Future: Harris Contrasts with Trump and Biden in 2024]," *La Línea Roja*, August 24, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930164402/https://lalinearoja.net/index.php/2024/08/24/un-futuro-inedito-harris-contrasta-con-trump-y-biden-en-2024>)
33. "Trump's Pet-Eating Claims: When 'Fake Mews' Becomes All Too Real," *NioThinker*, September 12, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930200411/https://niothinker.com/trumps-pet-eating-claims-when-fake-mews-becomes-all-too-real>)
34. "Haitian Immigrants Feasting on Local Fauna," *Teorator*, September 12, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930221725/https://teorator.com/index.php/2024/09/12/haitian-immigrants-feasting-on-local-fauna>); "The Real Cost of Biden and Harris's Open Border Agenda: Springfield and Aurora Are Just the Beginning," *Teorator*, September 23, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930220549/https://teorator.com/index.php/2024/09/23/the-real-cost-of-biden-and-harriss-open-border-agenda-springfield-and-aurora-are-just-the-beginning>)
35. Jack Stubbs and Christopher Bing, "Exclusive: Iran-Based Political Influence Operation – Bigger, Persistent, Global," *Reuters*, August 28, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-iran-based-political-influence-operation-bigger-persistent-global-idUSKCN1LD2R7>); U.S. Department of the Treasury, Press Release, "Treasury Sanctions Iranian Entities for Attempted Election Interference," October 22, 2020. (<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1158>)

several articles and political cartoons about the 2024 U.S. presidential election.³⁶ Although formerly critical of Biden, IUVM has recently published content that is markedly pro-Harris.³⁷ IUVM primarily utilizes two domains to disseminate its content, iuvmarchive[.]org and iuvmpr[.]co, although the content overlap between both domains is considerable.³⁸ These websites remain active despite Treasury’s sanctions.

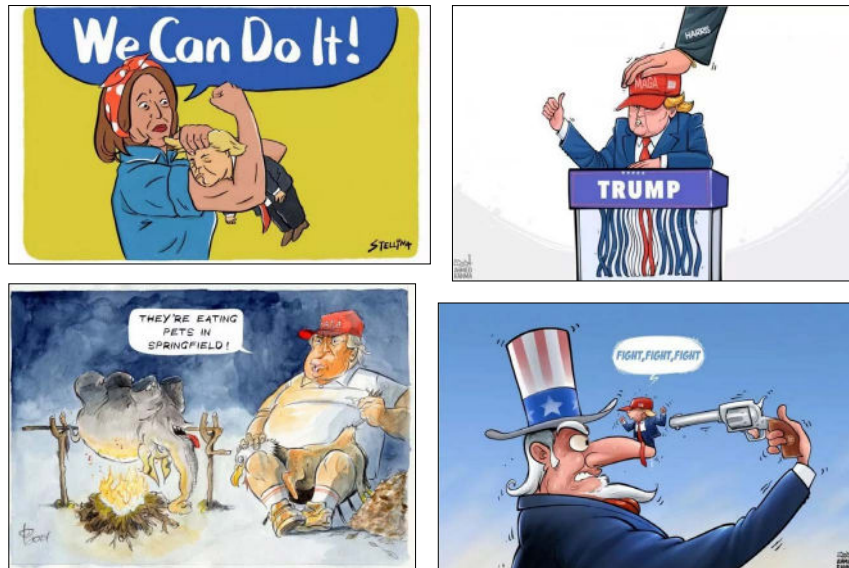


Figure: Anti-Trump political cartoons from iuvmarchive[.]org and iuvmpr[.]co.

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36. Insikt Group, “Malign Influence Threats Mount Ahead of US 2024 Elections,” *Recorded Future*, August 13, 2024. (<https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/ta-2024-0813.pdf>); “The Great American Political Circus,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930162011/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/video/the-great-american-political-circus>); M. Sharifi, “The Economic Crossroads of 2024: Kamala Harris, Donald Trump, and the Future of the US,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930161132/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/article/the-economic-crossroads-of-2024-kamala-harris-donald-trump-and-the-future-of-the-us>); A. Mahdavi, “Trump’s Trade Wars or Harris’ Diplomacy? A Tale of Two Trade Visions,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930155136/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/article/trump-s-trade-wars-or-harris-diplomacy-a-tale-of-two-trade-visions>); H. Zaim-Bashi, “America’s Darkest Hour: Trump’s Relentless Assault on Democracy,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930161309/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/article/america-s-darkest-hour-trump-s-relentless-assault-on-democracy>); “The 2024 Presidential Election and the Increased Risk of Terrorism in the United States,” *IUVM Press*, January 2, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002182748/https://iuvmpr.co/the-2024-presidential-election-and-the-increased-risk-of-terrorism-in-the-united-states>); “Harris Chocked Trump,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930161500/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/image/harris-chocked-trump>); “Harris Chocked Trump,” *IUVM Press*, September 11, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002180502/https://iuvmpr.co/harris-chocked-trump>); “Trump and Harris,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930161127/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/image/trump-and-harris>); “Trump and Harris,” *IUVM Press*, September 16, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002180921/https://iuvmpr.co/trump-and-harris>); “Fight,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930161622/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/image/fight>); “Fight, Fight, Fight,” *IUVM Press*, September 18, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002180415/https://iuvmpr.co/fightfightfight>); “Pets ... For Eating,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930161658/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/image/pets-for-eating>); “Pets ... For Eating,” *IUVM Press*, September 15, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002180433/https://iuvmpr.co/pets-for-eating>)
37. “The Great American Political Circus,” *IUVM Archive*, accessed September 30, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20240930162011/https://iuvmarchive.org/en/video/the-great-american-political-circus>)
38. Homepage of iuvmarchive[.]org, accessed October 2, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002173649/https://iuvmarchive.org>); Homepage of iuvmpr[.]co, accessed October 2, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241002173632/https://iuvmpr.co>)

CHINA'S SPAMOUFLAGE NETWORK AMPS UP ITS ATTACKS AGAINST HARRIS; CHINESE STATE MEDIA QUESTIONS IMPORTANCE OF ELECTIONS

FDD continues to track the X activity of the persistent Chinese influence operation Spamouflage. Numerous research institutions, including FDD, have exposed various components of Spamouflage's U.S. election-related activity,³⁹ but the activity continues.

FDD's previous election report discussed how Spamouflage increasingly began to criticize Harris after Biden dropped out of the race.⁴⁰ This continued throughout September.⁴¹ One notable post from September presents a Green Party image while claiming that Biden and Harris seek to "stifle democracy, manipulate votes, and deprive voters of their right to choose."⁴² Other posts claim that Harris is a puppet, a liar, and pro-war and that she receives disproportionate financial support from Microsoft and Google.⁴³

FDD follows one Spamouflage account that posts a high volume of pro-Trump content. This account appears similar to other Spamouflage accounts posing as Trump supporters previously reported by Graphika and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.⁴⁴ The Spamouflage accounts that do not pose as Trump supporters often criticize both Trump and Harris for their support of Israel. A Spamouflage account paired a caricature originally created

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39. Elise Thomas, "Pro-CCP 'Spamouflage' Network Pivoting to Focus on U.S. Presidential Election," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, February 15, 2024. (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-ccp-spamouflage-net-work-focuses-on-us-election); Elise Thomas, "Pro-CCP Spamouflage Campaign Experiments with New Tactics Targeting the U.S.," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, April 1, 2024. (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-ccp-spamouflage-campaign-experiments-with-new-tactics-targeting-the-us); "Inauthentic Chinese X Accounts Amplifying Trump Shooting and Biden Withdrawal Conspiracy Theories," *Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab)*, July 30, 2024. (<https://dfrlab.org/2024/07/30/china-x-trump-biden-harris>); "The #Americans: Chinese State-Linked Influence Operation Spamouflage Masquerades as U.S. Voters to Push Divisive Online Narratives Ahead of 2024 Election" *Graphika*, September 3, 2024. (<https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika-report-the-americans.pdf>); Ben Nimmo, Ira Hubert, and Yang Cheng, "Spamouflage Breakout: Chinese Spam Network Finally Starts to Gain Some Traction," *Graphika*, February 2021. (https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_report_spamouflage_breakout.pdf); Insikt Group, "Malign Influence Threats Mount Ahead of US 2024 Elections," *Recorded Future*, August 13, 2024. (<https://go.recordedfuture.com/hubfs/reports/ta-2024-0813.pdf>); Zak Butler, "Google Disrupted over 10,000 Instances of DRAGONBRIDGE Activity in Q1 2024," *Google Threat Analysis Group*, June 26, 2024. (<https://blog.google/threat-analysis-group/google-disrupted-dragonbridge-activity-q1-2024>); Max Lesser, Ari Ben-Am, Margot Fulde-Hardy, Saman Nazari, and Paul J. Malcomb, "Much Ado About 'Somethings': China-Linked Influence Operation Endures Despite Takedowns," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, March 27, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/03/27/much-ado-about-somethings>)

40. Max Lesser and RADM (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, "How U.S. Adversaries Undermine the Perception of Election Integrity," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 26, 2024. (<https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2024/09/26/how-u-s-adversaries-undermine-the-perception-of-election-integrity>)

41. @congcong612, X, September 8, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/uo63x>); @fo29904619, X, September 3, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/PtoxM>); @congcong612, X, September 25, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/ESgrh>); @congcong612, X, September 1, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/f0eZ5>); @W_liubao, X, September 24, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/2IKSH>); @congcong612, X, September 27, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/xQQGA>); @fo29904619, X, September 10, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/mpzva>); @shan_chahua, X, September 7, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/IYZc9>)

42. @congcong612, X, September 8, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/uo63x>)

43. @fo29904619, X, September 3, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/PtoxM>); @congcong612, X, September 25, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/ESgrh>); @W_liubao, X, September 24, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/2IKSH>); @shan_chahua, X, September 7, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/IYZc9>); @fo29904619, X, September 10, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/mpzva>)

44. "The #Americans: Chinese State-Linked Influence Operation Spamouflage Masquerades as U.S. Voters to Push Divisive Online Narratives Ahead of 2024 Election" *Graphika*, September 3, 2024. (<https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika-report-the-americans.pdf>); Elise Thomas, "Pro-CCP Spamouflage Campaign Experiments with New Tactics Targeting the U.S.," *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, April 1, 2024. (https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/pro-ccp-spamouflage-campaign-experiments-with-new-tactics-targeting-the-us)

by a pro-Iran Yemeni cartoonist with text saying that no matter who wins the election, “they will not change their stance on Judaism.”⁴⁵ Another similar post writes “republicans and democrats, one and the same,” and shares a photo of the Israeli, American, and Nazi flags.⁴⁶



Left: Spamouflage post claiming that Biden and Harris seek to undermine the integrity of U.S. democracy, with its text accompanied by an image apparently sourced from the Green Party. Right: Post from Spamouflage account sharing cartoon created by Yemeni cartoonist accompanied by antisemitic statement implying Jews control the United States.

In addition to content about Harris and Trump, Spamouflage continues to push content denigrating the U.S. democratic process more broadly.⁴⁷ One post says, “Political parties only care about votes, never about race or school shootings,”⁴⁸ while another claims, “The U.S. system is malfunctioning” as “the ‘deep government’ that actually controls power only cares about the interests of the political and business oligarchs.”⁴⁹

In parallel with covert operations such as Spamouflage that attempt to disguise their connections to Beijing, China also overtly pushes polarizing content about U.S. elections through official channels such as state media and public officials. Chinese state media outlets such as Xinhua News Agency, The Global Times, and China Global TV Network (CGTN) publish articles alleging that regardless of who Americans elect, the winner will precipitate America’s decline. Xinhua News Agency, for instance, produced a short video series called *House of Cuts* — parodying the Netflix TV series *House of Cards* — which makes light of political violence in the United

45. @congcong612, X, September 1, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/f0eZ5>); @kamalsharf, X, August 26, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/JdaUL>); @kamalsharf, X, accessed October 7, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/BHZNy>)

46. @mmshouhu, X, September 3, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/p7Pgl>)

47. @bestsolweb, X, August 19, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/f5ZVa>); @LeyaoHan_, X, September 4, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/5RFaO>); @LeyaoHan_, X, September 5, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/GFS46>)

48. @congcong612, X, September 22, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/wdKez>)

49. @elizabe01056090, X, October 2, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/3mDo6>)

States. One video minimizes the significance of the July 13 assassination attempt against Trump by saying, “It’s easier to snag an AR-15 than a box of Sudafed these days” and “Our country is just one bad tweet away from civil war.”⁵⁰ In another video, fictitious U.S. presidential candidate Frank Upperwood is instructed by an advisor that, in U.S. presidential debates, “Even babbling nonsense is better than silence” and that “Elections aren’t about making America great, but to let people feel they’ve got some say.”⁵¹

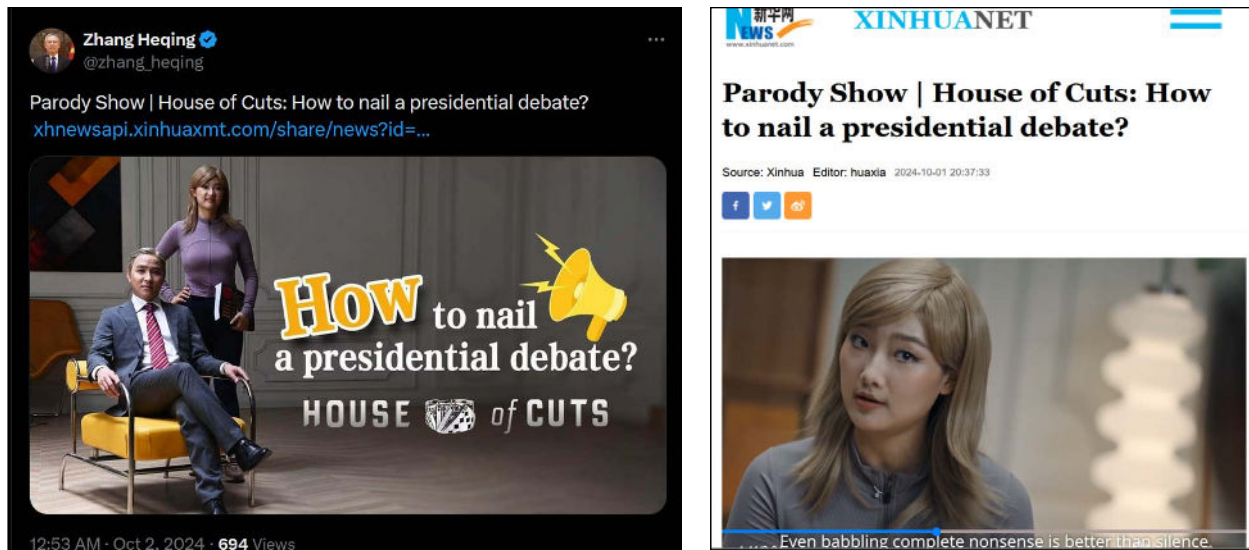


Figure: Chinese cultural attaché to Islamabad Zhang Heqing reposts an episode from Xinhua News Agency’s “House of Cuts” to X.

Chinese officials also push alarmist statements about the potential for political violence in the United States. Zhang Heqing, the Chinese cultural attaché to Islamabad, has served as one of the chief sources disseminating anti-U.S. and election-related content. Zhang’s X account, which boasts over 400,000 followers, shares content quoting Chinese academics asserting that increased political polarization and economic maladies could drive America into civil war or that the “deep state” seeks to deprive Trump of the presidency.⁵²

MOST FOREIGN MALIGN INFLUENCE ACTIVITY HAS LIMITED TRACTION

Fortunately, most Iranian, Russian, and Chinese efforts detailed in this report appear to have gained limited traction among American citizens. Most adversarial, influence operation websites received few page visits, and most social media posts garnered relatively little organic engagement.⁵³

According to Similarweb, a website that analyzes web traffic, fewer than 4,500 visits to the FBI/FBR’s website between June and August came from the United States. In this same time period, two Portal Kombat domains,

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50. Xinhua Global Service, “Parody Show | House of Cuts: 5 Reasons to Donate \$5 to Upperwood,” *Xinhua News Agency* (China), September 11, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241003182316/https://english.news.cn/20240911/a465fef59c0a4e9f88fa1127807ae207/c.html>)

51. Xinhua Global Service, “Parody Show | House of Cuts: How to Nail a Presidential Debate?” *Xinhua News Agency* (China), October 1, 2024. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20241003182302/http://www.chinaview.cn/20241001/eb1d7f56e7e44b9faad36525d00e256d/c.html>)

52. @zhang_heqing, X, accessed October 7, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/H8AqD>)

53. FDD relied on Similarweb’s statistics and manual social media searches to gauge the reach of the content in this report, so this assessment should not be considered exhaustive. It is safe to say, however, that the activity that FDD details in this report has generally not garnered significant engagement.

pravda-us[.]online and feed-news[.]com, received less than 1,000 visits, none of which came from the United States. Less than 20 percent of pravda-en[.]com's 35,000 visits (or fewer than 7,000 visits) and less than 4 percent of news-pravda[.]com's 175,000 visits (or fewer than 7,000 visits) came from Americans.

Five out of the eight Iranian influence operation websites discussing U.S. elections did not even generate enough traffic to be monitored by Similarweb. Niotioner had the greatest reach with over 4,000 visits from American readers between June and August. Iuvmarchive[.]org and iuvmpress[.]co each garnered fewer than 1,000 visits by American readers, and Teorator received less than 400. China's Spamouflage campaign also appears to continue to garner relatively little engagement on X.

The adversarial content that FDD has observed gaining the most traction includes two X posts from the head of the FBI/FBR alleging, "Democrats are planning to use an army of illegal immigrant criminals to destroy the MAGA movement." The posts have collectively garnered over 600,000 views (as of October 17, 2024).⁵⁴ Amplification of other content described in this report on social media came primarily from known pro-Russian, pro-Iranian, and pro-Chinese accounts or fringe websites and forums.

'PERCEPTION HACKING' CAN UNDERMINE PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE SECURITY AND INTEGRITY OF U.S. ELECTIONS

Hactivists and nation-states masquerading as hactivists have a history of falsely claiming the success of their cyberattacks or exaggerating the impact of their attacks, a tactic known as "perception hacking."⁵⁵ These groups often amplify statements about their attacks via Telegram channels and dedicated websites.⁵⁶ The intent of the false claims — besides self-aggrandizement — is to create unwarranted fear. The risk with regard to the election is that perception hacking could undermine Americans' confidence in the process even when hackers have not compromised election systems.⁵⁷

The U.S. government has warned the public about perception hacking, urging Americans to view incredulously all claims that the U.S. election infrastructure has been compromised. On September 12, 2024, the Cyber and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued a joint advisory warning of possible "attempts to undermine public confidence in the security of U.S. election infrastructure through the spread of disinformation falsely claiming that cyberattacks compromised U.S. voter registration databases."⁵⁸ They specifically urged Americans not to mistake the hackers posting voter registration information with a successful corruption of voting machines.

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54. @MiraMiru4, X, September 6, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/x88FN>); @MiraMiru4, X, September 6, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/7N951>)

55. Daniel Kapellmann Zafra, Keith Lunden, and Nathan Brubaker, "We (Did!) Start the Fire: Hactivists Increasingly Claim Targeting of OT Systems," *Mandiant*, March 22, 2023. (<https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/hactivists-targeting-ot-systems>)

56. Gabby Roncone, Dan Black, John Wolfram, Tyler McLellan, Nick Simonian, Ryan Hall, Anton Prokopenkov, Luke Jenkins, Dan Perez, Lexie Aytes, and Alden Wahlstrom, "Unearthing APT44: Russia's Notorious Cyber Sabotage Unit Sandworm," *Mandiant*, April 17, 2024. (<https://cloud.google.com/blog/topics/threat-intelligence/apt44-unearthing-sandworm>)

57. Greg Myre, "A 'Perception Hack': When Public Reaction Exceeds The Actual Hack," *NPR*, November 1, 2020. (<https://www.npr.org/2020/11/01/929101685/a-perception-hack-when-public-reaction-exceeds-the-actual-hack>)

58. U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, Press Release, "FBI and CISA Release Joint PSA, Just So You Know: False Claims of Hacked Voter Information Likely Intended to Sow Distrust of U.S. Elections," September 12, 2024. (<https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/news/fbi-and-cisa-release-joint-psa-just-so-you-know-false-claims-hacked-voter-information-likely>)

“The reality is that having access to voter registration data is not by itself an indicator of a voter registration database compromise” because “most voter registration information is available to the public,” CISA and the FBI explained.⁵⁹ Americans should “not accept claims of intrusion at face value,” they continued but should instead “remember that these claims may be meant to influence public opinion and undermine the American people’s confidence in our democratic process.”⁶⁰

In addition to posting voter registration data, hackers may launch distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks or website defacement attacks against election-related websites or conduct hack-and-leak operations to reveal otherwise non-public information. Attacking public-facing election-related websites and the websites of political campaigns may give the impression that the perpetrators have the ability to compromise core election infrastructure. Hacktivists may launch ransomware attacks against election infrastructure, yet even previous, successful, and localized ransomware attacks on election infrastructure have had “no impact on the security and accuracy of ballot casting or tabulation,” according to CISA and the FBI.⁶¹

False claims of successful influence operations are themselves a form of perception hacking to undermine Americans’ faith in the democratic process. In 2018, the notorious Russian malign influence outfit known as the Internet Research Agency set up USAIRA[.]ru, which claimed that a massive Russian influence operation targeting the midterm elections had gone undetected. Outing itself as a foreign influence operation actually furthered IRA’s goals to undermine faith in the U.S. democratic process. The IRA website asserted, “Whether you vote or not, there is no difference as we control the voting and counting systems. Remember, your vote has zero value.”⁶²

Recent hacktivist activity targeting Austria in the lead-up to its elections in September should serve as an additional warning to Americans about the type of perception hacking that may occur. While it is not clear if the campaign was effective, the tactic is one that hackers may repeat in the United States.

According to cybersecurity firm Radware, a pro-Russian hacktivist group named Noname057(16) partnered with other pro-Russia hacktivist groups to “check on cybersecurity ahead of upcoming elections” in Austria.⁶³ The campaign attacked at least 40 targets, including government sites, airports, and the Vienna stock exchange.⁶⁴ Multiple Austrian political parties issued notices that DDoS attacks had taken down their websites.⁶⁵

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59. U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, “Just So You Know: False Claims of Hacked Voter Information Likely Intended to Sow Distrust of U.S. Elections,” September 12, 2024. (https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-09/PSA_Just_So_You_Know_False_Claims_of_Hacking_Voter_Reg_CISA_and_FBI-508_0.pdf)

60. Ibid.

61. U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, “Just So You Know: Ransomware Disruptions During Voting Periods Will Not Impact the Security and Resilience of Vote Casting or Counting,” August 15, 2024. (https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-08/Just_So_You_Know_Ransomware_Disruptions_During_Voting_Periods_Will_Not_Impact_the_Security_and_Resilience_of_Vote_Casting_or_Counting_8.15.24_V2_508c_0.pdf)

62. Ben Collins, “A Russian Troll Farm Set an Elaborate Social Media Trap for the Midterms — And No One Bit,” *NBC News*, November 7, 2018. (<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/russian-troll-farm-set-elaborate-social-media-trap-midterms-no-n933781>)

63. “Pro-Russian Hacktivists Target Organizations in Austria With DDoS Attack Campaign,” *Radware*, September 20, 2024. (<https://www.radware.com/security/threat-advisories-and-attack-reports/pro-russian-hacktivists-target-organizations-in-austria-with-ddos-attack-campaign>); @noname057(16), *Telegram*, September 30, 2024. (<https://ghostarchive.org/archive/CqrIr>)

64. “Pro-Russian Hacktivists Target Organizations in Austria With DDoS Attack Campaign,” *Radware*, September 20, 2024. (<https://www.radware.com/security/threat-advisories-and-attack-reports/pro-russian-hacktivists-target-organizations-in-austria-with-ddos-attack-campaign>)

65. Daryna Antoniuk, “Pro-Russia Hackers Aim DDoS Campaign at Austrian Websites Ahead of Elections,” *The Record*, September 24, 2024. (<https://therecord.media/austria-websites-ddos-incidents-pro-russia-hacktivists>)

Despite the lack of evidence that this campaign compromised websites specifically related to Austrian elections, Noname057(16) claimed that it compromised “more than 120 critical infrastructure sites” and caused “incalculable” damage to the Austrian economy. They even uploaded an animated video showcasing targeted Austrian domains to Telegram.

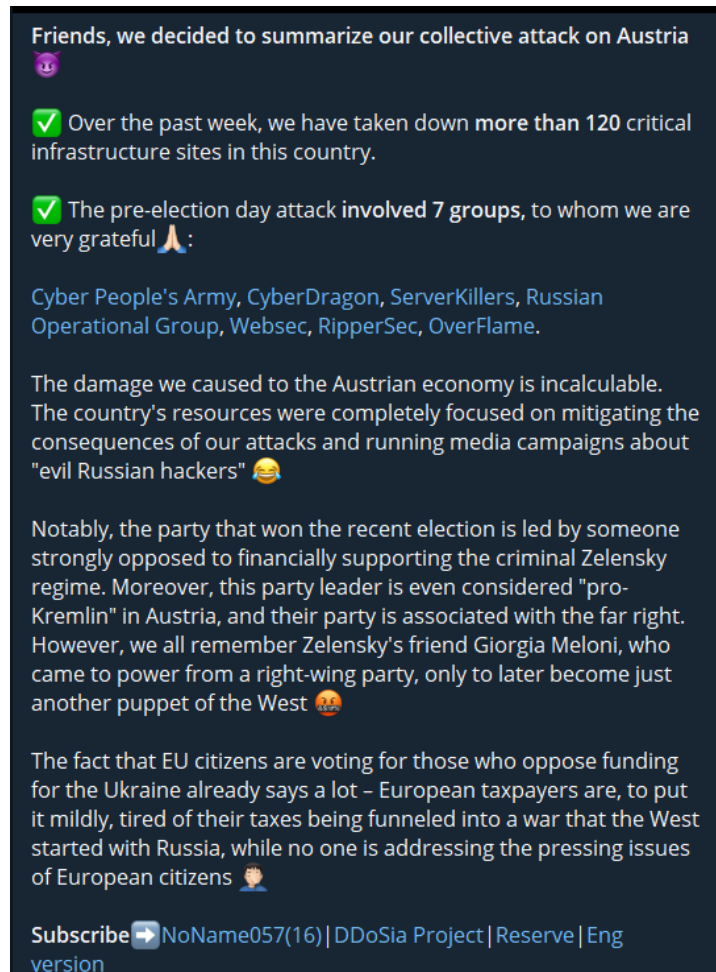


Figure: Telegram post by Noname057(16) exaggerating the impact of its cyberattacks in advance of the Austrian elections.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. government has stepped up its efforts to combat foreign malign influence targeting the 2024 elections. In addition to CISA and the FBI’s advisories, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence releases regular alerts on the issue. The Justice Department indictments against both the operators of Doppelganger and Americans acting as foreign agents for Russia, the Treasury’s sanctions against Russian state media outlets, and Meta’s decision to ban these outlets, are all major steps in the right direction. Adversaries, however, continue to launch influence operations against the U.S. elections. FDD’s previous report contained five recommendations to thwart and mitigate foreign influence operations. They included sanctioning the financial networks that facilitate illicit cyber activity, conducting more robust investigations, dismantling known infrastructure, working with U.S. allies to

hold hosting providers accountable, and providing more technical information about influence operations. In light of the continuing malign operations documented above, this report again emphasizes the need to dismantle the infrastructure on which these operations rely:

1. Take down known malicious domains and social media networks: FDD’s previous report noted the importance of dismantling the infrastructure of known influence operations. While U.S. law enforcement has seized domains and issued indictments against malign influence actors, many previously exposed influence operations targeting the U.S. elections remain online and active.⁶⁶ The U.S. government should work with international partners as necessary to seize known malicious websites, and social media companies should take down networks of inauthentic social media entities that foreign influence actors use in their operations.

This report also adds one new recommendation to those FDD made previously:

2. Add reach and impact assessments to U.S. government malign influence updates: The U.S. government should add an analysis of the reach and impact of foreign malign influence to its regular updates about influence-related threats to the U.S. elections. This would help Americans avoid either overestimating or underestimating the threat. Though measuring the reach and assessing the impact of foreign malign influence are challenging tasks, the U.S. government can provide statistics about visits to websites and social media engagement and use established frameworks to assess impact. One example is Ben Nimmo’s breakout scale that assesses whether a campaign has spread across platforms and communities, reached mainstream media, led to policy changes in response, or led to calls for physical violence.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION: AMERICANS SHOULD REMAIN VIGILANT

The decision of reporters across American mainstream media not to publish Trump campaign materials hacked by Iranians demonstrates that American society, at least in some respects, has proven remarkably more resilient to foreign malign influence than in 2016, when reporters readily published compromised materials from the Clinton campaign.⁶⁸ Indeed, the activity that FDD details in this report appears to have largely failed to gain significant engagement, perhaps further indicating that Americans are less susceptible to foreign influence than media coverage of these campaigns might indicate. Without exaggerating the threat, the United States must remain vigilant.

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⁶⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Press Release, “Justice Department Disrupts Covert Russian Government-Sponsored Foreign Malign Influence Operation Targeting Audiences in the United States and Elsewhere,” September 4, 2024. (<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-disrupts-covert-russian-government-sponsored-foreign-malign-influence>)

⁶⁷ Ben Nimmo, “The Breakout Scale: Measuring the Impact of Influence Operations,” *Brookings Institution*, September 2020. (<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-breakout-scale-measuring-the-impact-of-influence-operations>); Jon Bateman, Elonnai Hickok, Jacob N. Shapiro, Laura Courchesne, and Julia Ilhardt, “Measuring the Efficacy of Influence Operations Countermeasures: Key Findings and Gaps From Empirical Research,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, September 21, 2021. (<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2021/09/measuring-the-efficacy-of-influence-operations-countermeasures-key-findings-and-gaps-from-empirical-research>); Steve Sin, Megan Rutter, and Rhyner Washburn, “Influence-to-Action Model Development: A Tool to Assess the Impact of Foreign Influence Operations,” *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism*, December 2021. (<https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/influence-action-model-development-tool-assess-impact-foreign-influence-operations>)

⁶⁸ Alex Isenstadt, “We Received Internal Trump Documents from ‘Robert.’ Then the Campaign Confirmed It Was Hacked,” *Politico*, August 10, 2024. (<https://www.politico.com/news/2024/08/10/trump-campaign-hack-00173503>); Will Sommer and Elahe Izadi, “Why Newsrooms Haven’t Published Leaked Trump Campaign Documents,” *The Washington Post*, August 13, 2024. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2024/08/13/iran-email-hack-republicans-media-response/>); Rebecca Beitsch and Brett Samuels, “Trump Campaign Goes on Offense over Iran Effort to Share Hacked Materials,” *The Hill*, September 19, 2024. (<https://thehill.com/national-security/4888999-trump-campaign-iranian-hack>)

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