

Hackers reveal British government's interference in Spanish politics

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Documents leaked by internet hackers of Anonymous reveal how a supposedly independent think-tank based in the UK is a government funded and controlled operation of misinformation and fake news.

At the same time that the Western powers were accusing Russia of interference in democracy, the UK government and its intelligence services MI5 and MI6 were busily preventing the nomination of a Spanish official to Director of National Security, one of Spain's top advisory roles.

Details of the operation carried out by the Integrity Initiative (II), a project launched in 2015 by the Institute of Statecraft, have been published by the web site CyberGuerilla.org. It is a trove of documents allegedly hacked from II, showing carefully worked out campaigns, costs and internal guidelines, as well as names of individuals cooperating with the network.

Anonymous shows that the network:

1. Is mainly funded by the UK government through the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).
2. Cost £1,961,000 (\$2.5 million) this year.
3. Has received £168,000 in funding from HQ NATO Public Diplomacy and £250,000 from the US State Department.
4. Is controlled by figures in the UK who manipulate "clusters" of politicians, high-ranking military officials, academics and journalists.
5. Clusters are said to operate in Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Norway, Serbia, and Montenegro.
6. Its activities are carried under absolute secrecy via named intelligence services operatives in British embassies.

The Integrity Initiative poses as "Defending Democracy against Misinformation," but does exactly the opposite, spreading fake news against Russia in order to defend the national interests of the UK and its imperialist allies,

influence Russian speakers in Europe and North America and "change attitudes in Russia itself".

An example of II's activities was the operation launched last June against the nomination of Army reserve colonel Pedro Baños as Spain's Director of National Security. Attached to La Moncloa, the official residence and workplace of the prime minister of Spain, the director's role is to advise the PM on existing and potential threats to the country and possible responses.

II's operation started after it was warned that the new Socialist Party (PSOE) government under Pedro Sánchez, which had just been elected in parliament through a no confidence vote, was considering Baños and was about to confirm his appointment on June 7, 2018.

Immediately, newspapers like *El Mundo* and *El País* published articles accusing Baños of "sympathy for Russia." Proof of this for *El País* was his "regular presence" on *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*, media outlets funded by the Putin government. Further "evidence" was his tweet in response to a survey showing a domestic popularity rating of 74 percent for Russian President Vladimir Putin: "Wouldn't we love to have a political leader half as popular right here in the European Union!!!"

Baños was also quoted as saying, "Which country has everything that we lack? Russia does. We will not gain anything by provoking Russia. So Russia wants to have its own sphere of influence? Of course it does, just like the United States or China do. It also wants to have its markets and like-minded countries nearby."

Numerous articles also put in doubt Baños' sanity for his participation in the popular offbeat TV show *Cuarto Milenio* that often investigates topics such as conspiracy theories, ufology and parapsychology.

Baños reflects a minority realpolitik opinion within the Spanish ruling class which opposes provocative military actions and sanctions against Russia. He sees the need to

defend Spain's imperialist interests through a European army and closer relations with Russia—positions also held by sections of the German and French ruling elite.

The UK-sponsored II, however, saw Baños as a threat to British national interests and an obstacle to its anti-Russia campaign. According to the hacked documents, at midday on June 7, 2018, the Spanish Cluster, obviously through informants at the highest levels of the PSOE, “hear that a well-known pro-Kremlin voice, Pedro Baños, is to be appointed at the weekend (09.06.2018) as the Director of the National Security Department (DSN), which works closely with the Spanish PM's office (La Moncloa) and is very influential in shaping policy.”

An action plan is drawn up laying out how Institute of Statecraft Fellow and Spain Cluster leader Nicolás de Pedro will alert “the rest of the cluster members and prepare[s] a dossier to inform the main Spanish media. The cluster starts a Twitter campaign... trying to prevent an appointment.”

Spanish Cluster members also include Borja Lasheras and Quique Badia-Masoni, writers and journalists well known for their hysterical anti-Russian positions. They are supported by II Team UK members Chris Hernon, Simon Bracey-Lane and Ben Robinson, and StopFake Spanish Desk members Alina Mosendz and Serbian Cluster member Jelena Milic.

At 15:45, “The head of the Spanish cluster urgently contacts the British cluster, which activates the II network in order to create international support for the Twitter campaign. The British Cluster creates a group in the WhatsApp messenger... to coordinate the reaction on Twitter, gets contacts on Twitter to spread concerns and encourage people to ‘retweet’ the material. He publishes material written by the head of the Spanish cluster Niko de Pedro on the Spanish version of the StopFake website, which is also ‘retweeted’ by key influential figures.”

The Spanish cluster then sends material to *El País* and *El Mundo* to publish. On the same day, *El País* publishes, “Spanish PM taps Russia supporter for National Security Director.”

The documents reveal that by 19:45, barely eight hours after the start of the operation, the “campaign [had] raised significant noise on Twitter ... Contacts in the Socialist Party confirmed that this information reached the Prime Minister. Some Spanish diplomats also expressed their concern. In the end, both the People's Party and the Civil Party (Ciudadanos) asked the Prime Minister to stop the appointment.”

The following day, the government drops Baños and

nominates general Miguel Ángel Ballesteros instead.

The operation against Baños is a graphic illustration of the inner workings of the intelligence services in collaboration with alleged “independent” journalists and academics. The same forces that accuse Russia of meddling in European nations' internal affairs are themselves meddling to stop elected governments from nominating officials when it conflicts with their interests. They use social media in the same way they accuse the Kremlin of using it.

By showing the real sources of information on which they rely, newspapers like *El País* or *El Mundo* are exposed as conduits of the intelligence services to support the suppression of maverick political viewpoints, in this case, Baños' call for closer relations with Russia.

Last year, *El País* carried out a frenzied and paranoid campaign claiming that the Catalan crisis was not sparked by the Popular Party government's violent repression of the secessionists, but was the result of Moscow and its “fake news.” It quoted experts and specialists working for Spanish think tanks like Instituto Elcano and Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB), and the European Council on Foreign Relations.

The leaked documents show that many members of these think tanks are members of the “Spanish Cluster” of the Integrity Initiative. The most notorious is Senior Analyst for Instituto Elcano, Mira Milosevich-Juaristi who testified last year in parliament to claim that Russia was promoting fake news.

The Baños case is just one of the highlighted campaigns of Integrity Initiative, but according to Anonymous, similar operations have been carried out in numerous other EU states.



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