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Version 0

## Foreign Office probes Russia campaign over 'anti-Labour retweets'

2018-12-10 15:25:20 UTC

The Foreign Office is investigating claims a government-funded campaign group countering Russian disinformation retweeted articles critical of Labour.

The Institute of Statecraft's Integrity Initiative has received £2.3m.

Foreign Office minister Sir Alan Duncan said he would "totally condemn" any UK-backed organisation "involved in domestic politics in that way".

But Foreign Office sources claimed Russia was trying to discredit the Fife-based organisation.

They said the campaign was challenging Kremlin propaganda and there was no evidence of systemic bias.

Version 1

## Russia hack 'bid to discredit' UK anti-disinformation campaign - Foreign Office

2018-12-10 19:25:21 UTC (about 4 hours later)

The Foreign Office has accused Russian state media of trying to discredit a government-funded body that works to counter Kremlin disinformation.

A spokesperson said the Institute for Statecraft was hacked several weeks ago and documents were "published and amplified by Kremlin news channels".

The National Cyber Security Centre is said to be investigating.

The FCO comments on the IfS were issued after a news report said the group had retweeted stories critical of Labour.

The Institute for Statecraft is a charity registered in Scotland and based in Gateside, Fife.

## Version 0

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2018-12-10 15:25:20 UTC

Scotland's Sunday Mail newspaper reported this weekend the Integrity Initiative had retweeted a handful of articles by other media outlets critical of the position held by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and his aides, on Russia.

The Institute for Statecraft is a charity registered in Scotland and based in Gateside that is intended to promote good governance.

Sir Alan had confirmed Foreign Office funding for the initiative on 27 November in a written answer to a Parliamentary question from Labour MP Chris Williamson.

He said it received £296,500 in 2017 and £1.96m this financial year as part of the British government's declared campaign to challenge Russian propaganda on social media.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, Sir Alan said he had ordered an immediate investigation after seeing the reports.

## Russia hack 'bid to discredit' UK anti-disinformation campaign - Foreign Office

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Scotland's Sunday Mail newspaper ran stories this weekend that the Integrity Initiative run by the institute retweeted an article in the New Statesman in April which criticised Labour's support for Russia's position on Syria; an article in the Times in February in which the writer Edward Lucas described Mr Corbyn as the Kremlin's "useful idiot", and a Sunday Times magazine piece that criticised Mr Corbyn's aide Seumas Milne for his opinions on Russia.

Speaking on BBC Radio 4's Today programme, Foreign Office minister Sir Alan Duncan said he had ordered an immediate investigation after seeing the reports, saying "if there is any kind of organisation for which we are paying which is involved in domestic politics in that way, I would totally condemn it".

Sir Alan confirmed the Foreign Office was funding for the institute's Integrity Initiative on 27 November in a written answer to a Parliamentary question from Labour MP Chris Williamson.

'No systemic bias'

The Foreign Office statement issued later emphasised that the £2.2m it had given to the institute over the last two years supported its work to counter disinformation overseas and not in the UK.

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"I don't know the facts but if there is any kind of organisation for which we are paying which is involved in domestic politics in that way, I would totally condemn it, and I have already over the weekend asked for a report to be on my desk by 10 o'clock this morning to say if there is any such activity".

He added: "Not only must it stop, I want to know why on earth it happened in the first place."

'No party-political stance'

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The spokesperson said the government did not endorse or fund the institute's social media activity. And while insisting that the retweeting showed no systemic bias, she said the institute had agreed to review its editorial policy.

The spokesperson said: "The Institute for Statecraft, an independent charity, was hacked several weeks ago and numerous documents were published and amplified by Kremlin news channels.

"The Russian state media campaign's objective is clear. This is yet another example of Russian disinformation intended to confuse audiences and discredit an organisation which is working independently to tackle the threat of disinformation."

They added: "The Institute for Statecraft is independent of government and is non-partisan. We fund them on that basis.

"Their retweeting of articles critical of both the government and opposition shows no systemic bias, though they have undertaken to review their editorial policy."

'No party-political stance'

Emily Thornberry, the shadow foreign secretary, said it was "outrageous" a Foreign Office-funded initiative "has routinely been using its Twitter feed to disseminate personal attacks and smears" against Labour.

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In a statement, the Institute for Statecraft said: "In sharing information about such malign activities, the Integrity Initiative uses Twitter as a key method of sharing knowledge.

"This includes the usual Twitter practice of re-tweeting and liking tweets.

"However, at no time has the Integrity Initiative engaged in party political activity and would never take up a party-political stance. Disinformation and malign influence from rogue states and certain non-state actors are a threat to democratic values and transcend any party political cause."

Emily Thornberry, the shadow foreign secretary, said it was "outrageous" an Foreign Office-funded initiative "has routinely been using its Twitter feed to disseminate personal attacks and smears against the Leader of the opposition, the Labour Party and Labour officials".

She added it "cannot be dismissed as something outside the government's control".

Last month the Institute for Statecraft's computer system was hacked by a group that Western officials believe is linked to the Russian state.

Since then internal documents have been leaked to the Russian media about the organisation's activities, including lists of journalists it had contacted.

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A spokesman for the Integrity Initiative did not deny the retweets but pointed out the group had also promoted an article in October about links between the Russian state and Conservative peer Lord Barker of Battle, who is chairman of the Russian energy giant EN+.

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The Sunday Mail said the leaks showed the organisation retweeted an article in the New Statesman in April which criticised Labour's support for Russia's position on Syria; an article in the Times in February in which the writer Edward Lucas described Mr Corbyn as the Kremlin's "useful idiot", and a Sunday Times magazine piece that criticised Mr Corbyn's aide Seumas Milne for his opinions on Russia.

A spokesman for the Integrity Initiative did not deny the retweets but pointed out the group had also retweeted an article in October about links between the Russian state and Conservative peer Lord Barker of Battle, who is chairman of the Russian energy giant EN+.

Foreign Office sources said the funding was focused on the work the initiative did overseas and the leaks showed Russia was attempting to discredit an organisation that countered Kremlin disinformation.

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