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Chinese online influence operation called for overthrow of Spain's government

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REUTERS

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government amid flood relief criticism

MADRID, Spain – A Chinese social media operation that aims to whip up political anger in the West has called for the overthrow of a foreign government when impersonating protesters criticizing flood relief efforts in Spain, online analysis outfit Graphika said.

New York-based Graphika said an operation dubbed Spamouflage, which it believed was linked to the Chinese state, posed this month as human rights group Safeguard Defenders to spread online calls for the government to be toppled in response to the catastrophic floods in October that killed 224 people.

“This is the first time we have seen Spamouflage directly calling to overthrow a foreign government,” Graphika said in its latest report.

Graphika says the Spamouflage campaign has been operating in several countries since 2017, impersonating US voters during last year’s election, while Canada said last year that the operation had targeted members of parliament including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

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Graphika said it detected dozens of accounts across social media sites as Safeguard Defenders to seed videos and images



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The Chinese embassy in Madrid did not immediately respond to an email requesting comment, nor did the Spanish government.

During the 2024 US election campaign, a spokesperson for China’s embassy in Washington said Beijing had “no intention and will not interfere” in the vote.

Spamouflage has repeatedly targeted Safeguard Defenders since the Madrid-based NGO published a report in 2022 accusing China of establishing secret overseas police stations in European Union countries, according to Graphika.

Safeguard Defenders Campaign Director Laura Harth said the organization has been tracking an online discrediting campaign by China since it published its report.

In one video overlaid with the Safeguard Defenders’ logo that was posted on X and has since been taken down, a masked person claiming to be from the organization says they will “expose” authorities for giving up on ordinary people. The video ends with a call to overthrow the Spanish government.

Graphika said it had “high confidence” that the accounts it identified were part of a Spamouflage campaign. – Rappler. com

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