



# NATO STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

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## INVITATION TO TENDER OF THE PRODUCTION OF THE CONTINUING VIRTUAL MANIPULATION BRIEF PROVISION

To be supplied to the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE)

<b>Revision</b>	Version 1
<b>Release Date</b>	7 February 2024
<b>Issuer</b>	Mr Max Arhippainen
<b>Suppliers Response date</b>	<b>26 February 2024</b> submitted via e-mail <a href="mailto:tender@stratcomcoe.org">tender@stratcomcoe.org</a> <b>by 23:59 hrs</b> (Eastern European Time zone: UTC +02:00).

## **Invitation to Tender of the production of the continuing Virtual Manipulation Brief Provision**

You are kindly invited to submit a tender for the production of the continuing Virtual Manipulation Brief (last issue "Verified Propagandists and the Hamas - Israel War" <sup>1</sup>) which includes data collection, processing, conducting the research and compiling the report(s) based on the research.

By participating in this tender, you are indicating your acceptance to be bound by the guidelines set out in this letter. We provide below the key details of the NATO StratCom COE requirements, which you should take into account in your response. Please acknowledge safe receipt of this letter via e-mail within two working days together with your confirmation of your intention to tender.

To simplify exchange of information regarding this Invitation to Tender (ITT) please nominate a Bid Manager and relevant contact details phone and e-mail address.

Please direct any questions regarding the ITT content or process to Mr Max Arhippainen. You should not contact other NATO StratCom COE personnel unless asked to do so by the appointed NATO StratCom COE representative. The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to disqualify and reject proposals from suppliers who do not comply with these guidelines. All questions should be submitted in writing to the e-mail: [max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org](mailto:max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org)

As part of this tender process the NATO StratCom COE makes no obligations in any way to:

- (i) pay any supplier for an ITT response; or
- (ii) award the contract with the lowest price proposal or any Bidder; or
- (iii) accept any ITT information received from suppliers; or
- (iv) include suppliers responding to this ITT, in any future invitations; or
- (v) any other commitment to suppliers whatsoever.

Looking forward receiving your response.

Yours Sincerely,

Mr Max Arhippainen  
Chief of Technical and Science Development Branch  
E-mail address: [max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org](mailto:max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/virtual-manipulation-brief-20232-verified-propagandists-and-the-hamas-israel-war/294>

Whilst care and attention has been exercised in the preparation of this document, it remains subject to contract, and all warranties, whether expressed or implied by statute, law or otherwise, are hereby disclaimed and excluded.

These limitations are not intended to restrict continued business discussions between the NATO StratCom COE and suppliers.

Any proposal received by the NATO StratCom COE is subject to contract with the NATO StratCom COE.

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (NATO StratCom COE), based in Riga, Latvia, contributes to the improved strategic communications capabilities within the Alliance and Allied nations. The NATO StratCom COE designs programmes to advance StratCom doctrine development and harmonisation, conducts research and experimentation to find practical solutions to existing challenges, identifies lessons from applied StratCom during operations, and enhances training and education efforts and interoperability.
- 1.2. NATO StratCom COE is running a tender for the production of the continuing Virtual Manipulation Brief, including data collection and processing, research and compiling the report(s) based on the research.
- 1.3. The contract will be awarded within two weeks after the announcement of the winner. The contract shall be executed by June 2024.

## 2. Background

NATO StratCom COE has since 2017 studied the effects of robotic networks in social media. More recently, since 2019, it has also conducted experiments to understand the black market for social media manipulation.

Observing the war in Ukraine, the role of automated bots has become less significant as social media companies have introduced more effective counter measures. Instead, cyber troops, organizing on Telegram, have driven the information operations. The site of contestation has also shifted: VKontakte is now under near-total control of the Kremlin, while Russian citizens have much less access to Twitter since the Russian Federation imposed geo-blocks in February 2022. For this reason, platforms accessible by Russians and Ukrainians alike (e.g. YouTube and Telegram) have emerged as especially important sites of information conflict.

Building on the success of the Centre's Robotrolling reports, NATO StratCom COE published the first Virtual Manipulation Brief in October 2022. Since then two more issues in the series have been published, in June and December 2023. There are many open questions about the role, scale, reach and actual impact of social media manipulation. Security and policy implications also need further studying. This product will track the latest in social media manipulation. The fast development of new generative AI has also given the multi-modal analysis a new angle.

This tender is thus for the production of Virtual Manipulation Brief, including data collection and processing, research and compiling the report(s) based on the research during the Spring of 2024.

## 3. Requirements

- 3.1. The Virtual Manipulation Brief shall:
  - 3.1.1. Track the latest trends in social media manipulation. Identify changes in tactics, techniques and procedures employed by adversaries. Estimate the scale of the problem using quantitative data collection and analysis methods, as well as experimental approaches. Identify and analyse inauthentic and potentially automated pro-kremlin accounts. However, new sections will consider trends in pro-Kremlin messaging more broadly. The product should continue to draw on historical research findings since 2017.
  - 3.1.2. Detect networks (clusters) of pro-Kremlin accounts, identify and track their narratives and sentiment, determine their target audiences, and evaluate the effectiveness of their messaging on digital platforms through analysis of reach, engagement, and reactions. A particular focus on cross-platform activity, e.g. messaging as originating from Telegram.
  - 3.1.3. On information confrontation regarding the expansion of the Alliance, ongoing hostilities in Ukraine, and dynamics internal to Russia.

- 3.1.4. Considers platform architecture, which defines what conversations are possible; AI algorithms that determines what users will see. The reports should also consider emerging issues offering insight into how social media manipulation continues to adapt.
- 3.1.5. Consider the impact of new forms of generative AI in virtual manipulation.
- 3.1.6. Consider the impact of policy changes in social media platforms on the visibility of pro-Kremlin propagandist in the western information space, especially in the light of super-elections.
- 3.1.7. The reports may also conduct experiments to understand the market for social media manipulation.

### 3.2. Specification of the report

One report issued during 2024 as agreed with the NATO StratCom COE point of contact. The length of the report is 8-12 pages, and will follow the design of Virtual Manipulation Brief template.

### 3.3. NATO StratCom COE is looking to contract one successful applicant to:

- 3.3.1. Provide solutions and support Technical and Scientific Development Branch (TSDB) on data collection for platforms such as X, VK, Telegram, if possible YouTube and TikTok. Process collected data, and conduct the research.
- 3.3.2. Produce a report according to the Virtual Manipulation Brief template.
- 3.3.3. Coordinate finalization of reports with the editor and designer.
- 3.3.4. Produce publication-ready graphs according to the template.
- 3.3.5. Share computer code to replicate the results (data processing & analysis, LLM prompts, etc.), re-draw graphs.
- 3.3.6. Upon request and in cooperation with point of contact adapt data collection and analysis processes to integrate new platforms, new tools or algorithms etc.
- 3.3.7. Upon request present the results at NATO StratCom COE internal and external meetings, seminars and conferences.

### 3.4. Candidate shall show:

- 3.4.1. Proven ability to collect and analyse social media data at scale.
- 3.4.2. Experience working with dashboards such as Kibana, run data collection remotely through cloud solutions (e.g. based on Amazon or Google Cloud services).
- 3.4.3. A publication record of data-driven social media analyses.
- 3.4.4. Creative approach to identifying material for analysis.
- 3.4.5. Excellent standard of academic writing.
- 3.4.6. Willingness to modify and extend data collection and analysis solutions to new platforms, using new classification methods or algorithms (as agreed with / supplied by NATO StratCom COE point of contact).
- 3.4.7. Acceptance that all collected and processed data, and all intermediate and final products in the work, shall be stored at the NATO StratCom COE owned cloud or local servers and are owned by the NATO StratCom COE, and will be also after the contract has expired.

## 4. Reporting

- 4.1. We expect to hold an initial meeting to clarify the methodology and delivery process as soon as the tender has been awarded (via videoconference or other means).
- 4.2. We expect to receive an initial timeline for delivery in the bid. The thematic focus of the product and their timetable for delivery during May 2024 shall be agreed by the end of March 2024.

## 5. Deliverables

5.1. The tender submission should consist of:

- 5.1.1. A written proposal for the delivery of the work (see Section 3.3 and 3.4 - Requirements).
- 5.1.2. Detailed budget for the delivery of the work in EUR currency (amount of VAT or any other kind of tax must be clearly specified for each budget position and marked as zero where not applicable). It should indicate the budget estimate, indicating the costs for:
  - Methodology development;
  - Data collection and storing;
  - Conduct of the research;
  - Development and writing of the final reports.

5.2. To the tender submission should also be attached:

- 5.2.1. Copy of Bidder's Certificate issued by the national Commercial Register. If that is not applicable (for example, the Bidder is an individual), please provide an explanatory Statement and a different form of document confirming your identity and, if possible, permit to engage in a commercial activity.
- 5.2.2. Evidence of the work experience with similar projects and Statement of previous work experience that shows also the understanding of strategic communications.
- 5.2.3. Profile of the key personnel to be working on the Contract delivery providing evidence of skills, knowledge and experience (for example, a CV). The Bidder should also indicate the roles of the personnel working on the Contract delivery. Respective security clearance or eligibility to obtain one is considered as an advantage.
- 5.2.4. References from former customers (can be in the form of an email with customer's contact details, date and time when issued, sender's and recipient's email addresses).
- 5.2.5. Information about any persons or entities that the Bidder may choose to sub-contract for work on the Contract delivery (company or person's name, other relevant credentials (such as company's registration number, website address, contacts), and a short company's profile or person's biography).

## 6. Timetable

General	
Confirmation of bid	Please confirm you have submitted your bid by notifying <a href="mailto:max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org">max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org</a>
Deadline for submission	<b>23:59 hrs (Eastern European Time zone: UTC +02:00) on 26 February 2024</b>
Contract implementation date	<b>Upon agreement</b>
Questions	Questions arising from this document should be addressed to Mr Max Arhippainen until <b>20 February 2024</b>
Full contact details	Mr Max Arhippainen, <a href="mailto:max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org">max.arhippainen@stratcomcoe.org</a> , +371 2544 7260 (also available via Signal).

## 7. Respondent Instructions

- 7.1. This section provides detailed instructions to be followed in responding to this ITT.
- 7.2. Response Guidelines:
  - 7.2.1. You will be required to submit a written proposal that complies with the indicated requirements (see Section 5. Deliverables). The proposal should be submitted electronically in PDF format.
  - 7.2.2. **Please deliver the electronic copy to:**  
[tender@stratcomcoe.org](mailto:tender@stratcomcoe.org)  
**by 23:59 hrs (Eastern European Time zone: UTC +02:00) on 26 February 2024**
  - 7.2.3. The NATO StratCom COE will disregard any response submitted after the timetable deadline.
  - 7.2.4. Bidders are expected to supply all required information, or clearly state the reasons for being unable to do so.
  - 7.2.5. Any assumptions used in preparing responses should be clearly stated. Any appropriate supporting documents e.g.: brochures, demo videos, presentations, should be included.
  - 7.2.6. If any of the requested documents in the Section 5. Deliverables is not submitted, the Contract Award Committee shall have the right to exclude the applicant from further participation in the procurement.
- 7.3. Questions relating to clarification of the ITT will only be accepted in writing to NATO StratCom COE representative. Likewise, all responses from the Centre will be written and may also be made available to other suppliers (subject to confidentiality). In the event that any answer materially affects the ITT specification, an amendment of the original requirements will be escalated to all suppliers. The NATO StratCom COE will attempt to answer any questions within one working day of receipt of that request; otherwise it will respond within that timescale notifying you of the estimated time to obtain the information.
- 7.4. The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to modify the provisions of this ITT at any time prior to the scheduled date for written responses. Additional scope and requirements can be added. Notification of such changes will be provided to all suppliers.
- 7.5. Should you wish to propose a deviation from the specification please ensure that you clearly identify and highlight where appropriate in your response.
- 7.6. All information supplied in this tender to date, any further information supplied during the tender process will remain confidential and available only to the Contract Award Committee members.

## 8. Tender Assessments

- 8.1. Evaluation Criteria and Process. The NATO StratCom COE for the evaluation of every Submission has prepared a set of evaluation criteria. Within each stage an initial evaluation will consider whether or not every instruction and requirement contained within the ITT has been fulfilled.
- 8.2. The evaluation criteria will be based all of the following aspects of the Bidders' proposals (not in order of significance):
  - 8.2.1. Commercial
    - 8.2.1.1. Clarity of price (in EUR with VAT and w/o VAT);
    - 8.2.1.2. Competitiveness of price.
  - 8.2.2. Service capability:
    - 8.2.2.1. Capacity to execute the requirements indicated in ITT Previous experience with collecting and analysing social media data at scale Quality of previously delivered service (based on the evidence provided);
  - 8.2.3. Previous experience in cooperation with national government institutions and international organisations;
  - 8.2.4. Level of compliance with the Requirements, Reporting and Deliverables of the ITT.
- 8.3. You are reminded that through the process the NATO StratCom COE will continually assess all contact with the Bidders' organizations including compliance to the process and presentation. The NATO StratCom COE reserves the rights at its sole discretion to disqualify without further consideration any submission that does not satisfy this basic requirement.

**9. Briefing for Unsuccessful Participants**

The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to control the format and content of any such briefing, and to limit it in any way believed by the NATO StratCom COE to be appropriate (which includes, in exceptional circumstances, the right to refuse a briefing without giving any reasons for doing so).

**10. Contract Details**

10.1. Contractual and payment details will be subject to negotiation with the selected supplier.

10.2. The NATO StratCom COE reserves the right to modify the scope of this tender, after receiving the bids (including price estimates).