

Report: ‘Shocking’ Scale of UK Government’s ‘Secret Files’ on Critics



The Department for Education is one of 15 government departments found to have been monitoring social media activity of perceived critics.

LONDON (The Guardian) – Fifteen government departments in the UK have been monitoring the social media activity of potential critics and compiling “secret files” in order to block them from speaking at public events, the Observer can reveal.

Under the guidelines issued in each department, including the departments of health, culture, media and sport, and environment, food and rural affairs, officials are advised to check experts’ Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn accounts. They are also told to conduct Google searches on those individuals, using specific terms such as

“criticism of government or prime minister”.

The guidelines are designed to prevent anyone who has criticized the government in the previous three to five years from speaking at government-organized conferences and other events.

In September, the Observer revealed how three early-childhood education experts discovered that the Department for Education tried to cancel invitations for them to speak at government-funded events because they were judged to have been critical of government policy. Many more education experts and school staff have since uncovered

files of their critical social media posts held by the department.

However, it has now become clear that the practice is widespread across government and is probably targeting large numbers of individuals. The scale of the monitoring was uncovered by human rights experts at law firm Leigh Day and shared with the Observer.

The revelations will be hugely embarrassing for a Conservative party that regularly claims to champion free speech and has slammed universities for allowing students to “no platform” experts with whom they disagree.

Tessa Gregory, partner at Leigh Day, who is pursuing legal action against the government on behalf of at least two experts, said: “This is likely to have impacted large numbers of individuals, many of whom won’t know civil servants hold secret files on them. Such practices are extremely dangerous.”

Gregory maintains that these hidden checks are unlawful, running contrary to data protection laws and potentially breaching equality and human rights legislation.

Dan Kaszeta, a chemical weapons expert, was disinvented in April from giving a keynote speech at a UK defence conference after officials found social media posts criticizing Tory ministers and government immigration policy.

Trump-Admiring Populist Feared to Take Power

Argentina Votes in Nail-Biter Presidential Runoff

BUENOS AIRES (Reuters) – Argentines headed to the polls on Sunday in a delicately poised presidential runoff, with two starkly different visions for the country’s future on offer and an electorate simmering with anger at triple-digit inflation and rising poverty.

The election sees Peronist Economy Minister Sergio Massa, at the helm for the country’s worst economic crisis in two decades, go head-to-head with radical libertarian outsider Javier Milei, the slight favorite in pre-vote polls.

Milei is pledging economic shock therapy, from shutting the central bank to ditching the peso and slashing spending, potentially painful reforms that have resonated with voters angry at the economic malaise, but which have sparked fears of austerity in others.

With many Argentines unconvinced by either candidate, some have characterized the vote as a choice of the “lesser evil”: fear of Milei’s painful economic medicine or anger at Massa over the economic crisis. Many Argentines say they won’t vote at all.

Whoever wins, it will shake up Argentina’s political landscape, its economic roadmap, trade in grains, lithium and hydrocarbons, and its ties with China, the United States, Brazil and others.

“None of the candidates gives me certainty about the future,” said Josefina Valente, a 63-year-old retiree as she voted in Buenos Aires on Sunday morning.



Argentina holds second round of presidential election.

“I come to vote out of obligation so that once and for all we have a change in the country.”

The story of the race has been the shock rise of 53-year-old economist and former TV pundit Milei, driven by widespread disenchantment with traditional political parties on both the left and right.

Julio Burdman, director of the consultancy Observatorio Electoral, said the political landscape will change forever regardless of the result.

“The election marks a profound rupture in the system of political representation in Argentina,” he said. “I think all the political forces as we know them will be transformed.”

Milei has a slight edge in opinion polls, but most show a tight and uncertain race. Massa, 51, an experienced political wheeler-dealer, has

been clawing back votes with tax cuts and campaigns highlighting Milei’s radical plans to slash state spending.

In the first-round vote in October, Massa won 36.7% of the votes compared with some 30% for Milei. The libertarian has since won public backing from third-place finisher Patricia Bullrich, though it is not certain all her votes will shift to him.

Whoever wins the presidency will have to deal with the empty coffers of the government and central bank, a creaking \$44 billion debt program with the International Monetary Fund, inflation nearing 150% and a dizzying array of capital controls.

Voter anger at the crisis could well be the deciding factor, given Massa has directed the economy for more than a year.

Russia Launches Drone Attack on Kyiv for Second Night in Row

KYIV (AP) – Russia launched several waves of drone attacks on Kyiv early on Sunday for the second night in row, stepping up its assaults on the Ukrainian capital after several weeks of pause, the city’s military administration said.

“The enemy’s UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) were launched in many groups and attacked Kyiv in waves, from different directions, at the same time constantly changing the vectors of movement along the route,” Serhiy Popko, head of the Kyiv’s military administration, said on the Telegram messaging app.

“That is why the air raid alerts were announced several times in the capital.”

Ukraine’s Air Force said its air defence systems destroyed 15 of 20 Russia-launched kamikaze drones over Kyiv, Poltava and Cherkasy regions.

There had been no initial reports of “critical damage” or casualties, Popko said earlier. He also said that close to 10 of the drones were downed over Kyiv and its outskirts.

Cherkasy Governor Ihor Taburets said on Telegram that debris “slightly damaged” five houses but no people were injured.

Kyiv’s region Governor Ruslan Kravchenko said an infrastructure object was damaged in the region. There were no casualties.

Reuters could not independently verify the reports. There was no immediate comment from Russia.

Russia started carrying out strikes on Ukraine’s energy, military and transport infrastructure in October 2022, six months after Moscow’s troops failed to take over the capital and withdrew to Ukraine’s east and south.

Last winter Russia pounded Ukraine with hundreds of missiles and drones, leaving millions without electricity, heating and water during the coldest months of the year, before easing the assaults in the summer.

After a pause of 52 days, Moscow resumed air strikes on Kyiv this month. On Saturday, Ukrainian officials said all drones heading towards Kyiv were destroyed but some hit infrastructure facilities elsewhere in Ukraine.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and other officials have warned that Russia would resume its large-scale bombardments of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure during the winter months.

Man Kills Four, Himself in U.S. Shooting Spree



A man believed to have fatally shot three women and a teenage girl has been found dead in Memphis.

MEMPHIS (The Guardian) – A suspect in Tennessee who allegedly killed four people and seriously injured a fifth victim while on a domestic violence rampage died of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot while on the run, according to authorities.

Officers conducting a manhunt for Mavis Christian Jr, 52, found him dead in his car early Sunday after shootings at three locations in Memphis on Saturday night that left three women and a teenage girl dead – another teen girl was critically wounded.

Local police began investigating the killing spree when a call about a shooting came into them about 9.20pm. Officers found a woman with an apparent gunshot wound who was pronounced dead at the scene.

Investigators later concluded there were two other connected fatal shootings. At the scene of one of those attacks, a woman and a 13-year-old girl were killed and

a 15-year-old girl was critically wounded.

Another woman was found fatally shot at the other of the additional scenes, a police spokesperson said.

Officers suspected Christian was responsible for all three shootings and began a search involving local, state and federal law enforcement agencies. Investigators said they also believed each of the shootings constituted domestic violence.

The violence blamed on Christian would have constituted a mass shooting had it occurred in a single location.

Figures from the nonpartisan Gun Violence Archive show there had been more than 605 mass shootings so far this year as of Sunday. That translates to a rate of nearly two mass shootings a day, which has led to calls for more meaningful gun control from some quarters.

The archive defines a mass shooting as one in which four or more victims are killed or wounded.

Over 500 Rohingya Refugees Land in Indonesia

BIREUEN, Indonesia (AFP) – Three boats filled with more than 500 Rohingya refugees landed in Indonesia’s western-most province on Sunday, a UN agency said, in one of the biggest arrivals since Myanmar launched a military crackdown on the minority group in 2017.

The mostly Muslim Rohingya are heavily persecuted in Myanmar, and thousands risk their lives each year on long and expensive sea journeys, often in flimsy boats, to try to reach Malaysia or Indonesia.

United Nations refugee agency protection associate Faisal Rahman told AFP one boat had arrived in Aceh province’s Bireuen district with 256 people aboard, while at least 241 others arrived in Aceh’s Pidie region and a smaller boat carrying 36 arrived in East Aceh.

“They were found in several spots,” Rahman said Sunday.

Of the 256 aboard the Bireuen boat, 110 were women and 60 were children, he said.

It was the same boat that locals had pushed back out to sea on Thursday, leaving it stranded off the coast for several days, according to Rahman.

“It’s confirmed... because many people were identified by security officials during the landing,” he said.

The latest arrivals mean more than 800 refugees have landed

in Aceh province this week alone, after 196 arrived on Tuesday and 147 on Wednesday, according to local officials.

During this week’s arrivals, some Rohingya aboard one vessel made a desperate dash for shore after residents refused to let them land. They collapsed to the sand and begged for their exhausted fellow passengers to be allowed to disembark.

Chris Lewa, director of Rohingya rights organization the Arakan Project, said it was the “beginning of the sailing season” for boats from Bangladesh across to Indonesia, which is often used as a transit point to Malaysia where many Rohingya refugees settle.

A 2020 investigation by AFP revealed a multimillion-dollar, constantly evolving people-smuggling operation stretching from a massive refugee camp in Bangladesh to Indonesia and Malaysia, in which members of the stateless Rohingya community play a key role in trafficking their own people.

More than 2,000 Rohingya are believed to have attempted the risky journey to other Southeast Asian countries in 2022, according to UNHCR.

Nearly 200 Rohingya died or went missing last year while attempting hazardous sea crossings, the agency has estimated.

News in Brief

PARIS (Reuters) – France has test-fired an M51.3 long-range ballistic missile, the defence ministry said on Sunday.

The missile, which did not carry a nuclear weapon, was fired from the French army’s Biscarosse missile testing site in southwest France and landed in the North Atlantic, “hundreds of kilometers from any coastline” the ministry said, without giving further detail. The M51.3 missile is an upgraded version of the M51, a three-stage sea-land strategic ballistic missile designed to be launched from French Navy submarines. The M51 was first test-fired from a ground base in 2006 and from a submarine in 2010, the year it was commissioned. The new M51.3 missile, which is expected to enter service around 2025, is developed by aerospace firm ArianeGroup, a joint venture between Airbus and French defence group Safran.

NAIROBI (AFP) – Kenya on Sunday said tens of thousands of people across the country had been impacted by heavy rainfall, flooding and landslides that had also interrupted cargo services at Mombasa port. The Horn of Africa has experienced intense rainfall linked to the El Nino weather phenomenon in recent weeks that has claimed dozens of lives, including at least 46 in various parts of Kenya. Deputy President Rigathi Gachagua said at least 80,000 households in Kenya had been affected “with numbers rising every day”. He said the government was responding to “save our people” including with helicopters and other emergency services to deliver aid and rescue marooned families. “This situation has continued to threaten lives,” he said in a statement issued Sunday, urging the public to avoid floodwaters and evacuate homes in low-lying areas. The prolonged rainfall was expected to extend into the first quarter of next year, he added.

NAIROBI (Reuters) – A third round of United Nations negotiations to try to deliver the world’s first treaty to control plastic pollution has drawn more than 500 proposals from those involved, participants said on the last day of the talks on Sunday. Negotiators, who have spent a week meeting in the Kenyan capital at talks known as INC3, have until the end of next year to strike a deal for the control of plastics, which produce an estimated 400 million tonnes of waste every year. The plastics industry, oil and petrochemical exporters, including Russia and Saudi Arabia, have said a global deal should promote recycling and re-use of plastic, but environmental campaigners and some governments say much less needs to be produced in the first place. Environmental group Greenpeace said a successful deal would require the United States and the European Union to show greater leadership than they have so far. “The hard truth is that INC3 has failed to deliver on its core objective: delivering a mandate to prepare a first draft of a treaty text,” Graham Forbes, head of delegation for Greenpeace, said. Two more rounds of talks will take place next year to try to finalize the deal.

MALE (Reuters) – Maldives new President Mohamed Muizzu, who campaigned on altering the tiny Indian Ocean archipelago’s “India first” policy, has requested India withdraw its military from the country. Muizzu won the presidential election in September, ousting Ibrahim Solih in a runoff after promising to remove a small Indian military presence of some 75 personnel. India and China have been vying for influence in the region, with the coalition backing Muizzu considered to be leaning more towards China. “The Maldivian people had given him (Muizzu) a strong mandate to make the request to India and expressed the hope that India will honor the democratic will of the people of the Maldives,” the president’s office said in a statement.

CARACAS (AP) – Colombian President Gustavo Petro, visiting Venezuela, said he had proposed to the United States that it pay an “economic stabilization” bonus to Venezuelan migrants who stop in Colombia en route to the U.S. “We must reach an agreement with the United States on migration,” Petro said alongside Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. “We have proposed economic stabilization bonuses to the United States.” Petro did not provide details about the bonuses nor did he say when he made the proposal. But he said the payments would allow families “to return to their home, to their land.” Close to 2.8 million Venezuelans live in Colombia, part of an exodus of over 7 million who have left the OPEC member country since 2017 because of its prolonged economic crisis. “I believe that this exodus ... should reroute toward their country of origin because, for the most part, they are Venezuelans,” Petro added, emphasizing that migrants could choose to return to Venezuela or stay in Colombia.