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## COVID-19 AS A TOOL OF INFORMATION CONFRONTATION: RUSSIA'S APPROACH

Sergey Sukhankin

### SUMMARY

As the rest of the world struggles to cope with COVID-19, Russia is churning out propaganda that blames the West for creating the virus. Propaganda is, of course, nothing new for Russia; such practices have a long history dating back to the Soviet era.

What's different now, though, is that with the internet and social media, Russia has many more ways to propagate fake news and conspiracy theories, and to reach susceptible audiences both inside and outside the country. Russia is using social media accounts, fake news outlets, state-controlled global satellite media, bloggers, pseudo-scientists and supposed scholars, experts and Russians living in the West to disseminate its lies and distortions.

The European Union's External Action Service reports almost 80 incidents of disinformation since the end of January. However, Russia has a more insidious goal than merely disseminating propaganda for the sake of it. President Vladimir Putin, who has labelled the fall of the Soviet Union nearly 30 years ago as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century, is determined to show the international community that Russia is no longer the weak creature it was post-Soviet collapse.

Putin's larger goal in spreading propaganda and conspiracy theories is to subvert the West. Russia seeks to seriously damage the solidarity among EU members and capitalize on any internal European weaknesses to promote broader conflicts. COVID-19 is seen as an ideal way for Russia to deal a powerful blow not only to the EU, but to inflict damage on the ties between Europe and its North American allies.

The purposes behind all these machinations are plain. Moscow wants revenge on the West for the economic sanctions imposed on Russia for its incursions into Crimea and Ukraine. Moscow also views the virus as a fortuitous harbinger of the end of the post-Cold War liberal world order. The new leaders to emerge from this liberal collapse, according to this view, will be Russia and China. Indeed, Russia is seeking to strengthen its ties with China, as well as with Iran, and the danger is that other rogue states could join this new configuration.

The U.S. State Department has already taken some action against the onslaught of disinformation originating with the Russians, and Canada needs to follow its example. However, the average citizen has a role to play too, by refusing to buy into information that comes from such spurious sources as Russia Today or Sputnik. Canadians' key source of information about COVID-19 should be federal and provincial governments and Canadian authorities. People should cast a very jaundiced eye at tweets, Facebook postings and other information they find on dubious social media sites.

## INTRODUCTION

In early December 2019, dwellers of Wuhan province in China began to be admitted to a local hospital with symptoms of a strange disease. Initially, the Chinese government did not pay attention to (and was concealing information about) these developments. On Dec. 31, when the number of new cases reached 27, the Chinese authorities finally informed the World Health Organization (WHO) about a rapidly spreading new and unknown illness. On Jan. 13, the disease began its world tour with the first reported case outside of China – in Taiwan. It then rapidly crossed national boundaries and spread to other continents. On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared the global outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic, attesting to the emerging new challenge facing the international community. At the time of writing (late March 2020), the number of cases worldwide has gone beyond 240,000 with more than 12,000 deaths (Worldometr 2020). Despite the dire situation, some countries, especially Russia, see this crisis as an opportunity to promote their interests and (geo) political objectives.

## **‘POLITICAL VIRUS’: THE SOVIET/RUSSIAN HISTORY OF FALSIFICATION**

Russia’s use of conspiracy theories around bacteriological weaponry allegedly used by the West has a long history. The first narrative appeared after NATO’s creation in 1949 and blossomed during the Korean War (1950-1953), when Soviet propagandists started spreading rumours. These rumours ranged from the U.S. testing biological weapons on Alaskan Inuit people, to the purposeful cultivation and clandestine dropping of Colorado potato beetles on Soviet territory to damage crops and cripple the country’s economic potential.

Operation INFEKTION was arguably the most successful operation of this type that the Soviet KGB carried out. On July 17, 1983, via one obscure Indian newspaper, the Soviets started a rumour that the U.S. had deliberately created AIDS/HIV. After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, ultra-conservative Russian politician Yevgeny Primakov (then the foreign intelligence chief) personally debunked this myth, explaining that its main purpose was to spread global anti-Americanism (EU vs. Disinfo 2018). However, this urban legend still enjoys popularity in Russia and, given the current circumstances, seems to be regaining influence.

Immediately after the USSR collapsed, Russia lacked the resources and will to conduct aggressive foreign policy. The situation started changing in the early 2000s when high oil prices led to Russia’s economic recovery. Russian foreign policy grew much more assertive than it had been in the preceding decade. It reached a new high after Vladimir Putin’s infamous Munich speech in 2007, when the Russian president de-facto challenged the West, declaring that Russia was no longer playing by the rules imposed on her in the 1990s during an era of weakness. Beginning in 2011, Russian propagandist outlets used Soviet-style patterns in their attacks on the U.S. and its regional allies. Specifically, when the Lugar lab opened in Tbilisi in 2011, it was targeted for incessant propaganda attacks. Moscow relied on its disinformation outlets – including Sputnik Georgia, Georgia and the World, Alia and Saqinform, RIA FAN, *Eurasia Daily*, Tsargrad TV and Sputnik Armenia – to create tensions in Georgian society and foment anti-American sentiments. Russian propagandists’ key message was that the lab might become a source of regional contamination from highly

contagious infectious diseases, such as swine flu and measles. Other related fake stories included “brown stink bugs”, “GMO mosquitoes” and “flying cockroaches” – new types of biological weaponry the Americans were purportedly testing in Georgia (Zoria 2019).

After the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in late 2013 and the introduction of anti-Russian economic sanctions for the illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Moscow strengthened its disinformation onslaught. For instance, Russian sources claimed that the Zika virus arose from experiments carried out by American and British corporations and that diseases such as cancer, syphilis and the Spanish flu were also American biological weapons. Some outlets even argued that Ukraine was spreading Ebola among pro-Russian “rebels” on behalf of the U.S. military (EU vs. Disinfo 2020).

Predictably, Russia attributed the COVID-19 outbreak to the wrongdoings of Western special services and large corporations. Yevgeny Fedorov, leader of the United Russian Political Party, even requested that Alexander Bastrykin, the head of Russia’s Investigative Committee, launch an official investigation into the “artificial creation of the COVID-19 for the purpose of its employment as a type of biological weapon” (Regnum 2020).

## **COVID-19 AND RUSSIAN NARRATIVES: THE SIMPLE, THE TRICKY AND THE SOPHISTICATED**

With COVID-19, Russia’s approach to disinformation is similar. Russian media/information outlets dispatch narratives containing a kernel of truth wrapped in several layers of lies, exaggerations and distortions, making it difficult for a poorly informed audience to distinguish facts from fiction (Sukhankin 2019).

The Russian narratives can be divided into three streams. The first stream consists of the crudest and least sophisticated types of disinformation, exemplified by the activities of Russia’s notorious TV anchor, Yevgeny Kiselev. These narratives target the least informed of the Russian masses, among whom anti-American sentiment is historically strong and easily inflamed. The tools used include overtly biased disinformation platforms, bloggers, and in a particularly interesting move, “accounts” by Russians living in the U.S., Canada and the EU. For example, Russia’s largest state-sponsored platforms have extensively used accounts by the wife of Washington Capitals’ star sniper Alexander Ovechkin, who complained about the spreading sense of panic and uncertainty in the U.S., and the shortage of goods and commodities. She compared this with Russian shops “which are full of products” (Gazeta.ru 2020). Within this realm, Russian propagandists deliberately use unsophisticated language and primitive, yet convincing, straightforward arguments.

These Russian-sponsored outlets also spread the idea that authorities in the EU have demonstrated complete impotence in dealing with the crisis and that health workers are choosing between saving elderly people and more able-bodied members of society (Kucher 2020a), thereby underscoring the “hypocrisy” of European society where slogans about democracy and egalitarianism mask a survival-of-the-fittest ideology.

The second stream promulgates similar ideas but they are garbed in very different attire. This approach rests on elaborate conspiracy theories that aim to create so-called alternative reality and seek to foster distrust among Russians, and, potentially, even

a foreign audience. Russian outlets and information platforms use pseudoscientific “evidence” that the virus was created in an American laboratory in order to halt China’s economic growth as well as deal with Western societies’ internal problems.

Various conspiracy theories suggest that the “hysteria is purposefully generated by western leaders” to divert huge economic resources to the banking sector, increase these leaders’ popularity and put a strain on Chinese and Russian economic development and co-operation in the energy sector. In order to gain some level of credibility, while defending the U.S.-originated version of COVID-19, Russian authors also rely on the writings of Larry Romanoff, a retired management consultant and businessman who is a frequent contributor to Global Research (2020). Romanoff stated that the virus was invented in a U.S. lab and later transported to China (Nikulin 2020). As preposterous as this and similar theories seem, they do have their target audience and serve the main objective of confusing people and diminishing the levels of trust and credibility in Western political systems and institutions. Given the widespread popularity of various conspiracy theories in Russia and other cultures (for instance, in the Middle East), these narratives are likely to attract attention.

The third argument presents a truly fascinating example of elaborate propaganda designed for very narrow circles outside Russia. In this case, Russia relies on prominent scientists of its own and wide appeals to foreign (primarily Chinese) sources. By appealing to arguments and theories described in the preceding paragraph, Russian businessmen and oligarchs (such as Konstantin Malofeev, whom the EU has accused of sponsoring disturbances in the Donbas region in the spring of 2014), make the point that the non-Western world must get rid of the U.S. dollar and reconfigure global financial operations (Kucher 2020b). And, since the U.S. is supposedly the source of the virus’s outbreak, it has no moral right to point a finger at other countries, since its contribution to the WHO is shrinking, and its outstanding debt to this organization is close to \$60 million. This argument states that “because of its actions the US is destroying global efforts in fighting the COVID-19” (Russian People 2020).

Last, and perhaps most intriguing, Russian intellectuals have concluded that the virus is a precursor of the coming end of the “liberal world order”. They argue that the world order established after the Cold War is now collapsing and giving way to a new configuration in which old powers, such as the U.S. (that chose not to play by the rules and violated international law) and the EU (“displaying examples of national egoism on a scale that previously could not be imagined”) are giving way to the new leaders, including China and Russia (Bordachev 2020).

## **RUSSIA’S MAIN TARGET AND TRUE AGENDA(S)**

Through this onslaught of disinformation, Russia is pursuing immediate and also more far-reaching goals. The former is primarily concerned with economic sanctions, which despite Russia’s official rhetoric, are visibly hurting its oil-dependent economy. Importantly, the COVID-19 outbreak witnessed a new turn in the rhetoric from top Russian officials, including Maria Zakharova (director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation) and Konstantin Kosachev (senator at the Federation Council and chair of its Foreign Affairs Committee). Their central message

boils down to the “immorality of anti-Russian economic sanctions in the light of COVID-19” (Sokolov 2020). Interestingly, China voiced the same message earlier about Iran (Ria Novosti 2020). Russian sources quote their European counterparts, primarily members of marginal/radical political parties such as Waldemar Herdt (Alternative for Germany) and Alexander Noy (a left-wing MP in Germany’s Bundestag), who condemn “lifting economic sanctions against Russia” as counterproductive and detrimental for German businesses (Baynazarov 2020).

Russia’s second goal is to damage and potentially destroy the EU by undermining the solidarity among its members. It also seeks to compromise the strategic partnership between the EU, the U.S. and Canada. Russia senses increasing apprehension and uncertainty among EU member states over the current crisis. Russia is also convinced that the EU lacks resistance to external pressure and is permeated with internal fissures/hidden conflicts that might escalate into a larger crisis, given the right conditions. Russian military-political elites consider COVID-19 as something that could and should be used to deal a powerful blow to the EU and its ties to North American allies.

## **CONCLUSION: THE MAIN CHALLENGES**

North America and the EU have responded to Russia’s disinformation onslaught. The EU’s External Action Service (EAS) reports there have been almost 80 incidents of disinformation about the coronavirus since Jan. 22. Reuters reported on March 18 that one EAS document stated that: “[T]he overarching aim of Kremlin disinformation is to aggravate the public health crisis in Western countries ... in line with the Kremlin’s broader strategy of attempting to subvert European societies” (Emmott 2020). Similarly, the U.S. State Department has stepped up its actions against Russia’s disinformation efforts (Taylor 2020).

Two elements, however, should be taken into consideration. First, the Russians use a broad array of tools to spread disinformation, including social media accounts, fake news outlets, state-controlled global satellite media, bloggers, pseudo-scientists and the use of Western “scholars”, “experts” and public figures, whose participation adds credibility to these fake stories. Given its experience in dealing with Russian challenges in Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia and other places, the West is equipped to deal with these issues.

The second and much more daunting challenge for the West is a new reality that is taking shape. Specifically, Moscow seems to be strengthening ties with Beijing and Tehran (Rosbalt 2020), and this could potentially include other rogue states.

Canadian citizens and policy-makers can effectively confront the array of disinformation in two ways. First, Canadians should primarily rely on information emanating from Canada’s official authorities – not outlets such as RT or Sputnik, which Russia and other actors use to promote false and misleading narratives. However, the existence of Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms could complicate this. The Canadian government must take a tougher stance on platforms/agencies operating in Canadian information space and deliberately sowing panic or discord among the population.



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