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Russian Disinformation is as Infectious as COVID-19

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Since the beginning of 2020, the world has seen the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus which became a [global emergency](#)¹ on January 30 and a [pandemic](#)² on March 11. While everyone from physicians and epidemiologists to teachers and grocery store workers have sought means of combatting the spread of the disease, masks and social distancing have done little to combat the spread of misinformation - which can be almost as dangerous. Our enemy is not only the pandemic, but "[also an "infodemic" of misinformation,](#)"³ as UN Secretary-General António Guterres reminded the world.

In every crisis, leaders and communicators strive to provide accurate, timely information to relevant stakeholders. This has proven particularly difficult during the pandemic as efforts to inform the concerned citizens of the world has directly coincided with a [Russian disinformation campaign aimed at sowing panic in the West](#)⁴.

The Russian propaganda machine has been

curating and spreading false narratives about the virus among both Russian and Western audiences in order to bolster the credibility of the Russian authoritarian regime and undermine the strength of Western democracies. The growing fear and uncertainty amid the pandemic, its symptoms and treatments provide fertile ground for the Russian propaganda machine to strengthen its influence both at home and abroad.

RUSSIA PROPAGANDA RULE #1: IF THERE IS NO STORY, MAKE ONE UP

A popular Ukrainian satire show Telebachennya Toronto published [an episode](#)⁵ about Russian fake news regarding COVID-19 on their YouTube channel.

Russia's disinformation campaign aimed at the coronavirus started early. On February 5, 2020, Channel One Russia aired [an episode](#)⁶ of their evening talk-show Vremya ("Time") that offered the

following explanation of the name and purpose of the coronavirus: “What did Donald Trump — the president of the country which is the primary opponent of China on global stage — do in his previous life? Correct, he awarded crowns at his famous beauty pageants. Thus, the genesis of coronavirus and, more importantly, the aims and goals of its usage become perfectly clear”. To clarify, ‘crown’ is ‘corona’ in Russian, which makes the connection more apparent.

While the episode admits this assertion falls into the “conspiracy theory” category, it does not directly disavow the claim and goes on to credibly discuss a hypothesis that the virus was created by the US in order to undermine China.

On April 5, British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was [admitted to hospital](#)⁷ after exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19. The next day, Russian domestic state media [RIA Novosti reported](#)⁸ that Johnson was urgently hospitalized and on the verge of needing ventilation. The outlet cited “a source close to the leadership of England's National Health Service” for its reporting. This report, the only one of its kind, was later debunked by both [the UK](#)⁹ and [Riga-based Russian media Meduza](#)¹⁰ amid [persistent claims](#)¹¹ from RIA Novosti that the UK version of events was false.

[According to Meduza](#)¹², this disinformation was part of an ongoing narrative “on how poorly Western countries are coping with the coronavirus outbreak.” Its goal was making a favorable comparison between the Russian regime's handling of the outbreak as compared to a more vulnerable, weaker West.

“AMERICAN BIOLABS” IN EASTERN EUROPE: A RED HERRING

Russian media have been leading a disinformation campaign against the US programs in the Non-EU countries of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) for several years. The latest iteration of this narrative began in April 2020, coinciding with the spread of the coronavirus in those countries.

On April 15, Ukrainian politician Viktor Medvedchuk, a close ally of Vladimir Putin, [publicly demanded](#)¹³ of the Ukrainian government, to disclose information about US military bio-laboratories in Ukraine; claiming “European media” outlets were already “openly” writing about it. Medvedchuk claimed the labs could be responsible for “several serious outbreaks of infectious diseases in the country”, including the virus that causes COVID-19. While the US provides financial and technical support to some Ukrainian laboratories in accordance with [Biological Threat Reduction Program](#)¹⁴, the aim of this collaboration is to prevent outbreaks of infectious diseases, not cause them.

In [Medvedchuk's official message to the government](#)¹⁵ “European media” was transformed into Serbian outlet, [Pečat](#)¹⁶ and Bulgarian “journalists” from '[Center for Middle East Studies' \(MESBG\)](#)¹⁷. Needless to say, neither of the two references was credible. Serbian Pečat is a weekly news magazine with [pro-Russian orientation](#)¹⁸ and [non-transparent ownership](#)¹⁹ and MESBG

is noted for [spreading anti-Semitic conspiracy theories](#)²⁰. These two pieces of disinformation appeared in 2017 and 2018, but pro-Russian media and politicians mention it now in order to suggest a connection between the coronavirus and fake biolabs. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case of disinformation as similar examples have affected all non-EU countries of the Eastern Partnership during the coronavirus pandemic. Media in [Armenia](#)²¹, [Azerbaijan](#)²², [Belarus](#)²³, [Georgia](#)²⁴ and [Moldova](#)²⁵ have been particular targets. Nor is this the first time pro-Russian media are using this story.

Detector Media, the lead Ukrainian think-tank studying disinformation, says that a variety of media reports have attempted to alarm readers with the topic of American biolabs [since 2009](#)²⁶. What makes the Ukrainian situation unique is that this particular bit of false news was picked up by an influential Ukrainian [TV channel 1+1 on April 27](#)²⁷. This outlet holds known biases in favor of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and [broadcasted the third season of Zelensky's TV series "Servant of the People"](#)²⁸ during the presidential campaign of 2019. It played a major role in his election because in the series, Zelensky plays the main role, the President of Ukraine, who fights corrupt elites and helps his people. While Zelensky is not openly sympathetic to Russia, spreading Russian fakes on a pro-president channel plays into the hands of Russia.

One of the primary goals of this narrative is to sow discord between the Eastern Partnership countries and the West. It should be mentioned

that the campaign is not only focusing on biolabs as a potential cause of the outbreak in Europe, but also on the negative portrayal of the way these countries have approached combating the pandemic. According to [EUvsDisinfo](#)²⁹, Pro-Kremlin media portrays the EU as a region failing to respond properly to the crisis and thus unable to help neighboring countries contain the disease. While Russia is depicted as ready and able to actively assist its allies in their time of need.

Take Italy for example. During the peak of the coronavirus outbreak, [pro-Kremlin media suggested](#)³⁰ their Western allies abandoned the Italians, whereas Russia gave significant yet conveniently non-specific help in combating the disease. While it is true that Russia sent some equipment to Italy, according to [La Stampa](#)³¹, 80% of these supplies were untimely unusable in combating the outbreak. However, this did not stop Russian media from publishing [articles](#)³² and producing [TV episodes](#)³³ portraying the overwhelming gratitude of the Italian people. Regarding the latter, [Italian La Repubblica](#)³⁴ reported that Russian outlets paid people for publicly thanking Russia for its assistance.

ENGLISH-SPEAKING COUNTRIES ARE NOT LEFT BEHIND

Unfortunately, even English-speaking audiences in the US, UK and Canada have yet to find a vaccine to repel the infection of Russian disinformation. Government funded [Russia Today \(RT\)](#)³⁵,

the leading voice of Russian propaganda in English media markets, has created a series of manipulative stories that argue the fear and uncertainty surrounding the coronavirus will lead citizens to abdicate their democratic rights in favor of the safety of [an authoritarian takeover](#)³⁶. Further examples of less direct approaches include coopting voices such as that of Canadian economist and anti-globalization author Michel Chossudovsky. A [9/11 conspiracy theorist](#)³⁷ with an [Anti-Semitic flair](#)³⁸ and [pro-Russian](#)³⁹ tendencies, Chossudovsky recently declared [COVID-19 to be a fear campaign supported by fake data](#)⁴⁰. While he is hardly a credible source, his article reappeared on South Front, a website claiming to be a legitimate news source combatting the “mainstream media” covering issues of security, foreign policy and military analysis. The site is, in fact, professionally designed and registered in Moscow and perhaps the only [fake news outlet currently curating fake news content about their own fake news](#)⁴¹.

Regardless of the means of amplification, the message Russia is trying to spread is clear: the threat of COVID-19 is not that serious and Western policies to combat the virus are, in fact, doing more to combat the Western democratic process than the virus itself.

WHAT IS THE CURE?

An infodemic could be as dangerous as a pandemic. If these disinformation narratives take hold, they have the ability to seriously undermine government efforts in fighting the pandemic. Ironically enough, the coronavirus fakes threaten not

only the West, but Russia as well. For this reason, [the Russian government threatens its citizens with fines and imprisonment for the distribution of fake news](#)⁴² (too bad nobody threatens Russia and its media for the same crimes).

But as with the pandemic, the infodemic too can be defeated by unified efforts to push back. That is why journalists should always do fact-checking and refute misinformation; social networks should continue escalate their efforts in fighting fake news; governments should investigate and prosecute disinformation networks and campaigns as well as support and encourage non-governmental organizations that refute such stories and seek to arm the public with the truth; and, finally, everyone should employ critical thinking as a mental shield against infectious narratives.

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