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THE PANDEMIC

ANTI-WESTERN RHETORIC AND
INFORMATION CAMPAIGN
BY THE KREMLIN-CONTROLLED
RUSSIAN MEDIA

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	4
THE PANDEMIC, INFORMATION CIVILIZATION, AND ITS COMPLICATIONS	5
RUSSIAN MEDIA AND THE PANDEMIC	6
NARRATIVES AND HOW TO CONTROL THEM	9
THE UNIMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST	12
THE FIRST FLOOR. VLADIMIR PUTIN	13
THE SECOND FLOOR. OFFICE OF THE MAYOR OF MOSCOW, PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION, GOVERNMENT, MINISTRY OF DEFENSE, MID	14
THE THIRD FLOOR. THE KREMLIN'S PROPAGANDIST MEDIA POOL	15
THE FOURTH FLOOR. THE PRO-KREMLIN THINK TANKS	16
CASE STUDY : "EXPERT NIKULIN. THE VIRUS IS THE USA'S BIOLOGICAL WEAPON."	17
CASE STUDY: "THE SWISS WERE OUTRAGED BY THE ARTICLE..."	20
CASE STUDY: "THE BUNDESTAG DEMANDS THAT THE ANTI-RUSSIA SANCTIONS BE REPEALED"	20
CASE STUDY: THE LAGODINSKY LETTER	20
CASE STUDY: MALKEVICH	21
USA'S BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS IN UKRAINE	21
THE KREMLIN POOL	22
THE INTERNET AND NEW MEDIA	24
CONCLUSIONS	27

PREFACE

At the end of 2019, a viral disease broke out in central China which later received the name COVID-19. When it all just started, it was hard to imagine that the disease would seriously affect key areas of society around the world, including media, economics, transportation, the principles of transparent borders, etc.

Unlike COVID-19, which was declared a pandemic in March 2020, earlier outbreaks of infectious diseases like “the swine flu,” SARS, MERS, and the Ebola virus did not break beyond a regional scale and were not classified as “a threat to the population’s health” by the World Health Organization. However, even those epidemic outbreaks of a lesser scale - or a slower spread - led to extensive global informational crises. The fear of unknown diseases created the foundation for various manipulations, including political.

One of the most known examples of such manipulation was a disinformation campaign named Operation INFEKTION run by the Soviet KGB amid the Cold War in 1982-87. The goal of the campaign was to seriously undermine the power of the United States by planting the idea that the U.S. government had invented HIV/AIDS. The Soviet KGB meticulously fabricated documents and “testimonies,” and used third parties like the Indian newspaper *The Patriot*, and later “scientific studies” allegedly written by the East German genetics researchers. The exact conspiracy theory to be thrown into mass media was that HIV/AIDS was the product of a biochemical laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland, developed by the Pentagon specifically for a covert biological war against the “black race.” Indeed, the research of the early years of the AIDS outbreak showed that the disease had a significantly greater impact on non-white populations. To counter these accusations, the American administration needed to mobilize all forces capable of gathering, analyzing, and processing information, as well as to involve military and diplomatic forces. In 1981 under the authority of the US Congress, an interagency group called the Active Measures Working Group (AMWG) was formed. It included representatives of the National Security Committee, NSA,

CIA, State Department, Pentagon, and, most importantly, United States Information Agency (USIA) – a specialized organization created at the end of the 1950s to counteract the Soviet propaganda during the Cold War period.

The AMWG needed several years of exhausting work involving intelligence, media, and political forces to untangle the Soviet hoax, prove its foreign intelligence origins, and understand the objectives set by the KGB specialists. However, even today many people in developing countries are certain that AIDS – as well as other diseases – is a product of American biological warfare launched against them to achieve imperialistic goals.

Today, it is hard to say whether the unraveling COVID-19 pandemic provided the reason for the Russian government to dust off their old textbooks, but the spread of the disease beyond China’s borders served as the occasion for the Russian propaganda to open a new “front” in the information war. Just like in the 1980s, their main goal is to discredit the United States. However, in the era of Putin, the focus has shifted towards programming and maintaining a certain degree of suspicion and hatred towards the United States and other Western countries in the minds of the Russian people by condemning liberal values and democratic forms of governance. At the same time, Russian propaganda media makes certain for the disinformation campaigns to have an impact abroad. Both Russian state and private state-controlled mass media were actively planting conspiracy theories into the media of other countries, primarily of those with large Russian-speaking populations.

This report is not claiming the same depth in examination of the subject as the AMWG’s discoveries in the late 1980s which led to the cessation of “active measures” against the United States by the direct order of Mikhail Gorbachev. Rather, our main objective was to document the facts of Russian media manipulation, coordinated and controlled insertion of destructive misinformation, and campaigning to discredit countries with liberal policies and democratic systems.

THE PANDEMIC, THE INFORMATION CIVILIZATION, AND ITS COMPLICATIONS

The second decade of the 21st-century is a time of unprecedented growth of the amounts of information accessible to people via dozens of global platforms, from television to social media. The active usage of these means of information by traditional media as well as by politicians, individual authors, new groups of journalists, and activists, has been going on for over fifteen years. However, the abundance of information does not only create the “fruit of freedom”. Even though the global communication network remains a large space for free and candid discussion, it is inevitably exploited by people and groups with evil intentions – from inciting hatred and political manipulation to organizing terrorism and information warfare.

Before the technological revolution, the information was being delivered to consumers (readers, listeners, viewers) through traditional mass media which acted as the information gatekeepers. The working principles of classic media assumed that they would approach the tasks of selection, filtering, and commenting with accountability, avoiding fake, unchecked, and intentionally distorted information. Additionally, the mass media used to perform the role of controllers of the “authoritative” sources of information – for example, verifying politicians’ statements and their truthfulness as well as evaluating the conformity to the interests of communities they served. As real-time social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram rapidly spread, reaching hundreds of millions and even billions of people worldwide, the traditional mass media’s gatekeeping function was taken away. Today, social media enables users to convey any information without fact-checking or holding social responsibility, the monitoring of which was traditionally performed by editors. It took several years for the politicians, especially those of the populist and destructive kind, to fully realize the power of such communication. Following closely behind in recognizing the power of this “mass self-communication” (as

defined by the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells) are groups focused on directly manipulating the public opinion and informational discourse. Journalist Andrew Chen came up with the term “troll factories,” which was quickly caught on and is now used to describe such groups. The most well-known is the Internet Research Agency Ltd, a Russian company associated with Patriot Media Group and its assumed owner Yevgeny Prigozhin, also known in mass media as “Putin’s chef.”

Therefore, populist politicians such as the former United States President Donald Trump, “troll factories,” state-manipulated media (Russia Today and Sputnik, above all), as well as “concerned groups” use social media platforms for gathering, processing, and disseminating fake news to serve certain political interests. Therefore, the breakout of a highly infectious and dangerous disease created perfect conditions for the emergence of an “infodemic” – an unhealthy state of the media and information space where rumors, speculation, and false, anxiety-inducing information are intensified and multiplied manifold. Societies affected by the infodemics are not only prone to panic but also non-critical acceptance of political processes and principles; they easily accept “appointed enemies” and actively support various, often-times harmful, isolationist ideas.

As stated earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic is being used by the Russian state mass media and their Kremlin handlers to drive the society into serfdom and oppress independent media and civil rights activists. In addition to the existing curtailing of the freedom of speech, the Russian *silovik* (law enforcement) establishment pushed through a law that targets fake news. This law expands the government’s power to combat inconvenient information which is usually originating from anxious citizens or independent media. At the same time, the law is not being applied when state media or pro-leadership politicians disseminate lies.

RUSSIAN MEDIA AND THE PANDEMIC

In mid-January 2020 when the epidemiological situation in Wuhan, China started to raise concerns on a much larger scale, and other countries started reporting cases of COVID-19, the Russian media – first and foremost the Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) – began actively reporting on the epidemic and took upon seeking the explanation of the virus's origins.¹ In contrast to Western mass media that were leaning towards the origins of the disease being natural, the Russian propaganda immediately started promoting the theory of bacteriological warfare created in a secret laboratory.² The “experts” interviewed by the KP did not hesitate to turn to conspiracy theories in their answers. For example, a person who claimed to be a former Israeli intelligence officer Dany Shoham allegedly reported that “some subdivisions of the laboratory [in Wuhan] participated in the development of Chinese biological warfare.” The same article cited another “expert”, Igor Nikulin, a former member of the UN Weapons and Mass Destruction branch saying, “I doubt that the virus could have escaped from a biological laboratory. The time and place were chosen perfectly. Wuhan is in the very middle of the country, it is a major transportation hub. The epidemic outbreak takes place right before the Chinese New Year. Even if this was sabotage, it was more likely foreign rather than domestic. As for who could have done it – that’s an open question. Poisoning people using viruses – SARS, Bird flu, Swine flu – that’s tactics of the Anglo-Saxons, Americans.” Thereby, on the fifth day of informing their readers about COVID-19, the KP, using opinions of dubious experts, introduced a theory indirectly accusing the United States and its allies of using biological weapons.

Besides the alarming news on COVID-19, the attention of mass media was also drawn by the rapidly spreading rumors of a “new bird flu.” According to Russian anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova, as early as late December 2019 the researchers began documenting the spread of a new urban legend which finally took the

shape of the so-called “Doctor Yura’s Letter from Wuhan,” a text that became popular on Facebook and other social media. The letter was composed too sumptuously for it to appear as a simple repost.³ A distinctive quality of “Yura’s Letter” was its scattershot composition which practically invited readers to expand it by adding to the early (considering when COVID-19 just started) list of “facts and recommendations” on how to prevent and treat the disease. The recommendations were useless, if not harmful. For example, the belief that ginger would help prevent COVID-19 originated from a variant of “Doctor Yura’s Letter.”

In the early stages of the information spread (regardless of whether it was reliable information, rumors, or fake information) there were two types of sources reaching news consumers: news agencies and large groups on social media that talked about health concerns (especially, students’ and parents’ groups of a particular school). Harvard University researchers who analyzed social media across the United States, Europe, and Asia have discovered that news agencies were the first among all media to shift into the ‘infodemic’ mode and fill their newsfeeds with a multitude of stories about the development and spread of the pandemic, often without double-checking and verifying the information.⁴ David Lazer, head of the Northeastern University’s NULab network research laboratory, wrote that media agencies “switched to the wartime mode” before any governments, international organizations, or healthcare systems did. Similar effects could be observed in the Russian media space, at least until the point when the Kremlin started developing a national strategy regarding the pandemic in the first few weeks of March 2020. The number of messages in the newsfeeds of TASS, RIA Novosti, and Interfax in the timeframe of early January to March 25 (when President Putin announced the first measures to contain the virus) exceeded 8,000.⁵ This was greater than the number of messages about the activities of the Russian president, the government, and

1 Egor Falkhvatze, “Unknown Coronavirus in China: Increased Control Over Tourists at the Border and in the Airport of Vladivostok, Flights Are Canceled”, Komsomolskaya Pravda, May 18, 2020. www.dv.kp.ru/daily/27081/4152504/ [in Russian]

2 Mariia Berk, “Coronavirus Could Have Gotten Out From a Secret Lab Where Bioweapon for China Was Created,” Komsomolskaya Pravda, March 12, 2020, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27083.5/4155093/> [in Russian]

3 A.S. Arkhipova, D.A. Radchenko, et al. “Does the Russian infodemic follow a specific route? COVID-19 rumors and conspiracy theories in Russia.” Public Opinion Monitoring 2020, #6.

4 David Lazer et al., “The State of the Nation: A 50-State Covid-19 Survey,” The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public’s Policy Preferences Across States, April 30, 2020, <https://www.kateto.net/covid19/COVID19%20CONSORTIUM%20REPORT%20April%202020.pdf>

5 Medialogia mass media monitoring system data, using the authors’ proprietary filter. January–March 2020.

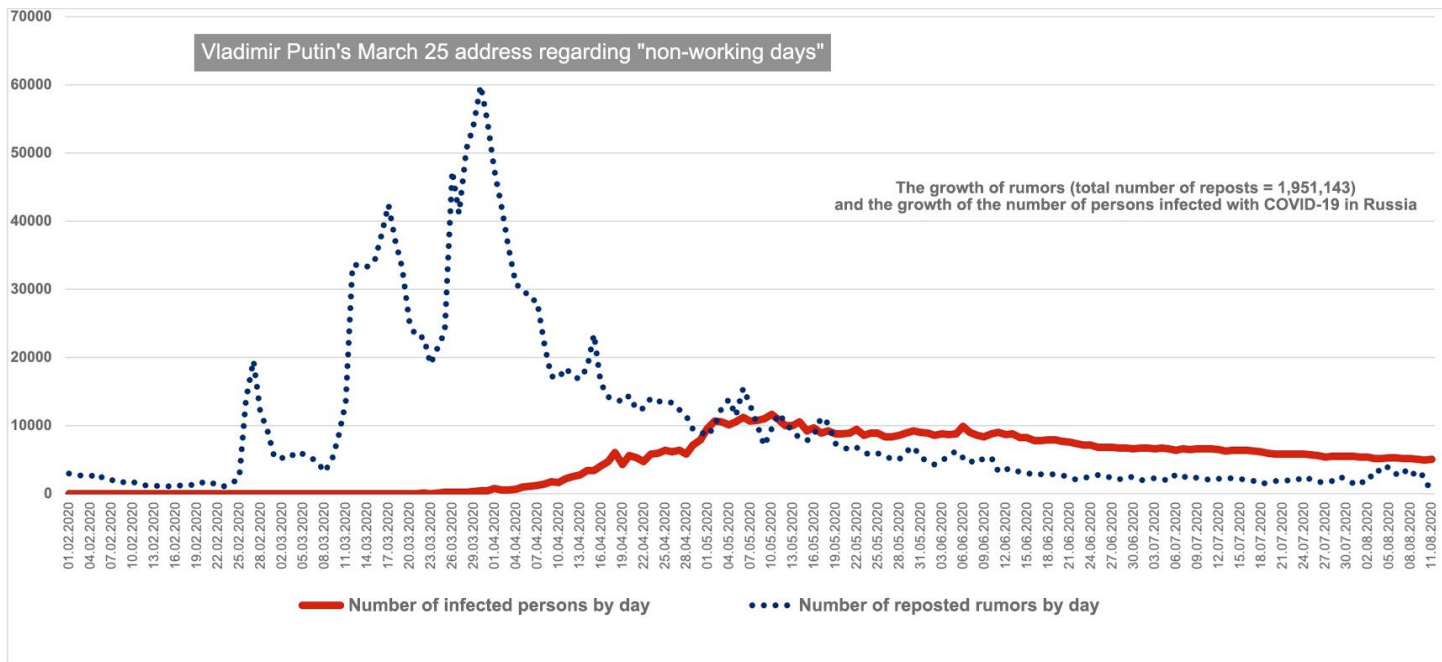


Fig. 1 Number of comments, reposts, and tracked modifications of rumors regarding COVID-19. Research by Alexandra Arkhipova's Group.

other federal agencies, combined.

The reaction of the large groups in social media, the second most influential “engine” of the infodemic, is harder to track. However, the scale of its impact can be estimated by the number of reposts and likes of the most popular Facebook statuses (see Arkhipova, et al, 2020⁶ and earlier publications by this research group; Fig. 1 and 2).

This infodemic was specifically targeted at the Russian audience the purpose of which was not to inform the public of the situation but more to create a chaotic, inconsistent environment based on a multitude of “opinions” including sources with no authority in medicine, disease prevention, virology, or microbiology which practically eliminated the possibility of individual critical thinking. The propaganda media was feeding the audience with conspiracy theories regarding the origins of the virus, exaggerating the scale of the issues caused by the pandemic in western countries, and linking those problems with the shortcomings of liberal democracies. Russian mass media also participated in the proliferation of fake news about the coronavirus from dubious and deeply politicized sources in the U.S. media space such as Breitbart, Drudge Report, or Fox News. The high degree of involvement in the proliferation of these sources’ information has become a typical occurrence for the Russian state and state-controlled mass media since Russia’s alleged interference

in the U.S. presidential elections in 2016. Russia Today, Sputnik, and other media sources controlled by the aforementioned Internet Research Agency actively participated in the amplification and distribution of polarizing, conflict-inciting content in the United States. According to a 2017 report by the U.S. intelligence community, the objective of Russian propaganda media was to sow discord between American voters, create a negative attitude towards democratic institutes, and ultimately, weaken the United States as a democracy.⁷

In this informational cacophony, the responsibility lays on the shoulders of independent journalists, civil activists, and political opposition guided by the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. Barely surviving, they now find themselves in a critical state of the growing infodemic, having to fight a war on two fronts: facing the key domestic undertaking of independently informing the public about the events in Russia and dealing with the great volume of American – and, to a lesser degree, European – fake news about COVID-19 which the Russian state media unleashed on the audiences, likely following the Russian Presidential Administration’s orders.

As for the United States, the problem of the serious influence of fake news on public opinion became even more complicated when then Presidential candidate Donald Trump began controlling the political process with

6 Ibid, p.12

7 National Intelligence Council, “Background to “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections: The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution, April 30, 2020, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf

SUBJECT	POSTS BETWEEN 02/01/2020 AND 08/11/2020
Pseudo-medical advice	609,770
Fringe groups (scammers and migrants) cause damage during the pandemic	25,412
The virus was created by foreign enemies as a biological weapon	242,489
Government authorities manipulate the information about the epidemic and its consequences	33,508
There is no real danger; the authorities are using or creating the coronavirus in their interests	644,410
Vaccines, tests, and masks are all methods to microchip or kill people	188,656
The authorities are withholding real information about the epidemic and its consequences	69,835
The virus is spreading through food, objects, and mobile network, including intentional infection	137,063

Fig. 2 The Dynamics of the Russian infodemic's subject focus between 02/01/2020 and 08/11/2020. Research by Alexandra Arkhipova's Group.

his Twitter account. Without researching the source of information, he regularly tossed fake, out-of-context, and unverified stories in the info space increasing political polarization and mobilizing conservative voters. In terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, Donald Trump took the position of doubting the objective information presented by the WHO (if not denying the virus and its dangerousness altogether), accusing China of intentionally spreading the virus, and supporting questionable methods of COVID-19 prevention and treatment originating with conservative right-wing "survivalists."

The political polarization in the United States was already significant, so as a result, the traditional media field split into two blocks, and the information war broke

out. Following the alleged Russian interference in the 2016 elections, many of President Trump's political opponents have been linking the negative events occurring in the States with Russia. This created the ground for liberal and even centrist mass media to constantly bring it up. For the Russian political and diplomatic powers, this backdrop does not just create a reason to continuously accuse the American mass media of Russophobia, but also the foundation for the "equal response measures." There is a reason to believe that in the process of developing the national response to the pandemic, the issue of "support operations" (including the use of American narratives) was considered for applications in foreign media space as well as domestically in Russia.

NARRATIVES AND HOW TO CONTROL THEM

In the complex multilevel system of contemporary media communication, the new mechanism of filtering questionable and potentially dangerous content is only now taking shape. Traditional models of gatekeeping – where journalists and editorial formats of verification and fact-checking provide relative authenticity of media messages – have been losing their effectiveness. Moreover, in Russia, where the degree of state control over mass media is very high, traditional fact-checking is almost completely absent. The narrative approved by the Kremlin (both directly and indirectly, by means of “trusted channels” such as political talk shows on Russia’s Channel One) is replicated by all other state mass media non-critically and without the due attention to authenticity and relevancy.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Internet, specifically, social networks, have become the key source of information in Russia. In many ways, it illustrated the factor of the population’s hidden distrust of controlled, censored mass media like television channels and major print and internet sources. According to researches, trusting controlled, state-manipulated media systems is one of the types of ongoing conformity, an explicit expression of loyalty.⁸ However, in a crisis, when media consumers have reasons to not trust the information provided by the authorities, the vast majority immediately switches to alternative sources to find unfiltered, uncensored data.^{9, 10} Since the social media are interactive and self-adjusting (through algorithms), a phenomenon of a “collective editor” appears to be surrounding a prominent issue during the time of a crisis, which “satisfies the consumer’s anxiety, curiosity, empathy, or hatred through friends on social networks and the selection of media content which is comfortable for the consumer.”¹¹

In the time of a pandemic, when most media consumers are seeking to receive information about the threats to their health and social well-being, all the mechanisms list-

ed above rose both locally and globally. The rapid growth of interest to alternative sources can be tracked; for instance, by using the increase in searches using Google Trends.¹² This growth could not have passed unnoticed by anyone, including those who organize and control media manipulations. The primary direction of their «information offensive» in 2020 were not social networks, but rather search engine results – Google (globally) and Yandex (for the Russian-speaking audiences). In our report, we attempt to highlight those practices and evaluate their organization, degree of connection with Russian politics, and its interests in the confrontation with the West.

As the analysis of the best practices of responding to the COVID-19 pandemic challenges has shown, the majority of fast and effective response actions took place in developed democratic countries (e.g. South Korea, Taiwan, New Zealand, Australia, Germany, Iceland), while of all the countries with authoritarian regimes only Singapore earned positive marks.¹³ The WHO has made similar findings, noting that the best results in the fight against the pandemic are achieved by those countries where “free independent press is adequately supporting the government’s efforts.” Additionally, according to TIME Magazine, the quality of various countries’ responses is directly dependent on the population’s trust in the government, the existence of effective feedback channels, as well as free, trusted mass media. On the contrary, the quality of national response to the COVID-19 crisis suffers greatly (partially, because of the infodemic), in countries with a low degree of democracy, state-controlled mass media, and a high level of political polarization (which includes the United States). A special section of the WHO’s website defines “infodemic” as an “overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that occurs during an epidemic. It can lead to confusion and ultimately mistrust in governments and public health response.”¹⁴

8 Lev Gudkov, “‘Trust’ in Russia: meaning, functions, structure”. The Russian Public Opinion Herald. Data. Analysis. Discussions, no. 2 (112), pp. 8-47, 2012 [In Russian]

9 Gregory Asmolov, “Crowdsourcing as an activity system: Online platforms as mediating artifacts.” Sintelnet WG5 Workshop on Crowd Intelligence: Foundations, Methods, and Practices. 2014.

10 Andrey Miroshnichenko, “Human as Media: The Emancipation of Authorship, by Andrey Miroshnichenko.” 2014.

11 Ibid, pp.93-94

12 “Coronavirus Search Trends.” Google Trends. Google. Accessed June 25, 2021. https://trends.google.com/trends/story/US_cu_4Rjdh3ABAABMHM_en.

13 Ian Bremmer, “The Best Global Responses to COVID-19 Pandemic, 1 Year Later,” Time, February 23, 2021, <https://time.com/5851633/best-global-responses-covid-19/>.

14 WHO Risk Communication team, “Infodemic Management of WHO Information Net Work for Epidemics,” World Health Organization, accessed June 25, 2021, <https://www.who.int/teams/risk-communication/infodemic-management>

As noted earlier, the infodemic created an extremely favorable environment for authoritarian, mediocrat leaders to manipulate public opinion: uncertainty, lack of trust in institutions, fear, and annoyance towards the “invisible foreign threat.” The latter creates the perfect foundation for taking “active measures,” both on the local and global levels which include information attacks, planting and spreading fake news, and promoting radical opinions in a broad spectrum of media channels that support these fake narratives and their amplification. Multiple studies of this phenomenon have shown that these malignant practices are inevitably associated with the Russian state and state-controlled media sources, including those targeting audiences abroad, the networks of Russian internet trolls, and, quite possibly, hacker operations against the “non-friendly” countries and international organizations.

In contrast to the past information conflicts, the researchers and corresponding state, public, and international institutions were prepared for the infodemic related to COVID-19. Suspicious aggressive operations accredited to Russia, China, or Iran were not new. What was new were natural, “native” conspiracy theories, political messaging by politicians like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and some European populists, and the systemic misinformation carried out for commercial purposes. This included serving the interests of manufacturers of supplements and medications with no proven effectiveness in the treatment of COVID-19.

In this situation, Google’s global search engine, as well as Russia’s Yandex, became the object of criticism for “political highlighting” of some news stories at the expense of others.¹⁵ As NBC News investigation has shown, U.S. President Donald Trump’s Twitter politics did not only amplify the critical polarization of the American society, but also echoed authoritative policies regarding the coronavirus – not just Russian, but also Chinese, Iranian, and Turkish.¹⁶ Even though this “mutual amplification” had begun long before the COVID-19 era, it significantly complicated the situation when the pandemic started. President Trump’s politics (including the usage of his Twitter account), and the growing conflict between him and the American national media led to a situation where the con-

cepts of curtailing fake news and controlling hyperbolic narratives became threatened and eroded. Peter Pomerantsev addresses this in his most recent book “This is NOT Propaganda.”¹⁷

According to researchers from Bruno Kessler Center in Information and Communication Technology at Italy’s Trento University which also maintains its own COVID-19 Infodemics Observatory¹⁸, the key problems in the battle with unscrupulous exploitation of the infodemic are:

1. Identification of freestanding misinformation narratives not included in the objective information agenda
2. Identification of “secondary” narratives tied into the objective agenda and used for misinformation using false contextualization, warped and incomplete citing and references
3. Observation of the increase in misinformation narratives using Twitter bots and mass Facebook groups
4. Indexation of the infodemic environment in various countries to identify the sources of misinformation and/or participation of media and/or special interest groups of various countries in the promotion of corresponding misinformation narratives.

The Center’s research has also provided sufficient evidence to conclude that several “disinformation armies” associated with Russia, China, Iran, and possibly non-government political and commercial interest groups are indeed operating in the infodemic space.

A lot of work analyzing Russian practices of information wars is being conducted globally by the U.S. State Department’s Global Engagement Center, various European organizations like European Values, INSAS, the Marshall’s Fund, The Atlantic Council’s DFR, Citizens Lab at the University of Toronto, Bellingcat, Stopfake, The Insider, and many others. One of the most well-known research projects on this topic is the “Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic” report conducted by the East StratCom Task Force

15 Philip Ball and Amy Maxmen, “The Epic Battle against Coronavirus Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories,” Nature News, May 27, 2020, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01452-z>

16 Matt Laslo, “COVID-19 Conspiracies Get Embraced by Trump and Right-Wing Media Because Reality Is Painful,” NBCNews.com (NBCUniversal News Group, July 29, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/COVID-19-conspiracies-get-embraced-trump-right-wing-media-becausecnca1235238>

17 Pomerantsev, Peter. This is NOT propaganda: Adventures in the war against reality. Hachette UK, 2019.

18 Covid19 Infodemics Observatory, accessed June 25, 2021, <https://covid19obs.fbk.eu/#/>

and published on March 19, 2020.¹⁹

The report caused a massive public outcry in traditional mass media and was cited by The Financial Times, The Guardian, Reuters, and others.²⁰ In February–March 2020 East StratCom reported a notable surge in fabricated disinformation that was consistently promoted by domestic Russian media as well as by Russia Today and the websites associated with or created by the RT. The central disinformation narratives that East StratCom believes to have been created in Russia include:

1. The transfer of “guilt” for the rise and spread of the coronavirus from China to the United States (e.g., the idea that the coronavirus was developed by the American army and planted in Wuhan to “weaken a key geostrategic adversary”).
2. Drawing the attention towards the U.S. biological laboratories in the countries of the former USSR (e.g., Lugar Lab in Georgia) as sources of outlawed biological warfare.
3. Constant repetition of the narrative that the authoritarian states deal with the pandemic better than democratic ones claiming that “democracy is disorder.”

Additionally, one of the most prominent conspiracy narratives supported and used in Russia is the 5G/Gates theory claiming that the coronavirus is part of Bill Gates’ strategy to gain control of humanity via the 5G networks by inserting a “liquid chip” integrated to the COVID-19 vaccine or medication. East StratCom also stated that Russian domestic and international mass media actively supported China’s measures to whitewash the country’s reputation against the backdrop of the spreading pandemic by enforcing the narratives like “China takes the heat” and “The American ‘tracks’ in the Wuhan bio lab.”

However, the most important statement in the report is that Russian actors that actively participated in the creation and dissemination of disinformation could directly cause harm to people’s health and lead to political and social conflicts in the countries of the EU and the former USSR.

As a result of this report, a group of European Parliament deputies accused Russia of exploiting the infodemic to pursue its interests of stimulating the doubts in the national governments of the EU and their actions to contain the pandemic.²¹ This accusation hit a sore spot and outraged the Russian propaganda forgers and caused a retaliatory disinformation storm in the Kremlin-controlled media.

It has been repeatedly noted that when it comes to the information war strategies, the fake news itself does not hold a place as important as maintaining the “narrative tracks” that distort the ongoing events using the manipulation of real facts.^{22, 23} As we have explained earlier, in the times of an infodemic, social information and opinions gain greater influence at the expense of truthful information. For distorted information or purposeful disinformation to reach its potential consumers, the information war actors must achieve the “narrative superiority” by creating a cross-reference network that keeps the readers from checking sources other than those that support the conspiracy theory.²⁴ In other words, a cross-reference network includes various media sources citing each other to support the disinformation they are promoting. As the East StratCom report has shown, the Russian propaganda demonstrated exactly that: they would publish the primary disinformation piece (e.g., the involvement of Lugar Lab in the manufacturing of coronavirus, citing “GRU sources” in Donbas’ News Front), which then would lead to a giant wave of publications in the major Russian domestic media citing the original source. After that, major news agencies themselves were being cited as “investigation sources.”

19 EU vs DISINFORMATION, June 24, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>

20 EU vs DISINFORMATION “EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment Of Narratives And Disinformation Around The Covid-19 Pandemic (Update 23 April – 18 May)”, April 28, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-updated-23-april-18-may/?highlight=CoVID>

21 Sergey Lagodinsky, “Legal and political aspects of mobile applications in the fight against the COVID19 pandemic”, EU Parliament, Accessed on June 24, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/2020-04-28__COVID_APP_Lagodinsky_EP_EN1.pdf

22 See: Nimmo, Ben. “Measuring Traffic Manipulation on Twitter.” (2019); Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts. Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics. Oxford University Press, 2018.

23 See: Pomerantsev, Peter. This is NOT propaganda: Adventures in the war against reality. Hachette UK, 2019

24 See: Tripodi, Francesca. “Searching for Alternative Facts.” Data & Society Research Institute (2018).

THE UNIMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a fundamentally new situation.²⁵ It launched a global infodemic of such scale and strength that any individual attempts by state agencies or responsible media to strategically counteract it simply drowned in the information stream.

It must be noted that at least until May 2020 one could not unequivocally state that Russian political leadership and its media support had a fully-fledged strategy regarding the pandemic from the very beginning. Most likely, they were developing their position based on healthcare, diplomatic, intelligence, and analytical agencies' data, but got confused and gave unclear instructions to the state-controlled media unlike in earlier cases when propaganda was carefully and effectively coordinated and developed. In the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, we could observe how the Russian media system deployed a series of cookie-cutter reactions used in the past. For example, the downing of Flight MH17 over Donbas, or the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal. Firstly, the propaganda media began increasing the number of "versions" of the events to distract the public's attention from the most obvious one. Using the cross-reference network method we described earlier, they indispensably fabricated a standard "it's all the West's/America's fault" narrative, bluntly plugging in xenophobia and the archetype of a "someone who's not one of us" who is encroaching on "our values and way of life." However, those early reactions to the pandemic were not systemic. The primary reason was that Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is the country's primary generator of media messages, did not develop a clear organizational structure to deal with the pandemic and especially with its informational component. As a result, the actors like the Office of the Mayor of Moscow, the Presidential Administration, the Ministry of Defense, the leadership of federal news channels, and key regional administrations were forced to act autonomously, consequently creating a whirlpool of contradictory messages regarding possible organizational solutions, the extent of quarantine measures, federal financing of the emergency, and so on. The degree of administrative chaos which led to severe pandemic-induced consequences



will undoubtedly be analyzed in the future as these hard times have revealed a profound crisis of power in Russia.

The Russian leadership managed to develop a relatively harmonious position on the infodemic only towards the end of May 2020. Around that time, the dissemination of "alternative facts" and opinions loaded with disinformation has been significantly reduced (the East StratCom's aforementioned report noted this as well).²⁶ The State Duma then passed a resolution criminalizing the distribution of fake news by private persons and organizations. At the same time, the Ministry of Health, the Federal Service for Surveillance in Healthcare (Roszdravnadzor), and other official agencies started providing information about the coronavirus to the public. Nevertheless, it is important to analyze how various actors in the Russian political system adapted to the infodemic environment, and how their approach to information/disinformation tools evolved during the severe crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

25 Iya Kiriya, "Unprecedented Infodemic Covered the World," *Vedomosti*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/columns/2020/04/15/828157-infodemiya>

26 See: EU vs DISINFORMATION "EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment Of Narratives And Disinformation Around The Covid-19 Pandemic (Update 23 April – 18 May)" <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid19-pandemic-updated-23-april-18-may/?highlight=CoVID>

THE FIRST FLOOR. VLADIMIR PUTIN

Until March 10, 2020, Vladimir Putin was spending a lot of time working on the constitutional reforms and decided to join the global fight against the pandemic only around March 16. His own information methods were extremely unsuccessful and led to a drop in his trust rating. This drop was noted by Russia's sociological services – first by the VTSIOM (Public Opinion Research Center) and later by the Levada Center. During the early stages of the pandemic, the informational front line was taken up by Dr. Denis Protsenko, Chief Physician of the State Hospital #40 in Kommunarka operated by the Moscow Department of Health. At the end of March, Vladimir Putin, realizing the necessity of demonstrating his personal participation in the battle against the pandemic, visited the hospital accompanied by a pool of journalists. Dr. Protsenko stood for the absence of face coverings. After this, Putin conducted a public meeting with Russian virologists, and later the FSO (Federal Protective Service) and the Kremlin's press service created news stories about Putin's meetings with representatives of the executive branch. Putin's presentation on the pandemic was perceived by both the bureaucrats and the society as a delegation of powers to regional authorities. As for the safety measures against the spread of the coronavirus, the Russian president initially announced the so-called "non-working week" which was soon nicknamed "the strange quarantine." The media narrative supporting this decision can be seen in messages like "everything is going so much better in our country than in the collapsing Europe." At that time, the government had no clear understanding as to how the "non-working week" should be compensated. From mid-March until the end of May Putin did not address the public once. The initial assumption that Putin was trying to use the pandemic to mobilize voter support did not prove to be true. Putin's statement that Russia had overcome many enemies in the past and would, therefore, overcome the pandemic became a meme-maker due to his mentioning the Polovtsy and the Pechenegs. Putin did not comment on any of six issues triggered by the pandemic that he logically should have:

1. The spread of the virus in monasteries, military schools, and entities where personnel was working in densely staffed facilities.
2. Financing certain sectors of the economy that were severely affected.
3. Clear plan for fighting the pandemic.
4. Putin approved the deployment of Russian military medical workers to Italy and aid to 20 countries but could only use it to his advantage in domestic media, not in Italian or global media. An article in *La Stampa* claimed that the humanitarian aid received from Russia was "80% useless" and was "in fact, a cover operation for the Russian military intelligence". The scandal caused protests against the interference in Italy's domestic affairs even among those groups that had previously been pro-Russian. For example, Matteo Salvini, head of the Lega Nord, agreed with *La Stampa's* claims.²⁷
5. Issues with online applications developed to receive financial aid or permits to move around Moscow. Neither Putin nor the PM Mishustin found a way to address the public regarding the mitigation of these issues.
6. Lack of response created an impression that Putin preferred to focus on the May 9 Victory Day parade and the constitutional reform. This immediately resulted in the drop of the public trust (the Levada Center, public opinion polls, May–June 2020).

27 Jacopo Iacoboni, "Coronavirus, La Telefonata Conte-Putin Agita Il Governo: 'Più Che Aiuti Arrivano Militari Russi in Italia,'" *lastampa.it*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primopiano/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus-la-telefonata-conte-putin-agita-il-governopiu-che-aiuti-arrivano-militari-russi-in-italia-1.38633327> [In Italian]

THE SECOND FLOOR. OFFICE OF THE MAYOR OF MOSCOW, PRESIDENTIAL ADMINISTRATION, GOVERNMENT, MINISTRY OF DEFENSE, MID

The primary institutions to which Vladimir Putin delegated the responsibility for policymaking in the times of the pandemic were acting without sufficient coordination during the critical period of March-May 2020. This could not go unnoticed even by the mass media loyal to the Kremlin.

Consequently, talks about the conflict between the Presidential Administration and the Office of the Mayor started floating around in the Telegram channels (which are currently used to coordinate the internal politics of Russia).

At the same time, it was clear that while Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyanin and his structures had engaged public opinion management specialists to provide quarantine measures in the Russian capital, the Presidential Administration created a center for information politics management (headed by Alexey Goreslavsky) but did not launch its operations. It is possible that during the pandemic the Presidential Administration was experiencing a critical situation. The only person who maintained personal access to Vladimir Putin was his Chief of Staff Anton Vaino; however, he did not have any specific directions from the President on the issues of the pandemic, and his first Deputy Sergey Kiriyyenko ended up in quarantine due to his wife's illness.

As a result, it was hard to see any trace of organized work being carried out by the Presidential Administration in response to the pandemic in the spring and early sum-

mer of 2020. For this study, we can identify only three media solutions carried out by the Administration's political managers.

The first one was the temporary shutdown of Yevgeny Popov's and Olga Skabeyeva's aggressive and neurotic "60 Minutes" talk show on federal TV channels. The show was suspended on March 30, 2020, and when it resumed several days later its hosts completely avoided any discussion of coronavirus-related topics. Instead, it focused on the beloved topics of "the end of the Ukrainian regime" and "the dying West."

The second media solution was the elimination of Nikita Mikhalkov's "Besogon" ("The Exorcist") regular program from Russia-24's lineup. The reason was Mikhalkov's statements supporting the "Bill Gates' liquid chips and mind control using the 5G towers" conspiracy theory which was unfavorable for the Kremlin.

The third action was the demand that social networks and mass media block the sharing of Russian comedian and parodist Maxim Galkin's video in which he mocked Putin and Sobyanin in a Zoom meeting.

The media got hold of a document from Alexey Goreslavsky's office which described the tasks for editors supervised by the Kremlin. It talked about taking efforts to avoid fueling public anxiety and panic and to publish more positive news about the battle against the pandemic. However, it is impossible to say whether this "good news objective" was fulfilled to any degree.

THE THIRD FLOOR. THE KREMLIN'S PROPAGANDIST MEDIA POOL

In the Russian media system, a highly visible place is occupied by a group of media headed by managers who maintain constant direct contact with the Kremlin's political operators. For a long time, these media have been consistently developing narratives that included real facts and statements as well as fakes. It is important to examine how these five traditional narratives were used in March-August 2020:

- "The desirable breakup of the European Union, NATO, or the Euro-Atlantic concept in general." The political logic is obvious: a collapsing Europe is advantageous to the Kremlin since internal conflicts within Europe will weaken its common political position on post-Crimea Russia.
- "The immorality of the entire Western school of politics and the collapse of values." Just like during the Soviet times, this narrative is used to highlight the superiority of the so-called "Russian spiritual values."
- "Criticism of Russia is Russophobia." The motives behind any negative reactions to the Kremlin's aggressive and dangerous actions are explained as Russophobia that is allegedly hard etched in Western politics.
- "The unfairness of sanctions and the necessity to repeal them without demanding that Russia make any political changes." Pulling together a pool of European speakers in favor of repealing the sanctions.
- "The Russian opposition has sold out to the West and is acting against national interests." Creating an image of the Russian opposition and civil organizations as subversive entities operating by instructions from abroad. Discrediting organizations, their leaders, and civil activists.

We have already shown how the Russian technology to launder disinformation in Russian media works. During the pandemic, the technology of legitimization and amplification of news and comments in the Kremlin propaganda continued functioning as before. This process involves first "planting" a news story into a low-quality, little-known news outlet and then "verifying" it in national

news media. The key topic starters are Donbas's propagandist media, outlets belonging to Evgeny Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group, and the sensationalist REN TV. The stories (consisting of fake news or extremely radical or confusing opinions) are then caught on by the state-owned RIA Novosti or RIA FAN (also part of Prigozhin's group) and, less frequently, TASS. Since these are trusted news agencies, those stories are then usually picked up by truly mass-reach sources (such as Gazeta.ru, Lenta.ru, VZ.ru, etc) without being verified or critically analyzed and then they make it to the Yandex top news. The next step is setting up a "cross-reference network" and a source diversification, after which the fake news story quickly (and possibly controllably) gets promoted by the Mediometrics Top-20 system, and then – often naturally – by a large group of smaller regional media outlets, news aggregators, as well as social media (often using bots). If the pieces all come together for the original source of this disinformation, the story may within a day end up on the daily news agenda and even become the subject for discussions on federal channels' political talk shows. Their influence on public opinion is significant, especially in Russia's remote regions. Below we will provide examples of such "information merry-go-rounds."

Information that came to Russia in March-May 2020 from abroad was treated differently by the domestic media. In those three months of the pandemic there was a large number of stories covering issues, even conflicts, that were originally published by media in different parts of the world and then re-printed and re-interpreted by the Russian media – not just Kremlin-controlled but independent as well. The tone varied but most often all Kremlin-controlled media aimed to: (1) exaggerate the pandemic problems in Europe, (2) highlight the disagreements within the US on the issues of reacting to the pandemic, and (3) create an image of a "dying, weakening" Europe which departed from "true values" – in contrast to Russia where, sure, not everything is perfect, but those "traditional values" are being preserved thanks to the country's wise leadership. Some examples were the Russian media coverage of French President Macron's speech calling for unity in the EU's fight against the pandemic,²⁸ the story about the Czech police detaining a cargo of face

28 Rym Momtaz, "Macron Calls for National Unity in War against Coronavirus," POLITICO, March 25, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/25/macron-calls-for-national-unity-in-war-against-coronavirus-148874>

masks from China headed for Italy²⁹ and the story about the US' (actually, President Donald Trump's) conflict with the World Health Organization. The Russian media also exploited, primarily for domestic purposes, discussions surrounding "the Swedish model" (see RIA's May 2020 publications³⁰). Public addresses made by Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Deputy PM Matteo Salvini demanding support from the EU were reinterpreted first by RIA Novosti and immediately thereafter on talk shows broadcast on Russia's primary TV channels as "the end of the European unity." In his March 22, 2020, broadcast Russia's leading propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov stated,

"Italians, common Italians will never forgive Europe for simply ignoring all their calls for solidarity."³¹

In all these instances high-quality media aimed to sort things out and deliver a well-balanced, truthful coverage of the reported events and statements to their audience. The Kremlin's propagandist media pool created negative headlines and painted a picture of disorganization in the EU and the West as a whole. Below are several examples of coordinated dissemination of fake or fringy news used as an instrument of information war.

THE FOURTH FLOOR. THE PRO-KREMLIN THINK TANKS

These organizations (often consisting of just one "expert") churn out series of roundtables and expert publications which serve the Kremlin's primary narratives. This network of brain enterprises has a long history. Some of them had existed before Putin's ascent to power and were then brought under the Kremlin's control during the early years of Vladislav Surkov's administration (Surkov was the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration in 2001-2009 and was responsible for Russia's domestic policy). One such organization is the SVOP (Council on Foreign and Defense Policy). Others (for example the Valdai Club) were formed during the same period under the Kremlin's direct control and use of government funds. Other organizations were created recently by the new generation of Putin's political scientists (e.g. Alexander Malkevich's Foundation for the Protection of National Values). All these organizations have a certain status and replicate and intensify the anti-West focus of the primary conflict narratives. Their heads are supported and promoted by the Kremlin and receive funding via presidential grants or state corporations. During the pandemic, such experts are put to good use by the controlled media to make "reason-

able and justified" comments on the West's crises and to highlight the necessity of repealing the sanctions that are having an appreciable impact on the Russian leadership.

The "Fourth Floor" is occupied by a multitude of small media outlets that don't need constant political control. They include partisan assets of anti-liberal and anti-West political groups that are even more radical than the Kremlin. Among those are the group of "Donbas assets" (News Front, South Front, Geopolitika.ru, and others); some pro-Russian media of the Baltic states (such as First Baltic Channel and Rubaltika), directly supported by Russian government grants; numerous websites preaching the ideology of the superiority of the Russian civilization (Kathelon.ru, TsarGrad TV, etc.), and websites propagating the hybrid ideology of communism and Orthodoxy (like the Zavtra newspaper). All those outlets reprint news and messages produced by RIA Novosti and other state mass media and use them in their conspiracy theory narratives even without the need for any special coordination.

The Kremlin's propaganda mechanism is especially apparent when one turns their attention from mainstream pandemic-related topics to exotic statements.

29 "Czech Republic Seizes More than 100,000 Face Masks Sent by China to Help Italy Tackle Coronavirus Spread," The Independent, March 22, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-face-masks-china-italy-czech-republic-latest-a9416711.html>

30 Tatyana Pichugina, "'What Is Done by Night, Appears by Day'. What Will the COVID-19 Epidemic End with in Sweden," RIA Novosti, May 8, <https://ria.ru/20200504/1570906619.html>

31 News of the Week. Russia-1. March 22, 2020.

CASE STUDY: “EXPERT NIKULIN. THE VIRUS IS THE USA’S BIOLOGICAL WEAPON.”

In February and March 2020, state-controlled media repeatedly worked up “the virus is the USA’s biological weapon” theme.

On January 26, 2020, KP published a story about the coronavirus which stated that the largest Chinese virology center was located in Wuhan. “I doubt that the virus could have escaped from a biological laboratory. The time and place were perfectly chosen. Wuhan is in the very middle of the country, it is a major transportation hub. The epidemic outbreak takes place right before the Chinese New Year. Even if this was sabotage, it was more likely foreign than domestic. As to who could have done it – that’s an open secret. Poisoning people using viruses – SARS, Bird flu, Swine flu – that’s tactics of the Anglo-Saxons, Americans.”

On the same day REN TVs “Dobrov on Air” showed a reel claiming that a “secret U.S. laboratory in the country of Georgia” had conducted tests on human subjects to develop biological or genetic weapons which would affect specific ethnicities.³²

Later, a person introduced as “expert Igor Nikulin” would be repeatedly quoted, invited to radio and TV broadcasts, and presented as a diplomat, a former United Nations expert, a world-class Russian expert, and a microbiologist. The whole series of news materials was built on the “expert opinion” of Igor Nikulin:

- RIA Novosti: “The spread of the coronavirus could be a sabotage operation, expert says.”
- TsarGrad TV: “A secret bioweapon of the USA? A way to render harmless the new coronavirus has been discovered in Russia.”
- MK: “An American biological weapon. An expert suggests the unusual origins of the coronavirus.”
- Expert: “Russian military expert says that the spread of the coronavirus could be a sabotage operation.”

- Radio Sputnik: “Expert says the USA’s role in the spread of the coronavirus cannot be ruled out.”
- Ura.ru: “Experts explain why the coronavirus afflicts people by an ethnic mechanism.”
- NSN: “The USA may be the perpetrators of the Chinese coronavirus epidemic.”

Instead of a bio, Nikulin’s personal website (as that of a candidate to the Duma from the “Just Russia” party) contains a text titled “A word about my son” that was allegedly written by his father, a retired KGB colonel Viktor Nikulin. From this text, it’s obvious that Nikulin has never been either a United Nations expert or a bacteriological warfare specialist. He graduated from the Mendeleev University of Chemical Technology (formerly Moscow Chemical Technical Institute aka MCTI) and entered the business sector. At the end of the 1990s, he became an assistant to a State Duma Deputy and oversaw medication shipments to Iraq under a United Nations program in the capacity of a pharmaceutical company director.³³

As early as February 6, 2020, in his publication for The Insider Yuri Bershidsky wrote about the dissemination of a fake claiming that the virus had originated in an American laboratory.³⁴

The story resurfaced on March 11–12 when a squabble occurred between the representatives of the United States and China. National Security Adviser Robert O’Brien publicly accused China of concealing the information about the real state of affairs in Wuhan for too long.³⁵ In reply to that, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Zhao Lijian tweeted, “When did patient zero begin in the U.S.? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals? It might be the U.S. army who brought the virus to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make your data public! The U.S. owes us an explanation!”³⁶ Therefore, it is apparent that China did not plan to

32 REN-TV Channel, “Dobrov on Air. Release from January 26, 2020,” YouTube, January 27, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZi_gAoJ610&feature=emb_title [in Russian]

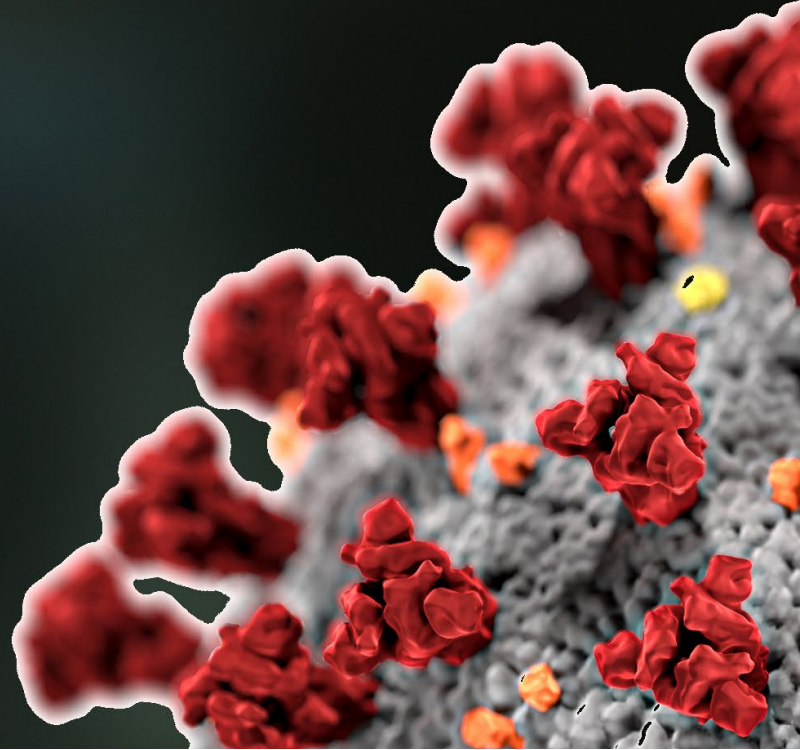
33 Igor Nikulin, Igor Nikulin Website, accessed June 25, 2021, <http://nikulin.web-soft.ru/work/biography> [in Russian]

34 Yuri Bershidsky, “Fake of the News Program ‘Time’: Chinese Coronavirus Was Artificially Created by Americans as a Bioweapon,” The Insider, accessed June 25, 2021, <https://theins.ru/antifake/200285> [in Russian]

35 Laurel Wamsley, “National Security Adviser O’Brien Alleges WHO Is ‘Propaganda Tool For The Chinese,’” NPR, April 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/21/840582956/national-security-adviser-obrien-allegeswho-is-propaganda-tool-for-the-chinese>

36 Znak.com News Service, “Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Responded to the Accusations of FOX News That COVID-19 Was

5G



make any specific accusations and did not have any facts at its disposal. Zhao Lijian's tweet was polemic. However, the Kremlin media immediately reactivated the subject of the virus's American origin, specifically of having been a biological weapon developed in the United States.

Thus, between March 13 and March 17, all Kremlin assets were actively promoting the stories with the following message: "The United Nations chemical warfare expert tells all about the American origin of the coronavirus." It is also important to note that on March 29 the media was spreading the text titled "Coronavirus was launched by the USA, Ukraine may be an accomplice." Quoted in the text was a statement by a Russian government official, Putin's former advisor, Sergey Glazyev: "You can call bioengineers, and they will tell you how to synthesize it. It is a fact that only one country that has a network of secret biological laboratories around the world is capable of doing something like this. Right under our noses, the Americans went all out testing the viruses on practically our compatriots in Ukraine. They have a complete arsenal of biological warfare. Ebola and the Bird flu, for instance, were experiments in creating a virus of selective action." Finally, another example - on March 30, Pravda.ru published an interview with Aleksandr Dugin's famous supporter Valerii Korovin titled "COVID-19 was patented by the Pentagon."³⁷

Hereby, the entities that participated in spreading fake information about the virus being a U.S. biological weapon include Channel One Russia, REN TV, RIA Novosti, Izvestia, MK, Arguments of the Week, Red Star (of the Ministry of Defense), National News Service Radio, Rambler, FAN, TsarGrad TV, Russia Today, and Sputnik. An important role was also played by news aggregators 24SMI and SMI2: they continue to actively promote fake stories even when they are not on the information agenda of major media anymore.

On March 16, 2020, Vladimir Putin decided to join the efforts on implementing global quarantine measures. On March 22, Russia's Ministry of Defense in agreement with the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte sent a large group of military medics and medical equipment to Italy. This event was covered by all Russian and global media. On March 26, Italian La Stampa published an op-ed expressing the opinion that Russia's aid was not effective. Even though the Italian media and political circles, in general, reacted positively to the arrival of the Russian military medics, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and later the Ministry of Defense stirred up a scandal around the La Stampa article.

As the scandal developed, the Swiss newspaper Der Blick reprinted the La Stampa article. Pro-Russian

Created in a Lab," Znak.com, April 16, 2020, https://www.znak.com/2020-04-16/mid_kitaya_otvetil_na_obviniya_fox_news_o_tom_chno_covid_19_byl_sozdan_v_laboratorii [in Russian]

37 Inna Novikova, "Valery Korovin: The World Will Change Dramatically from the Coronavirus Hysteria," Pravda.ru, May 25, 2020, <https://www.pravda.ru/world/1484531-coronavirus/> [in Russian]

comments under the article appeared immediately.³⁸ On March 27, the Kremlin media pool published an article titled “The Swiss were outraged by the article about the uselessness of the Russian aid.” It appeared unaltered on the pages of RIA Novosti, Gazeta.ru, FAN, Piter.tv,

RuNews24, Yandex News, and other news media. Thus, a completely made-up story – based solely on the internet trolls’ comments – was transformed into sensational news.

CASE STUDY: “THE BUNDESTAG DEMANDS THAT THE ANTI-RUSSIA SANCTIONS BE REPEALED”

The subject of repealing the EU sanctions clearly shows which news outlets are feeding the readers with intentionally distorted information. Having sent to Italy a large group of military medics along with transportation equipment and materials, the Kremlin immediately began a campaign connecting this gesture with the need to repeal the sanctions. It should be noted that just a handful of European parliamentarians who are already well-known for holding pro-Russian views spoke out in support of the repeal.

Bundestag member Ulrich Oehme of the AfD party, known for having a pro-Russian stance, along with the Italian right-wing populist, Paolo Grimoldi (the organizer of the “Putin’s friends” group in the Italian parliament) wrote a letter requesting immediate aid for Italy. The letter was addressed to Roman Babayan, a Moscow Municipal Duma member and host of “Svoya Pravda” TV show airing on the state-operated NTV channel, and Leonid Slutsky, Chair of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, member of the LDPR party, and PACE delegate, who

is currently sanctioned by the US and the EU. Babayan read the letter on air.

On March 26–27 a wave of articles rolled through Russian media: “The Bundestag demands that the anti-Russian sanctions be repealed” (MK.ru), “German parliamentarian calls for the revocation of sanctions against Russia” (IZ.ru), “Common sense: against the backdrop of COVID-19 a call to lift sanctions against Russia has been made in Germany”, etc. The media largely quoted Bundestag members from AfD including Waldemar Herdt, Petr Bystron, and Robby Schlund. REN-TV reported: “So was it really necessary to wait for such an economic slump to understand what Russia has always been saying: the time of trade wars and questionable games played on the field of limitation measures has passed. Today the Bundestag tried to talk sense into Angela Merkel.”³⁹ AfD’ member Waldemar Herdt later said, “The sanctions should have been repealed way before the coronavirus crisis. However, now that the borders are closed, this issue is even more salient.”

CASE STUDY: THE LAGODINSKY LETTER

On March 27, 2020, three German members of the European Parliament – Sergey Lagodinsky, Alexandra Geese, and Viola von Cramon-Taubadel – wrote a letter (which was supported by 39 other members) to the presidents of the European Council. In this letter, citing a report by the European External Action Service, they called for active measures to be taken against a flow of disinformation originating in Russia and China about the COVID-19

situation in the European Union. As we wrote earlier, the authors of this letter expressed their concern about the East StratCom data indicating Russia’s increased activity in promoting disinformation among European audiences – especially, Russian-speaking residents of Germany.

The mere fact of this letter’s existence, let alone its contents, elicited an immediate negative reaction from the

38 Myrte Müller, “Blick (Switzerland): Russian Military Went to the Front of the Fight against Coronavirus,” InoSmi.ru, December 21, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20200327/247138467.html> [in Russian]

39 REN-TV Channel, “Dobrov on Air. Release from March 29, 2020,” YouTube, March 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKcaDzghUoE> [in Russian]

Russian media. The “investigation” of this letter’s origins turned into a traditional “deny – distort – discredit” method of Russian propaganda. The accusations of spreading disinformation inside and outside Russia were denied. The letter was condemned based on the European Parliamentarians’ “questionable reputation” and by discrediting the European Parliament’s status in general. Finally, Russian propaganda accused the East StratCom report” by calling it a “secrecy” (which is a lie since it had been made public as early as two weeks before the letter was written by Lagodinsky and his colleagues). The more Russian columnists and politicians commenting on foreign political events became involved in evaluating and interpreting the letter, the greater was the degree of denying, distorting, and discrediting. This can be seen from the chronological order of the links below. It should also be noted that all the cited texts contain almost the same set of references to the events which indicates the existence of a manager running the Kremlin’s demand to “respond to the anti-Russian attacks.”

- https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2020/03/30_a_13028029.shtml
- <https://vz.ru/politics/2020/3/30/1031681.html>
- <https://iz.ru/993249/2020-03-30/v-evroparlamente-obvinili-rf-v-dezinformacii-na-fone-pandemii-koronavirusa>

[fone-pandemii-koronavirusa](#)

- <https://www.5-tv.ru/news/290197/vevroparlamente-usmotreli-zagovor-rfkitaa-protiv-evrosouza-izza-covid19/>
- <https://russian.rt.com/opinion/733482-babickii-evropa-koronavirus-rossiya>
- <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/03/30/otvetili/>
- <https://iz.ru/993422/2020-03-30/klimov-prokommentiroval-obviniia-rf-so-storony-es>
- <https://riafan.ru/1263331-v-sovfe-de-otreagirovali-na-obviniya-rf-v-dezinformacii-na-fone-pandemii>
- <https://radiosputnik.ria.ru/20200330/1569354736.html>
- <https://ria.ru/20200330/1569352033.html>

In Europe, the letter received practically no coverage. However, the Russian authorities’ reaction to it was actively disseminated in English and Spanish by Russia Today, Sputnik, and affiliated media.

- <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202003301078756785-eu-lawmakers-try-to-launch-unfounded-smear-campaign-against-russia-for-helping-italy-amid-pandemic/>

CASE STUDY: MALKEVICH

Unlike other anti-West Russian speakers often quoted by the Russian media, Alexander Malkevich makes for an interesting case study. He recently left Prigozhin’s group (where he was leading an anti-American project), established the Foundation for the Protection of National Values, and was brought on as a member of Russia’s Civic Chamber. A thorough analysis shows that Malkevich was the Kremlin’s commentator talking about the coronavirus situation, and he was being quoted exclusively by the Kremlin-controlled media pool. For example, on May 11, 2020, The Financial Times published data indicating that Russia may have had 72% more coronavirus victims than was being stated in the official statistics.⁴⁰ Russia

immediately reacted, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied this information and demanded a formal refutation. The Prosecutor-General of Russia requested that the Roskomnadzor blocks the websites that were spreading this information and citing the Financial Times. Alexander Malkevich spoke out the very next day during a Russia-24 broadcast. He stated that the FT had joined a special operation conducted by the American and British special services aimed at discrediting Vladimir Putin. One could then observe how this statement was quoted only by the pro-Kremlin media, such as RIA Novosti, FAN, RIA FederalPress, Regnum, VZ.ru, TsarGrad, URA.ru, Rossa Primavera News, Nakanune.ru, and Life.ru.

40 Victoria Ivanova, “French MEP Called for Removal of Sanctions on Russia,” RIA Novosti, March 27, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200327/1569240754.html?in=t>

USA'S BIOWEAPONS IN UKRAINE

On April 15, 2020, Ukrainian politician Viktor Medvedchuk and his Opposition Platform – For Life party sent a formal inquiry to the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky launching a new wave of fake news about the alleged presence of American military laboratories in Ukraine. On May 1, a Ukrainian journalist Gala Sklyarevskaya published a detailed text documenting the history of this fake.⁴¹ It was published on the Strategic Culture Foundation's Russian website, reposted by Serbian statesman Zoran Milosevic, and then reprinted, citing the Serbian media, by InoSMI (which is part of Russia Today).

In May 2020, the Zelensky Administration did not respond to Medvedchuk's inquiry and multiple publications in the media controlled by Medvedchuk. There was an official response by the Ukrainian Security Service (the SBU) and the US Embassy in Kyiv but neither in Europe nor even in Russia was this story discussed by independent media. However, RIA Novosti, Izvestia, EADaily, Regnum, VZ.ru, TsarGrad, UTRO.ru, and Rambler all featured stories that mentioned "USA's biological weapons in Ukraine" with a reference to Medvedchuk's parliamentary inquiry.

THE KREMLIN POOL

As early as the first week of March 2020, the Kremlin-controlled media's content producing panic, chaos, and discrediting the U.S. and Europe looked as follows:

1. Newsgroups and political talk shows on federal channels.
2. Analytical resources associated with the Kremlin's think-tanks (Expert, The Valdai Club, VZ.ru, etc).
3. A group of tabloids aimed at mass audiences and providing texts for news aggregators (KP, MK, AIF, Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru).
4. A group of propaganda media including Russia Today, RIA Novosti, and Yevgeny Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group (FAN, Nation News, Economics Today, Politics Today).
5. News aggregators with a goal of increasing the sizes of the audiences for stories that would otherwise go unnoticed (Rambler News Service, Yandex News, 24SMI, SMI2, Lenta.ru).

Experts have described the Kremlin's system of media control many times.⁴² At the very top of it are Deputy Chiefs of the Presidential Administration Alexey Gromov and Sergey Kiriyenko who constantly interact with Vladimir Putin and have a very specific apparatus at their disposal that constantly monitors the media space and de-

velops ideas on how to support the "desirable" narratives and counter the "undesirable" ones.

Sergey Kiriyenko's scope of responsibilities involves the internet and new media while Alexey Gromov oversees the work of the traditional mass media: federal television channels, primary radio stations, and the largest tabloids. He is responsible for presenting a daily 15-minute overview of the most important bits of programming and a digest of significant media publications to Putin that he must be familiar with. The management of the political content aired on television is done through constant interaction between Alexey Gromov and his subordinates with the specially appointed leadership of television channels. Gromov's "Ministry of Propaganda" sets objectives for the TV channels like headlines, key messages, and thesis that need to be worked up in news broadcasts and on talk shows. He also determines who and what must not be on-air. The result of this centralized management is that the key propaganda media sources react to the Kremlin's agenda more or less simultaneously. It must be noted that the statements claiming that the TV viewership and tabloid readership are both dropping (i.e. "nobody is watching television" or "nobody is reading the Kremlin propaganda") are erroneous.

Many authors that deny the influence of the Kremlin media on public opinion are not taking the contemporary

41 RIA Novosti, "German Official Called Sanctions against Russia Absurd," RIA Novosti, March 26, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200326/1569199171.html?in=t>

42 Elnar Bainazarov, "Common Sense: in Light of COVID-19 FRG Called to Remove Sanctions on Russia," Izvestiya.ru, March 17, 2020, <https://iz.ru/987993/elnar-bainazarov/zdorovyi-smysl-na-fone-COVID-19-v-frg-prizvali-sniat-s-rossii-sanktcii>

mechanism of promoting messages into consideration. This includes not only the traditional mass media but also the possibility to repeat and amplify those messages using social networks and online search algorithms and recommendations. Content groups of traditional media manufacture propaganda messages which are then promoted by news aggregators and are therefore present on the websites of all national search and email service providers. Those messages are also quoted or on social networks and, finally, are passed from person to person verbally which reaches that part of the society that doesn't use the Internet. This way the Principle of Totality – one of the basic principles of effective propaganda – is maintained. In the general stream of information coming from various types of sources, more than 90% is information containing the same or very similar messages. Consequently, the majority of information consumers generate a false impression that alternative information either does not exist or is inessential, marginal, or not worth their attention.

Daily news programs and daily and weekly talk shows and analytical programs of Russia's five largest Federal TV channels – Channel One, Russia 1, NTV, REN TV, and TVC – are all included in the scope of active propaganda. The primary ones are:

1. "Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" and "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Solovyov" (as well as his Telegram and YouTube channels) famous for their aggressive presentation of information and derogatory statements towards the West and the Russians who support the opposition.
2. "Time Will Tell." Social and political talk show on Channel One hosted by Artyom Sheinin, Anatoly Kuzichev, and Yekaterina Strizhenova. This is the primary propaganda tool on Channel One and a vivid example of an aggressive, forceful manipulation style. Harsh moderation allows for the creation of an illusion of debate that inadvertently ends with previously agreed-upon conclusions.
3. "Vesti Nedeli." Weekly summary program on Russia-1 hosted by Dmitry Kiselyov.
4. "The Great Game." Social and political talk show on Channel One hosted by Dimitri Simes and Vyacheslav Nikonov. The authors say "this program is dedicated to the eternally salient subject of political confrontation. Namely, the collision of American and Russian worldviews."
5. "60 Minutes." Social and political talk show on Russia-1 hosted by Olga Skabeeva and Yevgeny Popov.
6. "Vesti v Subbotu." Informational analytical program on Russia-24 hosted by Sergei Brilëv.
7. "Dok Tok." A daily evening talk show hosted by Ksenia Sobchak and Alexander Gordon. It perfectly carried out propaganda functions by explaining to its viewers that the Russian healthcare system is much more effective than its European and American counterparts.
8. "Dobrov on Air." Weekly summary program on REN-TV hosted by Andrey Dobrov.
9. "Postscriptum." Informational and analytical program on TVC hosted by the famous propagandist Aleksey Pushkov. The channel is controlled by the government of Moscow.
10. "Itogi Nedeli." Weekly summary program on NTV hosted by Irada Zeynalova.
11. "Mezhdunarodnaya Pilorama." The weekly satirical show hosted by Tigran Keosayan.
12. "Mesto Vstrechi." Talk show on NTV hosted by Andrey Norkin and Ivan Trushkin.

THE INTERNET AND NEW MEDIA

Sergey Kiriyenko and the team of political managers he has put together oversee a large pool of various sources including radio stations, daily online newspapers, news aggregators, Telegram channels, and “troll factories.” This group was initially led by Alexey Goreslavsky who was recently replaced by Alexey Zharich.

In mid-March, Alexey Goreslavsky transferred from the Presidential Administration to the newly created State Center to Inform Citizens on the Coronavirus Situation. The center is responsible for the generation of official information, creation of the ideological framework for “politically permissible” interpretations, and waging information war against the creators and distributors of content that the Kremlin may consider dangerous for its politics and the ratings of the president and the government. Officially, the Center was created under the umbrella of the Russian government’s Coordination Council to Combat the Spread of Coronavirus, and the person responsible for its work is Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko. This Center was created using the structure (and the office) of a nonprofit organization called “Dialog,” and the Center’s office is located in the same building as Yandex in Moscow. (It is interesting to note that one month before that an entity called the Center for Risk Management was also created based on Dialog. The objective of this entity was to increase voter turnout and promote pro-Kremlin narratives during the voting on Constitutional amendments.) Meduza (as of April 23, 2021, Meduza is recognized as a foreign agent by federal law), citing sources close to the Coordination Council’s leadership, reported that the person responsible for the work with the Internet and mass media is Dialog’s deputy director Vladimir Tabak, former deputy director of the Internet Development Institute (IRI).

The analysis of the process of putting fake stories into the media shows that this political management team has several media groups under its control. All these media operate either under direct contracts with one of the Kremlin’s foundations, or their owners receive funding through large contracts to perform different kinds of activities. These media outlets are:

1. LIFE.ru – a tabloid created by Aram Gabrelyanov. LIFE.ru’s headlines during the pandemic boldly supported the Kremlin’s constant narratives such as “No

longer a threat to the world. The coronavirus struck at the American armed forces’ abilities” (March 31) and “The EU is over! How the Schengen Zone will break apart” (March 27). Dmitry Rodionov from LIFE.ru writes a column with standard rhetoric: “The common Europeans understand what’s going on. They are watching the EU leadership maintain deadly silence while several countries of the union are all becoming extinct from the pandemic. Against this background, even Germany is forbidding the export of masks from the country, while Poland and Czechia seize masks that China has been sending to save Italy. This isn’t even a case of ‘every man for himself,’ but rather that of ‘run for your life’ [...] If the pandemic intensifies there is no guarantee that the European Union will remain in existence...”⁴³

2. VZ.ru (Vzglyad), created by Konstantin Rykov in the early 2000s. In 2017, it came under the control of the ISEPR – the Presidential Administration’s primary analytical center and is now an active political magazine. Since 2018, following the departure of Editor-in-Chief Alexander Sharavsky, the editorial office has been run by Konstantin Kondrashin. VZ constantly publishes works by a group of anti-West propagandists such as Petr Akopov, Igor Maltsev, Andrei Babitsky, Gleb Kuznetsov, and Timofey Borchachev. The headlines and materials of VZ.ru clearly show synchronicity and unity of subject matter with other fully controlled media such as the above-mentioned LIFE.ru. For example: “The coronavirus is destroying the military power of the USA” (March 30), “The coronavirus has buried the Schengen Zone” (March 27), “The European Union has crumbled apart. Without making major announcements or setting the dates for 27 countries to bid farewell. Formally this organization still exists, but it looks like a family that has fallen apart and where each of its members is living their own life” (March 23), “Money and liberty are being taken away from the Europeans” (Igor Maltsev, March 19),⁴⁴ “The liberal world order is living its last days” (Timofey Borchachev, March 19).
3. REGNUM Information Agency is currently con-

43 Dmitry Rodionov, “EU Is Done! How Will the Schengen Zone Be Dissolved,” Life.ru, March 27, 2020, <https://life.ru/p/1315223>

44 Igor Maltsev, “Europeans Are Deprived of Money and Freedom,” Vzglyad.ru, March 19, 2020, <https://vz.ru/opinions/2020/3/19/1029236.html>

trolled by The Foundation for the Development of the Civil Society (FRGO) which is headed by Konstantin Kostin, the former head of the Internal Policy Directorate of the Presidential Administration. REGNUM makes its money by publishing content from regular clients – above all the FRGO, which, in turn, is operating under a contract with the Presidential Administration.

4. The Rambler Group, owned by Aleksandr Mamut. Besides Rambler News Service, this group includes Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru, Afisha, Sekret Firmy, and the Okko online streaming service. Of those only RNS, Lenta.ru, and Gazeta.ru participate in The Kremlin's propagandist campaigns. The group's political manager is Vladimir Yakovlev who has previously worked closely with Alexey Goreslavsky. The Editor-in-Chief of Lenta.ru is Vladimir Todorov, while Sergey Rybka, formerly editor and host at Govorit Moskva Radio, has been the Editor-in-Chief of Gazeta.ru since October 2019.
5. KP (The Komsomolskaya Pravda), operating both as a newspaper and a radio station. Some of their headlines: "Quarantine due to the coronavirus in Germany: the borders are locked down, but migrants are still being accepted without medical control and quarantine" (the title of an article by Eugen Schmidt, deputy chief of AfD for the Cologne District, published by the KP on April 1). "The coronavirus in Europe: the king of Spain is asking for China's help, while the personnel is fleeing retirement homes" (March 25), "Italian politician: 'Anti-Russian sanctions must be immediately repealed – otherwise we will leave the EU.' Berlusconi's comrade-in-arms, member of the Forza Italia party Antonio Razzi speaks with the KP" (March 22).
6. National News Service. Part of Multimedia-Holding (MMH) which belongs to Vitaliy Bogdanov. The radio station supports a full lineup of negative messages, ranging from conspiracy theories ("Military expert states the Chinese coronavirus is biological sabotage") to anti-Ukrainian narratives ("They are reducing the population." A political scientist talks about the slackening of quarantine in Ukraine").
7. IZ (The Izvestia). The IZ's newsroom, which is controlled by the Rossiya Bank and the Kovalchuk brothers' National Media Group, produces content for several media including REN TV and Channel 5. The synchronicity of covering the subjects listed above,

the unity of the expert group, and the full compliance with the primary narratives supported by Russia all indicate a high degree of control by the Presidential Administration.

8. Sputnik. A group of websites for the Kremlin's foreign policy propaganda. Just like Russia Today, it is using little-known experts from various countries criticizing the West: "The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed a complex humanitarian situation existing in the world. While the USA and the EU closed their borders, countries like China, Russia, and Cuba helped Italy – a member of the European Union – which most suffered from the pandemic" (Czech edition of the Sputnik). At the same time, Sputnik disseminated a Spanish language text containing the same rhetoric that Russia, China, and Cuba are helping suffering countries, while the USA and the European Union are not. "It is also important to note that Russia is not the only country helping Europeans in their fight against the pandemic. Italy is receiving help from Cuba and China in the fight against the coronavirus."
9. Prigozhin's "Federal News Agency". Today it produces as much propagandist information as RIA Novosti.

These news outlets, all owned by several large media holdings, are the primary content factories manufacturing anti-European and anti-American texts.

We must also note that the Presidential Administration has several "services" that can provide fast and often effective promotion of appropriate messages, as well as amplification of messages in new media. The most famous of those are the Internet Research Agency, which is a part of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Patriot Media Group, and Kristina Potupchik's group which de facto has a monopoly on servicing the Kremlin when it comes to anonymous Telegram channels. Prigozhin's trolls and bots are working for the massification of necessary messages, while Kristina Potupchik provides the support for corresponding narratives using a system of commercial relations with major Telegram channels and individual influencers on Facebook and Instagram.

As numerous academic and expert studies of the infodemic and the corresponding informational operations have shown, the activities aimed at information promotion reached their peak from March to May 2020 (when Russia was the primary source of messages), followed by a lull at the beginning of summer (with an increase in the amount of credible, high-quality information from sources

such as the WHO and national healthcare agencies). East StratCom has also reported a decline in the amount of COVID disinformation, as have other organizations that monitor the global media space. However, researchers from the University of Munich noted that the decrease of such activity may have been impacted by Twitter's and Facebook's greater involvement in the filtering of posts and other messages containing dangerous disinformation and by the greater caution exercised by mainstream media and internet channels due to bans and restrictions on the publication of unreliable content during the pandemic implemented in several countries.⁴⁵

Two factors limiting Russia's propaganda media, one internal and one external, should also be highlighted. When in March 2020 Vladimir Putin transferred the responsibility for the fight against the coronavirus to the local governments and regional leadership of Russia, conflicts arose in the governing mechanism of the state media. On the one hand, the Presidential Administration maintained its position on the anti-European and anti-American directions, criticizing, mocking, and attacking governments of the EU and other "adversaries" for the measures they were implementing. On the other hand, the decisions of Russian regional authorities (especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg) copied the very same European recipes that the Kremlin's media so disdained. Gradually, towards the end of May 2020, the attention of the mass media was shifted to more salient internal issues (including infection control measures, prevention, and the danger of self-treatment). This was achieved, in large part, thanks to the information policies of the Office of the Mayor of Moscow since practically all national and local mass me-

dia depended on those policies too.

Also, as it was correctly noted by Riddle's and East StratCom's researchers that the issue of informational confrontation during the infodemic became extremely important to China and its leadership. The President of the U.S. and several American allies voiced the idea of "calling on China to hold responsibility" for the pandemic. In some cases (for example, in Kazakhstan) national governments chose to freeze joint projects that were part of the New Silk Route citing China's insincere position during the early stages of the epidemic. East StratCom noted that China started using Russian-style tactics of informational confrontation approximately in early April 2020. However, it soon changed: rather than fanning the flames of anti-West messages within China, a switch to positive messages was made in both the diplomatic and "soft power" resources. Since China had already been conducting an approved policy to promote national interests in the Russian mass media for several years,⁴⁶ the program's operators from the Central Committee of the CPC and the Xinhua News Agency were not content with the constant harping of conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus, including those in the Russian media. Once China adopted "positive messages" (for example, "China took upon itself the pandemic's first strike and thus gave others the time to prepare), the sentiment of many Russian media outlets started changing in accordance with their duties.

And as more "obvious" propaganda stories appeared (e.g., the crisis in Belarus and the poisoning of Alexei Navalny) the disinformation narratives dating to the peak of the pandemic were relegated to the back burner.

45 Orestis Papakyriakopoulos, Juan Carlos Medina Serrano, and Simon Hegelich, "The Spread of COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories on Social Media and the Effect of Content Moderation: HKS Misinformation Review," *Misinformation Review*, April 21, 2021, <https://misinforeview.hks.harvard.edu/article/the-spread-of-COVID-19-conspiracy-theories-on-social-media-and-the-effect-ofcontent-moderation/>

46 Alexey Kovalyov, "It's a Facepalm. China Started Aggressively Promoting Itself through Russian Media but the Result Is Comical. Turned out That China Doesn't Have Skillful Propagandists.," *Meduza*, accessed June 25, 2021, <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/07/27/eto-polny-feypalm>

CONCLUSIONS

Just like any other crisis, the global COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted certain peculiarities of new techniques in the use of disinformation for political purposes. This overview, as well as the academic and expert studies mentioned herein, allow for systematizing observations, identifying the technological solutions used by disinformation creators, and evaluating both the effectiveness of information measures themselves (in this case, carried out by Russia) and the capabilities of other parties in the informational confrontation during a disinformation campaign.

A global pandemic that carries an immediate, invisible, and poorly contained threat to public health, results not only in a healthcare crisis affecting almost every country of the world but also bears the infodemic effect. This infodemic, characterized by an overabundance of information on a subject of common concern, allows the creators of disinformation to effectively plant fake stories useful to them and to create negative consequences in the real world (e.g., provoking distrust towards national institutions or discrediting the principles of continental unity, such as the EU).

The primary efforts of the creators of disinformation and propaganda are concentrated not necessarily on the creation of fake news but rather on false, harmful, and conspiracy theory narratives. In contrast to previous flareups of Russian disinformation activity (e.g., the Ukrainian crisis of 2013–2014, flight MH 17, and the unsuccessful poisoning of Sergei Skripal), the primary technology this time was not the “mass production” of fake information and false opinions, but rather the maintenance of a reference network providing the constant redirection of media consumers to generated narratives using multilayered referencing and laundering of disinformation through increasingly more trustworthy media sources.

The primary victims of disinformation operations during a pandemic are the country’s citizens. Even though since the beginning of the pandemic (and the infodemic), the “foreign direction” was important to the Kremlin, the peculiarities of the contemporary media space continued to return the false narratives and fake news to the Russian discourse. While the Kremlin was developing national policies concerning the pandemic, the state media were

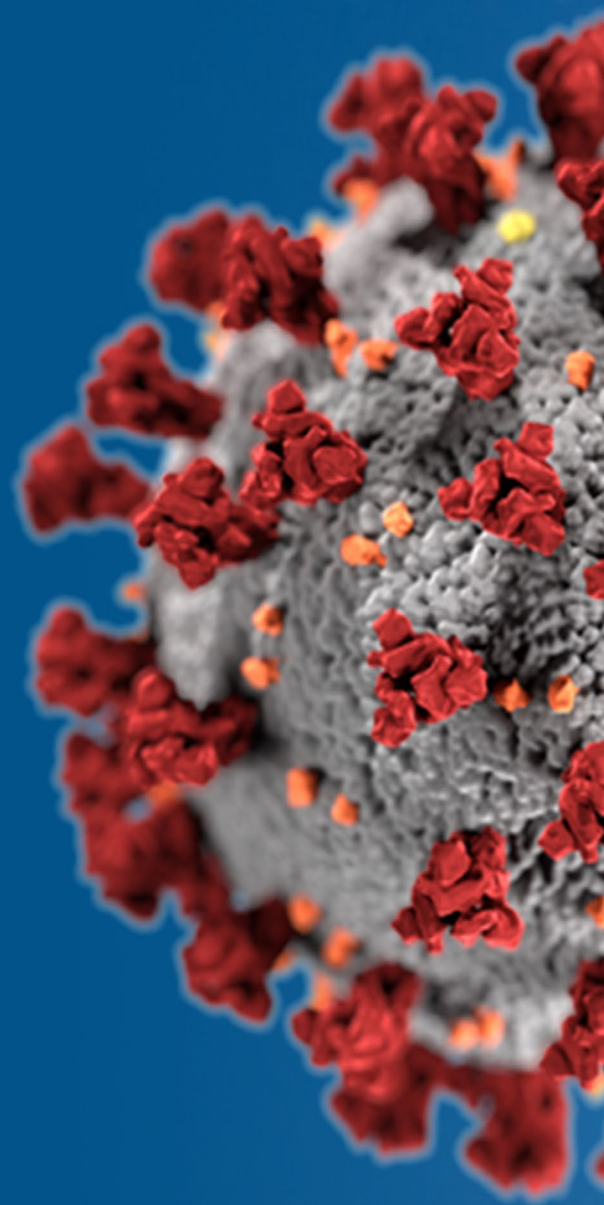
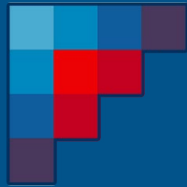
receiving consistent directions to amplify the anti-West and anti-democratic sentiment from the Kremlin. As soon as the implementation of anti-COVID policies was delegated to the regional leadership, they were able to get across the notion that questionable, falsified, and sharply critical information is harmful (including the information about the EU countries’ measures to combat the coronavirus, many of which were being copied by Russia). Moreover, the Russian authorities are still having to deal with a broad variety of COVID denial which is inspired among other things by false messages in the Russian media.

Identification and classification of disinformation threats is a key component in the fight against unscrupulous propaganda and fake news. In the situation that unfolded in March-May 2020, when streams of disinformation were flowing from Moscow, the EU’s East Strat-Com monitoring system proved its mettle, as did the private initiatives by the Trento University, European Values Foundations, German Marshall Fund, and many others. They promptly captured the growth and coordinated the nature of the disinformation, identified and recorded the chains of messages used to create and then fortify the corresponding narrative (i.e., the “reference network”), and delivered this information to executive and parliamentary entities of the European Union. Besides, following the 2016 US presidential elections, Russia’s attempts to interfere in the 2017 French presidential elections, and to influence the Brexit referendum in 2018, American and European academic researchers developed a broad spectrum of instruments to analyze social media for the presence of synchronized, controlled viral campaigns. In the infodemic surrounding COVID-19, those instruments provided additional arguments to the researchers in favor of identifying the disinformation sources and their methods to control social amplification. This allowed Facebook and Twitter to cut short the spreading of harmful messages relatively quickly and effectively. Also, the academic community and, partly, the harsh reaction of the countries of the EU to the proliferation of disinformation motivated Google to implement stricter filtration of search results about COVID-19, known fakes, and persons supporting conspiracy theories regarding the coronavirus.

According to polls conducted by the Levada Center and by Sergey Belanovsky's independent group, despite all the efforts to distract the Russian voters from the issues of accountability for the delayed and inadequate (both from the standpoint of medicine and in the area of social and economic support) response of the Russian authorities to the challenge of the pandemic, no less than half of the respondents believe that President Vladimir Putin and his subordinates are directly at fault for the scale of the pandemic's spread in Russia. A separate issue is the trustworthiness of the Russian data about the number of

coronavirus cases and deaths; 3/4 of the respondents do not trust the official data in this area. Finally, it turned out to be a surprise for the Russian authorities that their own disinformation would lead to the emergence of domestic COVID deniers' groups that refused to follow the quarantine guidelines, social distancing, and limiting gatherings, while propagating anti-scientific and harmful methods of preventing and treating the virus. As we understand, this resulted in a large part of domestic disinformation campaigns being shut down.

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