

Russian disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic – how does Moscow attempt to use the coronavirus pursue its agenda?

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SUMMARY

1. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia became its main successor, though it lost the superpower status that the Soviet Union used to hold. In recent years, Russia has been intensively trying to regain the position that the Soviet Union had had, for instance through strengthening its standing on the global stage and expand its sphere of influence. The Kremlin has been using a wide range of methods for such purposes, one of which is disinformation
2. Russia recognised the opportunities that the Covid-19 pandemic offers and decided to use the coronavirus crisis to pursue its agenda and facilitate accomplishing particular goals and objectives of its foreign policy. Through the use of disinformation, Moscow has been trying to undermine the authority of the EU and NATO and agitate its member states against each other. A disinformation campaign aimed at weakening the position of the US on the international scene is also underway
3. However, Russia's disinformation activities during the pandemic are not limited to coronavirus-related issues, as exemplified by the disinformation regarding NATO's DEFENDER-Europe 20 manoeuvres

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia became its main successor, though it lost the superpower status that the Soviet Union used to hold. The beginning of the 21st century, initiated with Vladimir Putin becoming the president, marked the inauguration of the reconsolidation process of Russia's great power status¹.

In order for this process to succeed, the Kremlin's plan aims at strengthening Russia's position on the global stage through, amongst others, reinforcing its influence in countries that Moscow perceives as its traditional sphere of influence and expanding such sphere, undermining the EU and NATO, as well as weakening the position of other global powers – especially the US. To this end, for several years now Moscow has been carrying out activities on multiple levels, e.g. political, economic, military, or hybrid, and in various parts of the world. There are plenty of examples that can be used here, for instance Russia's involvement in the Ukrainian conflict and the illegal annexation of Crimea. Another illustration is taking part in the conflict in Syria, which aimed at protecting the regime of Bashar al-Assad (Moscow and Damascus have enjoyed quite a beneficial relationship since the early 1970s, when Bashar's father, Hafez, rose to power). Moreover, from the very beginning of the engagement, preventing al-Assad's regime from collapsing was regarded by Kremlin as an integral part of the plan for further expanding Russia's influence in the Middle East. Lastly, an increased interest in deepening relations with African countries – and through such reinforcing Russia's position on the continent, what was demonstrated by the Russia-Africa summit held in Sochi in October 2019 – seems to play a role in fulfilling the ambition of becoming a superpower.

A number of different types of sanctions (diplomatic, economic, etc.) have been imposed on Russia for frequent violations of international law – for instance for the aforementioned annexation of Crimea, meddling in the US presidential election process in 2016, or an attempted assassination of a former Russian intelligence officer, Sergei Skripal. For several years now, Russia has been, more or less effectively, isolated on the international scene.

Disinformation is one of the methods quite repeatedly used by the Kremlin. Russia uses disinformation in order to manipulate the global narration in a way favourable for itself, which is supposed to advance the pursuit of Moscow's foreign policy objectives. Russia attempts to strengthen its position on the global stage and expand its sphere of influence through, for instance, spreading rumours aimed at sowing panic, chaos, and uncertainty,

as well as undermining public trust to authorities in other countries, whose governments are at odds with the Kremlin.

At present, Russia is struggling with the spread of coronavirus, just like any other country. The official number of infections shows currently over 350 000 cases, however, a number of experts believe that the actual number of those infected is far higher than the Kremlin is willing to admit. Nonetheless, in the global crises caused by Covid-19, Moscow recognised the opportunities the pandemic offers and attempts to make the best use of the coronavirus crisis to pursue its agenda and advance accomplishing its goals – both immediate and long-term ones.

The focus of this paper shall be put on what Russia tries to achieve pursuing its disinformation campaigns during the pandemic, rather than on the means Moscow uses to spread the disinformation.

Russian disinformation – examples from the recent past

Using disinformation is nothing new for the Kremlin. Over the decades – including the communist times of the Soviet Union – Moscow has been regularly employing this method, often combining it with its propaganda activities. It can be argued that disinformation has been an integral element of pursuing Russia's foreign policy agenda for many years. However, there is no need to look for examples in the distant past – there have been quite a fair amount of them in the recent years: for instance, disinformation has accompanied the Russian military and political involvement in Ukraine, the US presidential election in 2016, or the spread of Ebola in Liberia and Sierra Leone, for which the Kremlin's propaganda tubes have blamed the US.

Russia uses quite a wide range of entities to spread disinformation: from internet trolls that run campaigns in social media, to its Foreign Ministry and its subordinate diplomatic missions around the globe, which transmit false messages, to Moscow's propaganda tubes (Russia Today TV network, or Sputnik news agency). Spreading disinformation is simplified by the fact that the Kremlin keeps quite a tight grip over the media sector in Russia and tries to limit independent journalism in the country.

Russian disinformation during the coronavirus pandemic

Russian disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic aims mainly at two things. Firstly, Moscow seeks to undermine the authority of the UE and

NATO, as well as weaken the cooperation between their member states. Also, it tries to show both institutions' perceived weaknesses in the face of the current crisis and their inability to provide assistance to member states in need. Secondly, Russia takes active steps to expose the vulnerability of the US, and to undermine other countries' trust to the US government through spreading false accounts according to which the coronavirus pandemic is an effect of American research on biological weapons. In other words, Moscow is trying to discredit the U.S. in the international arena.

Moscow sees undermining intra-European and transatlantic cooperation, as well as damaging the reputation of the US, as actions acting to its best interest. The Kremlin seems to be perceiving world politics as a zero-sum game: according to this perspective, the weaker the EU and NATO and the poorer the reputation of the US, the greater the chance of strengthening Russia's position on the international stage and expanding its sphere of influence.

Because of the limited space here, Russia's disinformation during the coronavirus pandemic will be illustrated only on a few selected examples.

Medical assistance to other countries

Russia's deliveries of medical aid to other countries were accompanied by disinformation combined with propaganda activities. Here, the cases of medical transports to Italy, Serbia, and the US will be analysed.

What is interesting, China's doing is very similar in that regard, and its activities have been dubbed 'mask diplomacy'. Beijing's intentions are primarily aimed at replacing the narrative presenting China as the country where the pandemic began, with a picture of the country that has dealt with coronavirus and is now able to help others. Furthermore, China's authorities seek to recover their image and divert attention from the mistakes they made in the initial period of the pandemic.

Russia's motives, however, are quite different. Although the medical transports to each of the aforementioned countries had at least one common goal – namely promoting Russia's image as a country coping with the coronavirus well enough to help others – Moscow planned to exploit each of the cases in a different way.

Italy

Due to the action of providing medical help to Italy, named 'From Russia with Love', in addition to medical equipment, more than 100 Russian members of the military medical personnel were deployed to the Apennine Peninsula. The mere fact that it was the Russian Defence Ministry behind the medical mission, and that it included military personnel, should have been alarming for Italy as a member of the EU and NATO, as well as for these institutions.

According to the La Stampa newspaper, which cited sources in the Italian Ministry of Defence, 80 % of the supplied equipment was supposed to be useless in the struggle against coronavirus. Quite quickly, information was revealed that among the medical stuff directed to Italy were Russian intelligence officers³. The action of providing medical assistance was therefore not a humanitarian mission, but rather one of disinformation, intelligence, and propaganda purposes. The disinformation campaign was designed for harming the unity of the European (EU) and transatlantic (NATO) communities and portraying the EU as incompetent and unable to provide an adequate assistance. When it comes to the intelligence aspect, operations within this dimension could have been aimed, amongst others, at collecting information on the functioning of the Italian army, police, and other state entities during the pandemic^{4,5}.

There was an additional motivation behind Moscow's aid to Italy that ought to be mentioned here – namely, the attempt to interrupt Russia's isolation on the international scene. In other words, the Kremlin tried to break the EU's internal unity regarding upholding its sanctions imposed on Russia (the decision to extend the sanctions for a renewed period of time needs to be made unanimously by all members of the EU every six months). Italy is seen as the state with a considerable willingness to lift the restrictions imposed on Russia, which the Kremlin has decided to exploit. Interestingly, Vladimir Putin called for the lifting of sanctions himself during the G20 summit held in late March. He argued that such a decision should be made for humanitarian reasons so that countries could better respond to the pandemic⁶.

Serbia

Due to the deteriorating situation in the country with relation to Covid-19, Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić turned to China and Russia for assistance. He justified his request by saying that the EU is entirely absorbed with providing help to its member states, at the same time forgetting about the countries in its immediate neighbourhood⁷.

11 airplanes transported medical equipment and 87 military doctors⁸. Together with Serbian soldiers, they were meant to be responsible for disinfecting buildings and organizing healing centres. The assistance for Serbia, as in the case of Italy, was organised by the Russian armed forces from the beginning.

While analysing the motivation behind Russia's aid to Serbia, it has to be underlined that both countries have political, economic, and military ties, as well as share Slavic origins. What is more, Russia still has not recognised the independence of Kosovo. However, it seems that while deciding to provide aid to Serbia, the Kremlin took into consideration quite different arguments.

One can argue that Russia decided to aid Serbia in order to hinder its integration with the EU. Russia's disinformation campaign in this particular case is based on undermining the authority of the EU and portraying it as an unreliable partner, which does not guarantee a sufficient level of assistance when it is most needed. In fact, however, the EU actually provided help to Serbia during the pandemic.

An attempt to reinforce influence in Serbia may be an element of the Kremlin's plan of further growing Russia's impact on the Balkans, and thus damaging prospects for a possible Euro-Atlantic integration of the countries in the region. Of the Balkan countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina is an official NATO candidate, and the EU accession is under negotiation with North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, and Serbia.

Moscow also hopes to encourage an anti-EU sentiment amongst the Serbian society. The Kremlin thinks this should positively impact Moscow's struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of the Serbs, and thus facilitate the achievement of Russian foreign policy objectives concerning Serbia and the Balkans in the wider perspective.

The US

In early April, Moscow sent transport with medical equipment to the US. Russia's motivation behind this action was multifaceted, however, the humanitarian aspect of aiding the United States as a country in need of assistance was hardly one of them.

Firstly, the mere fact of sending medical aid to the United States allowed the Kremlin to stress in its propaganda that the US's initial response to Covid-19 was inadequate. Moscow's action has exposed the American authorities to a damage to their image – after all, Washington accepted medical transport from one of its main opponents on the international arena.

Moreover, a disinformation campaign presenting Moscow's decision as a selfless act of support was launched immediately. It was not, however, humanitarian assistance and therefore free of any charge. Quite to the contrary, the US had to pay for the equipment received from Russia⁹. Furthermore, some of the delivered medical devices were manufactured by Russian companies upon which Western sanctions had been imposed. Thus, Washington fell into the Kremlin's propaganda trap, which in turn has allowed Moscow to reinforce its narrative regarding the need of lifting international restrictions because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Russia also aimed at undermining the superpower status of the US, as well as showing to the world that even the United States is not able to cope with every crisis.

Coronavirus as a biological weapon

As part of its disinformation campaign, the Kremlin has also been dissolving rumours that the coronavirus is the result of the American research on biological weapons. These accusations resemble a well-known Cold War narrative of the USSR, which accused the US of conducting biological experiments that got out of control, resulting in the tragic spread of AIDS. While some journalists and historians argue over the name of that disinformation campaign (according to some it was 'Operation Denver', while others think it was rather 'Operation Infection'), there is a general agreement that secret services of the USSR and other communist countries were involved in disseminating such theory^{10,11}.

By spreading rumours that the coronavirus was created as a biological weapon by the Americans, Russia tries to undermine other countries' trust to the US. It also attempts to portray the US as a country at best incompetent, and at worst cynically using biological weaponry to pursue its agenda. One can argue that the Kremlin strives for weakening the US's international position, and thus for deteriorating its position as the global hegemon.

Disinformation related to the DEFENDER-Europe 20

Finally, it is worth mentioning that currently Russia does not limit its disinformation activities solely to coronavirus-related topics. The example of disinformation accompanying DEFENDER-Europe 20 manoeuvres illustrates this point.

These exercises were to take place, among other places, in Poland and in the Baltic States, and the plan was to transport 20 thousand soldiers and military equipment from the US to Europe. Russia considers any military exercises near its borders as a provocation and perceived DEFENDER-Europe 20 as a threat to its security since it was announced. This is also how it presented the manoeuvres in the media.

In the period preceding the planned start of the manoeuvres, both before and after the announcement of the coronavirus pandemic, the pro-Kremlin media published information aimed at agitating NATO's member states against each other, as well as challenging the need for conducting the manoeuvres. What is more, Sputnik disseminated information about transferring nuclear weapons to Poland and planning to simulate a nuclear attack on Russia as part of the military exercise. Such revelations were obviously denied by the Polish Ministry of Defence.

Undoubtedly, Moscow's goals were to play on the emotions of Russian society and spread fear amongst its members. In the pro-Kremlin media, NATO was presented in a negative light, even as a potential aggressor, which was supposed to intensify average the Russians' reluctance towards the Alliance and its member states, and through such increase support for Putin's anti-Western rhetoric.

Conclusion

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became its main successor, though it did not inherit the superpower status. For some years now, Moscow has been carrying out intensive efforts to regain this position, and its disinformation activities are one of the tools used for this purpose.

Russia recognised the opportunities presented by the coronavirus pandemic and decided to use them to pursue achieving its goals, which are, amongst others, undermining the EU and NATO, discrediting the US on the international stage, as well as strengthening its own position and expanding the sphere of its influence. The Kremlin, quite cleverly, analysed how it can benefit from the pandemic and made a decision to use the coronavirus crisis for the purpose of accomplishing the objectives of its foreign policy.

From the very beginning, Moscow's decision to send medical transports to Italy, Serbia, and the US had little to do with the humanitarian aspect of helping, and in fact was intended to facilitate Russia with achieving particular benefits. The same reasoning was behind spreading rumours about the US developing coronavirus as part of its research on biological weapons, in which case the Kremlin drew inspiration from the Soviet Union's disinformation activities against the US from several decades ago.

It ought to be highlighted that Russia does not limit its disinformation activities during the pandemic solely to the coronavirus-related topics. An example illustrating this point is the disinformation regarding the DEFENDER-Europe 20, and particularly false news about transferring nuclear weapons to Poland and simulating nuclear attacks on Russia as part of the DEFENDER manoeuvres.

Recommendations for NATO, the EU, and US

- In one of its media communicates, NATO argued that the best response to the Russian disinformation is proving it wrong with action revealing its falseness. However, the need for greater publicity of such actions must be stressed. To this end, it is worthwhile to conduct a media campaign to illustrate how member states receive assistance through the NATO Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre and to stress that, despite the coronavirus pandemic, NATO continues to fulfil its role of deterring and securing its member states and their citizens. Advancing digitalisation and technological development do not mean, however, that every citizen of NATO member state has access to the Internet or is in possession of a device that allows for using the internet. Moreover, the number of people following NATO's social media or visiting the Alliance's website to learn about its activities is rather low. Therefore, the media campaign should be conducted both in social media, as well as in traditional media (radio, newspapers, etc.) to maximise its reach and audience. The EU should act in the same way.
- Looking at the example of the Russian military medical mission to Italy, some of whose members are Russian intelligence officers, member states of the EU and NATO should insist that any future aid from Russia only covers medical equipment. "Medical personnel" deployed by Moscow to any of the EU and NATO member state should be subjected to a check by counter-intelligence service of given countries, in order to make it more difficult for Russia to use the coronavirus pandemic for running additional intelligence operations.
- The EU, NATO, and the US should agree on a coherent and clear message, supported by scientific arguments, on the origin, prevention, and treatment of coronavirus. To this end, they should use, for instance, TV conferences (also broadcasted in social media), which would involve experts with scientific knowledge and from recognised institutions, and not politicians. Moreover, a good idea would be to set up an online information service dedicated entirely to the coronavirus pandemic, which would provide reliable information. All interested parties, that is the EU, NATO, and the US should be engaged in administering such a portal. In order to maximise audience, it also seems appropriate to conduct an information campaign in the print media, e.g. by purchasing space in newspapers with an established reputation and widespread circulation and providing the most important information about the coronavirus in the form of an article, or an interview with an expert.

- An in-depth analysis of Russia's disinformation campaigns during the coronavirus pandemic ought to be carried out, as Moscow certainly will not give up using disinformation as a tool in achieving its foreign policy objectives. Therefore, it is worthwhile to know and understand the mechanisms of it. While developing such an analysis, it is necessary to take into account Moscow's disinformation activities from the past – both recent, and more distant.

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