

Russia's Viral Disinformation in Ukraine



Featuring Nataliya Bugayova and George Barros

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Likely Russian actors launched a disinformation campaign against Ukraine exploiting COVID-19 fears related to the Ukrainian government's evacuation of its citizens from Wuhan, China. The campaign's tactics, timing, and nature point toward Kremlin involvement. In this episode of Overwatch, ISW's Russia Team Lead Nataliya Bugayova and Russia Research Assistant George Barros discuss this information operation, the Kremlin's disinformation techniques, and larger implications for Ukraine.

Kim Kagan:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Today, we will talk about a likely Russian disinformation campaign on COVID-19, or coronavirus. The US State Department assessed this January that Russia is spreading misinformation about COVID-19 globally. ISW analyzed a coronavirus-focused disinformation campaign that took place in Ukraine in mid-February. In our assessment, likely Russian actors launched this campaign to provoke protests in Ukraine in response to the arrival of Ukrainian evacuees from China. It is likely a component of both the Kremlin's global disinformation campaign around coronavirus and the Kremlin's pressure campaign against Ukrainian government as Vladimir Putin seeks to regain dominant influence over Ukraine's decision-making. This campaign matters for US national security from the standpoint of both the innovations in the Kremlin's hybrid warfare tactics, as well as the Kremlin's pressure on Ukraine. The Kremlin disinformation also makes it more challenging to contain the spread of coronavirus globally. We will now talk about the disinformation tactics that we have uncovered, their impact, and the larger implications for the US.

George Barros:

The disinformation campaign was Ukraine-wide, coordinated, and employed a variety of tools. The campaign exploited the lack of information about the evacuees' quarantine site, which Ukrainian officials did not reveal until the last minute. Information about the quarantine's location began spreading on Ukrainian social media in mid-February, fueling uncertainty and fear. Misinformation proliferated through news sites and social media. Ukrainians across the country also received texts en masse falsely claiming that Ukrainian authorities selected their specific city to quarantine evacuees. The text messages called to protest to block the evacuees' arrival.

Disinformation specifically targeted Novi Sanzhary in central Ukraine, the actual quarantine site that the Ukrainian government announced on February 20th. The day before, mass text messages were sent to locals and called for protests to block the evacuees' arrival. There was also a fake email posing as the Ukrainian Ministry of Health that was sent out 10 minutes before the evacuees' plane even arrived in Ukraine on February 20th. This was aimed to provoke fear. The email falsely stated that there were five laboratory-confirmed cases of coronavirus inside Ukraine. We'll now provide a brief overview of our assessment for the impacts of this disinformation. The disinformation likely fueled the protests in Novi Sanzhary. Protestors gathered near the quarantine site before the evacuees even departed China or before the regional governor knew that his province was selected as the quarantine site. Protestors attacked the evacuees' convoy, attempting to block their arrival.

George Barros:

Disinformation helped fuel protests in four Ukrainian cities. The protests also forced the resignation of a Ukrainian governor, another indicator that the disinformation campaign achieved real-life effects. The Kremlin exploited the optics to frame Ukraine in a negative light internationally and claimed the protests made Ukraine look like medieval Europe. The disinformation operation also coincided with the Kremlin's pressure campaign against Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The Kremlin has been increasing its pressure on Ukraine as Putin seeks to shrink Zelensky's space to maneuver in the peace process for the war in Donbass. Kremlin proxy forces launched an offensive on Ukrainian positions on February 18th during the middle of the coronavirus disinformation campaign. This disinformation further eroded Ukraine's domestic confidence in the government at a time when Zelensky's ratings are at an all-time low. This campaign thus supported the Kremlin's larger effort to increase pressure on Zelensky to grant concessions in the war.

Nataliya Bugayova:

We assessed this disinformation campaign in Ukraine had Kremlin backing for several reasons. First, the campaign's coordinated nature. This disinformation was nationwide, it used a wide variety of tools from social media to text to fabricated government correspondence. The social media engagements were also most likely inorganic based on the post-interaction patterns and like-to-share ratios. The Kremlin also used similar tactics in the past, including targeted text messages. For example, Ukrainian soldiers in Donbass have received targeted text messages with Kremlin propaganda since the war began in 2014. Additionally, the fake government email had a previous analog. The Kremlin-linked actors sent a letter posing as Ukrainian government to a Ukrainian hospital with fake orders in 2018 under the pretext of martial law.

George Barros:

Another indicator of the Kremlin's engagement is the participation of non-locals during the protests in Novi Sanzhary. Ukrainian law enforcement stated that two-thirds of the violent arrested protestors in Novi Sanzhary are not local residents and claimed that many of them were professional provocateurs. The Kremlin and its proxies have used paid protestors in Ukraine before to fuel discontent, a prominent example being former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's use of provocateurs to assault protestors during the Euromaidan protests in 2014.

Finally, this disinformation campaign may be a part of the Kremlin's global information operation on coronavirus. The US State Department assesses that the Kremlin is executing a global information operation on coronavirus. The Kremlin employs real humans, not just bots, to operate thousands of social media personas to spread alarm about the coronavirus and advance Kremlin talking points, including conspiracy theories that the United States is behind the coronavirus outbreak. US experts notice parallels with Soviet efforts such as the KGB's disinformation campaign from the '80s that claimed that US scientists created HIV/AIDS. We have also observed similar data outside of Ukraine. Russian state-run media, specifically Sputnik's Arabic language service, claimed that 10 members of the Iraqi parliament are infected with coronavirus, a claim that Iraq's government denied.

Nataliya Bugayova:

The disinformation campaign in Ukraine has larger implications and matters for two key reasons. First, Russia is evolving its hybrid warfare tactics. Russia may be testing a new way to destabilize government through opportunistic scare campaigns exploiting public health concerns. Other global actors are watching the Kremlin's actors, and it means that disinformation techniques are at risk of proliferating. This disinformation campaign also matters in the context of Russia's efforts to bring Ukraine back to the Kremlin's orbit. Putin's campaign to regain dominant influence over Ukraine's decision-making consists of many components, and this recent disinformation operation aimed at weakening the credibility of Ukrainian government is likely one such component.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Current Russian influence in Ukraine matters for US national security because Ukraine is a key determining point for Putin's ability to advance his ambitions globally, as the Kremlin campaign in Ukraine and associated costs are still a major dampener on Putin's ambitions. You can read ISW's full assessment and case study of this coronavirus disinformation operation online at understandingwar.org.

Kim Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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