

Kremlin Uses COVID-19 Misinformation to Bolster Image, Undermine Adversaries, and Seek Sanctions Relief



Featuring Nataliya Bugayova, George Barros, and Mason Clark

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Kremlin-affiliated networks are falsely accusing the United States of engineering the coronavirus responsible for the ongoing pandemic. This narrative is one of several interlocking disinformation efforts by the Kremlin that exploit COVID-19. In this episode of Overwatch, ISW's Russia team unpacks how the Kremlin's complex information operations support its long-standing objectives in Syria, in Ukraine, and globally.

Kim Kagan:

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Nataliya Bugayova:

Good afternoon. I'm Nataliya Bugayova, Russia team lead here at the Institute for The Study of War. Today, we will talk about the Kremlin's information operations around COVID-19. I'm joined today by my colleagues, Mason Clark and George Barros. I will start by saying that Russia's information efforts around COVID-19 have not been merely impressionistic. In fact, they support a number of Kremlin's longstanding objectives across multiple theaters. From widening efforts to lift sanctions on Russia to undermining the image of the United States at home and globally.

Today, we'll talk about three key directions of the Kremlin's information campaigns related to COVID-19 that we have been observing. First one is related to the anti-West rhetoric. Second's, Kremlin's larger efforts to lift sanctions, and finally, the Kremlin related information operations in specific theaters and campaigns such as Ukraine. So first the major bucket is focused on the US and the West. Already in February, Russian proxy networks were promoting conspiracies that the US is behind COVID-19 as the US State Department reported. Russian media was also amplifying the narratives about racism in the West emerged around COVID. There's one narrative, however, the Kremlin is particularly emphasizing and trying to gain momentum for. Is the disinformation about the United States operating bio-weapon laboratories in the former Soviet union.

The Kremlin is pushing this narrative at both localized level and globally. At the global level, the Kremlin officials, including Russia's foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, revived the Kremlin's old claims that the US Department of Defense has bio laboratories near Russia's borders that might be producing biological weapons. Lavrov said in May, that US unwillingness to be transparent about its military, biological activities, raises questions about what exactly the US is doing. The Kremlin also claimed that Georgian government is trying to divert the global attention away from the military biological activity or foreign states, implying the US, at the health center in Georgia named after a US Senator Richard Lugar. As a side note, US has a cooperative threat reduction program with some of the former Soviet States, but solely for the purpose of biological threat reduction. The second stream of this disinformation is coming out on a more localized level from Russian networks in Ukraine. Which is spreading the narrative that the US developed COVID-19 in Ukrainian biological facilities. They are particularly interesting in this case. In addition to this narrative being spread through media. Russian linked Ukrainian members of parliament, even called to launch an official investigation in the US bio-research efforts in Ukraine.

Separately, there was even an official petition on Ukrainians president website from some concerned citizens likely linked to Russia's war efforts saying that the US must repent and pay back everyone for what US made COVID-19 has done. The Kremlin's trying to do couple of things with this campaign. First, is create negative

sentiment against the US in Ukraine, Georgia, and other countries. The larger goal is to keep the United States on defensive in the information space.

Nataliya Bugayova:

What is also interesting is that China is now also amplifying this Russia's narrative. China's Foreign Minister echoed a long standing Russia's allegation for the first time on April 29th, accusing US sponsored labs in the former USSR country for developing bio weapons. Early in May, the head of the US State Department stated that China and Russia are likely communicating to coordinate these disinformation campaigns, adding that they're seeing the Chinese communist party adopting Russian style tactics. In addition to this campaign, we're also observing the attacks on the Western media in Russia, which Mason will now talk about.

Mason Clark:

Thanks, Nataliya. The Kremlin began orienting its COVID-19 information campaign to actively suppress Western media coverage of COVID-19 in Russia in mid May, demanding Western media outlets retract coverage of the Kremlin's cover up on death rates and claiming Western publications are carrying out a coordinated disinformation operation against Russia. A longstanding Russian narrative, the Kremlin is now linking to COVID-19. The Kremlin previously focused its information efforts around COVID-19 on controlling the domestic Russian language information space in March and April, to push its preferred framing of a competent Kremlin response to the pandemic. This newly adapted effort is primarily focused on the international English language information space in two ways. First, limiting any non Kremlin favorable coverage to burnish Russia's image as having dealt with COVID-19 better than most States, particularly in the United States. And second, cohering the Kremlin narrative of a coordinated US information campaign against Russia.

This campaign is less focused on the domestic Russian information space, though the Kremlin is likely also attempting to pressure Western outlets to prevent Russian audiences from receiving non-Kremlin media, particularly as the Kremlin increases its framing of having defeated COVID-19. On May 14th, the Russian Foreign Ministry sent formal letters demanding both the New York Times and the Financial Times, retract their stories on the Kremlin covering up COVID-19 death rates or face the possible loss of accreditation in Russia. Both outlets stood by their stories and the Kremlin has not yet taken any further direct action in response. Additionally, Moscow health officials issued lengthy statements justifying their numbers as correct. The Kremlin is leveraging local authorities for this information campaign as well, in addition to the Foreign Ministry. This Kremlin pressure had a demonstrable effect between May 13th and May 16th on Bloomberg. Bloomberg News changed the title of an article on the Kremlins campaign to cover up COVID-19 deaths three times between May 13th and May 16th, following public pressure from Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, in a formal letter. Bloomberg initially published an article titled, "Experts Want to Know Why The Coronavirus Didn't Kill The Russians More", on May 13th. After this public pressure and private letter and two intermediary edits Bloomberg edited the title to, "Experts Question Russian Data on Mortality From Coronavirus", on May 16th. The Kremlin further decried a Bloomberg article on Putin's declining popularity as part of a coordinated misinformation campaign on May 23rd.

Russian Foreign Ministry, spokeswoman Zakharova directly stated that all of these articles were directly part of a Western disinformation campaign against Russia. The Kremlin is now linking a long running framing of coordinated Western disinformation against Russia to COVID-19, adapting its existing campaign. It's important to note that this direct pressure on Western outlets is a known Kremlin tactic. The Kremlin put pressure throughout the fall of 2019 on German outlet, Deutsche Velle for its coverage of Moscow protests, in summer 2019. Threats of expulsion brought Deutsche Velle to the table for a formal meeting with the Russian Foreign Ministry and Russian Parliament, which at minimum the Kremlin was able to spin into a propaganda victory claiming

Deutsche Velle apologized to the Kremlin and it served as a warning to other Western outlets of the lengths the Kremlin will take to push back on non desired media coverage.

Mason Clark:

The Kremlin is also likely to attempting to co-op the Western outlets where possible to promote and legitimize it's own narratives. Reuters began offering Kremlin run wire service TASS, the largest media organization in Russia, to its Reuters connect customers on June 1st, a move the CEO of TASS praised as essential to promoting a quote "Objective and reliable image of Russia, in the global information agenda." The Kremlin is additionally attempting to leverage COVID-19 to advance its campaign to remove Western sanctions on Russia, by framing sanctions as inhumane during COVID-19. The Kremlin has attempted to advance this objective by linking the removal of sanctions to a UN Security Council Resolution sponsored by France, calling for a global ceasefire. This sanctions removal campaign has stalled on the UN Security Council Resolution, however. The UN Security Council has still yet to make any formal statement on COVID-19 due to protracted negotiations among the P5, US and China disputes over the World Health Organization being at the core of this. The United States does not want the World Health Organization mentioned in the resolution, while China wants it praised for its involvement in combating COVID-19, a position the Kremlin supports. The Kremlin is still seeking to advance this effort despite deadlock in the Security Council, however. Ukraine's Ambassador to the United Nations confirmed on May 28th, that Russia's delegation continues to demand sanctions removal be attached to any resolution on a global ceasefire due to COVID-19.

This debate in the UN Security Council over the World Health Organization illustrates a great example of the malleability of Russian information operations. Simultaneously, Russia and Syria issued a joint statement, the World Health Organization is pushing bustard interests in Syria on May 13th. Russia and Syria claimed the World Health Organization recommendations to reopen border crossings in Northeast Syria are intended to facilitate sending drugs, weapons, and COVID-19 positive patients into areas of Assad controlled Syria. This shows the adaptability of Russian narratives. Russia is supporting a clause praising the World Health Organization as an excellent aid to the global response to COVID-19 in the UN Security Council while also decrying it as a Western tool in Syria.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Thank you, Mason. I would also note that it is not all anti-Western narrative or criticism coming out of the Kremlin in the COVID environment. In fact, the Kremlin has also been reaching out to the West during the pandemic. Russian Minister of Defense delivered limited humanitarian aid to the US, Italy and the Balkan States, despite the fact that Russia suffering domestic shortages. Putin also has been trying to engage US and other members of the United Nations Security Council. This outreach does not necessarily mean that the Kremlin's intent to undermine the US has changed. It has happened likely in part because Putin got hit with conversion pressures from low energy pr-prices and the pandemics, putting his posturing as a good Samaritan and a humanitarian partner, in part because he could not afford additional sanctions right now and is trying to get rid of the existing ones.

Now, in addition to using COVID-19 to support, uh, the Kremlin's global campaigns, Putin is also using the crisis as an opportunity to evolve disinformation methods and the Kremlin's broader hybrid worker toolkit, which George will talk about now.

George Barros:

Thanks, Nataliya. The Kremlin is using COVID-19 to test new disinformation tools in its pressure campaign against Ukraine. Russian actors are carrying out a disinformation campaign aimed at provoking real on the ground results, such as protests around the coronavirus. Ukrainian State Security Service or SBU, announced on April 30, it arrested three people in Central Eastern Ukraine attempting to incite anti COVID-19 quarantine riots in Ukraine. The SBU's forensic analysis of the arrestees' emails indicates that their disinformation activity was coordinated with Russian actors to destabilize Ukraine. The arrestees use anonymous social media accounts to spread calls to action for mass protests against the quarantine and to promote pro-Russian separatism. On May 4th, the SBU announced it identified over 300 internet agitators spreading disinformation on Corona virus in Ukraine. The SBU claimed that 14 of the agitators demonstrably acted on Russian orders and had a cumulative audience of over 900,000 internet users across different social media groups and platforms.

The SBU also reported it observed intensified efforts from Russian troll and bot farms to encourage quarantine violations and anti quarantine protests inside Ukraine. All of these developments reinforce ISW's assessment from February, that likely Russian actors launched a coordinated disinformation campaign against Ukraine on the coronavirus. The effort aimed to fuel protests in response to the arrival of Ukrainian evacuees from China. The disinformation targeted specific Ukrainian cities and help ferment protests that created a crisis management requirement for the Ukrainian government, while the Kremlin's proxy simultaneously escalated their military operations in Donbass. The Kremlin is using disinformation to support its various pressure campaigns aimed to coerce Ukraine into accepting a Kremlin preferable political settlement to the war in Donbass.

The Kremlin is also spreading false narratives via the Russian Orthodox Church and its partners to disrupt the expansion of Western structures in Europe. On May 12th, Montenegrin authorities arrested eight Serbian Orthodox Church priests for organizing a religious procession in violation of the COVID-19 quarantine and social distancing regulations. The Serbian Orthodox church is a close ally of the Russian Orthodox church, which is a Kremlin foreign policy tool. Pro Serbian protesters responded to the arrests by blocking a regional road on May 13th. The situation escalated and the protest turned violent. Montenegrin police officers detained around 60 violent protestors and this resulted with 26 injured police. Montenegro's president in the past has accused the Serbian Orthodox Church of undermining its independence and attempts to join the European Union. The Russian Orthodox Church's main monastery in Kiev, also refused to comply with quarantine and encourage parishioners to attend Easter services resulting in quarantine violations. And furthermore, the Moldovan Orthodox Church's, Moscow patriarchy has also spread disinformation on how Bill Gates intends to use a coronavirus vaccine to microchip and control people with 5G technology. ISW will continue closely watching Russian and pro-Russian actors using disinformation efforts to agitate real activity in this case anti quarantine protests, riots, separatism, and other acts of disobedience, which Russia will continue to try to use as a part of its hybrid worker toolkit in its future conflicts.

Nataliya Bugayova:

Thank you, George. ISW will continue to watch how the Kremlin exploits the COVID-19 pandemic, and other crises to advance its agenda in multiple theaters. Thank you.

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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