



Russia's (un)Controlled Disinformation

*Adriano Rodari*¹

Abstract: As the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic hit the world and Europe, another spreading menace caught the attention of experts and policymakers: infodemic. The same kind of concerns were voiced by European and international news outlets, pointing the finger at Russia, which was accused of waging an information war against the European Union, or the “West” more broadly. Allegedly, Russia was profiting from the health crisis to spread chaos within European democracies and advance its objectives. This paper intends to shed more light on the intentions and might of the Russian-backed disinformation towards Europe during the initial outbreak of COVID-19. The focus is not only on disinformation per se but on Russia's degree of commitment to such information campaigns. To do so, this work centres on the potential strategic interests of the Kremlin, outlining three relevant goals which Russia tried to achieve during the pandemic with the support of information operations. When compared to previous attempts to influence the West, the level of coordination of narratives and actors is evidently lower. Instead of being the golden age of Russian-led disinformation, the COVID-19 pandemic was revealed to be a challenging time to advance Moscow's strategic objectives.

Keywords: Russia, disinformation, COVID-19 pandemic, information operations, infodemic

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic hit societies unexpectedly quickly, bringing health systems to the verge of collapse, affecting economies and shaking up media platforms. When referring to the unfolding information environment at the Munich conference, the World Health Organisation's

¹ Adriano Rodari is a second-year student of the Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe at the University of Bologna. He is interning at the Berlin office of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and volunteering as a Young European Ambassador.

Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus affirmed that “we are not just fighting an epidemic, we are fighting an infodemic”.² The declaration drew attention to the abundance of misleading information found on formal and informal channels, clearly underlining the vulnerability of the Western media ecosystem from both internal and external points of view. Indeed, this fragility was afterwards stressed in March by the current EU High Representative Josep Borrell, who highlighted a “clear attempt to discredit the European Union”, adding that the “spreading [of] disinformation is playing with people’s lives”.³

Throughout Western media, commentaries on the disinformation coming from Russia have flourished, often labelling it as “attacks”⁴ or a “coronavirus offensive”⁵ planned in Moscow, as well as being aimed at “aggravating the public health crisis in the West”.⁶ Framing the output originating from Russian-controlled media in this way implies that these actions are aimed at winning over European counterparts. It also emphasises the Kremlin’s ability to turn the weakness of European countries to its advantage.

Most of the assertions and opinion pieces at a European level were based on the data and analysis provided by EUvsDisinfo, “the flagship project of the European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force”⁷, which provides reports on disinformation and narratives put out by Russian media, disproving the stories with fact-based rebuttals.⁸ According to one of the April 2020 reports, there have been “coordinated campaigns” throughout Europe carried out by state-sponsored media, aimed at “undermining EU and its crisis response”.⁹ Moreover, in early March 2020, the European Union’s lead spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy asserted: “We have seen an increase in the amount of misinformation originating outside the EU. Some has been Russian, spread by Russian providers and pro-Kremlin sources”.¹⁰

² World Health Organization, “Munich Security Conference”, 15 February 2020, <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference>.

³ Josep Borrell Fontelles, “A lot of inaccurate information”, tweet by Josep Borrell Fontelles, 23 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/josepborrell/status/1242148469407649802>, accessed 12 September 2021.

⁴ See William J. Broad, “Putin’s Long War Against American Science”, *New York Times*, 13 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/13/science/putin-russia-disinformation-health-coronavirus.html>.

⁵ See Hannah Roberts, “Moscow’s Coronavirus Offensive”, *Politico Europe*, 22 April 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/moscow-coronavirus-offensive-vladimir-putin/>.

⁶ See Jennifer Rankin, “Russian Media ‘Spreading Covid-19 Disinformation’”, *The Guardian*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/russian-media-spreading-covid-19-disinformation>.

⁷ Data.europa.eu, “EUvsDisinfo: Disinformation Operations About COVID-19”, <https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/euvsdisinfo-disinformation-operations-about-covid-19?locale=en>.

⁸ European External Action Service, “Questions and Answers about the East StratCom Task Force”, 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/2116/questions-and-answers-about-east-stratcom-task-force_en.

⁹ EUvsDisinfo, “EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19/Coronavirus Pandemic (Updated 2 – 22 April)”, 24 April 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>.

¹⁰ Barbara Wesel, “Is Russia Running A Coronavirus Disinformation Campaign?”, *Deutsche Welle*, 20 March 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-russia-running-a-coronavirus-disinformation-campaign/a-52864106>.

On the other hand, academics and researchers have raised some doubts over the level of coordination and power of the Russian propaganda ecosystem.¹¹ For example, disinformation expert Ben Nimmo declared that these media outlets did not appear to be following an orchestrated set of actions (as had happened during the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and the alleged shooting down of flight MH17), and that “the whole thing seems more like standard anti-Western posturing than a targeted campaign devised at the Kremlin”.¹² Following this point of view, the assessment of Russian disinformation as a polyphony of misleading articles and opinions would mean re-framing the response of both European countries and institutions.

Understanding how Russian disinformation campaigns are shaped by the Kremlin is a vital task for Europe in the time to come. The shift towards hybrid tools requires the European Union and the Member States to rethink their security strategy and swiftly adapt to this changing reality. The openness of the European virtual space has become the object of state and non-state actors, which aim at exerting their influence through the use of misleading information and targeted campaigns. It is in the interest of Europe to comprehend the strategy behind information operations and learn how to face such threats in the future. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the awareness that disinformation can be as spreadable and dangerous as a virus. To increase Europe's future resilience, it is necessary to engage in a discussion about vulnerabilities, reliability of information sources and long-term solutions like digital literacy. The first step to do so should be to comprehend and compare past disinformation efforts directed towards the EU and European countries, in order to grasp the might and characteristics of such operations.

This paper intends to explore the main characteristics and peculiarities of Russian-led information campaigns. It seeks to apply the academic tools provided by studies on information warfare and disinformation to the coronavirus outbreak in Europe, in order to assess the intentions, targets, goals and degree of coordination of the Kremlin's instruments. It devotes particular attention to the most manifest trends and their effectiveness. Different from the analysis provided by some private and public fact-checkers which mainly, if not only, have focused on the “message” sent by Russian-backed means of communication, this work intends to focus additionally on the “messenger”, namely Russia and on the level of commitment to such information campaigns. To do so, the first section provides a general overview of the main points outlined in the academic debate on disinformation. Subsequently, attention is paid to the potential strategic interest of Russia in launching disinformation campaigns. Keeping these objectives in mind, the paper analyses three relevant goals which Russia tried to achieve during the pandemic with the support of information campaigns. The final section focuses on the way in which COVID-19-

¹¹ Mark Galeotti, “Coronavirus Propaganda a Problem for the Kremlin, Not a Ploy”, *Moscow Times*, 6 April 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/04/06/coronavirus-propaganda-a-problem-for-the-kremlin-not-a-ploy-a69879>; Cynthia Garcia, “Untangling the Disinformation Problem: Russia, China and the West”, *Wilson Center*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/untangling-disinformation-problem-russia-china-and-west>; Keir Giles, “Beware Russian and Chinese Positioning for After the Pandemic”, *Chatham House*, 9 April 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/beware-russian-and-chinese-positioning-after-pandemic>.

¹² Wesel, *op. cit.*

related disinformation added to the long-term objectives of information campaigns, resulting in a cacophony of narratives. Moreover, a brief comparison with previous cases displays the differing levels of coordination of information campaigns.

What this paper argues is that the COVID-19 outbreak did not result in a favourable opportunity for Russian disinformation as the country found itself under the international spotlight. This hampered the ability of the Kremlin to achieve its objectives, such as the lifting of sanctions, and showed the inability of Russia to get an advantage from the narratives spread within its disinformation ecosystem. This analysis is conducted by addressing the following questions: How did the Kremlin spread disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic? What level of coordination was evident in the effort to influence European countries? How does it differ from previous examples of disinformation?

1. Disinformation: old but gold

Disinformation came under the spotlight in academia and public debate in Western countries straight after Russia annexed Crimea and with the beginning of the ongoing war in the Donbas region, creating different perceptions and understandings of what the term means. Throughout recent years, the word disinformation has been used in the media and policy spheres as a synonym for expressions like “propaganda,” “information war,” “hybrid warfare”, “active measures”, “fake news” and “influence operations”, creating a lack of common understanding and, arguably, a delayed response.¹³ On top of this, disinformation not only refers to actions waged by an actor against another but can also allude to the realm of the domestic flow of information within a country, for instance internal disinformation in Russia.

There are different ways to define what disinformation is. Essentially, disinformation is information since it represents data and knowledge.¹⁴ Yet, what makes it distinctive is the purpose of conveying a message that is intentionally misleading.¹⁵ Therefore, disinformation can be defined as “false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm”.¹⁶ The component of intent differentiates disinformation from misinformation,

¹³ Nina Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 8.

¹⁴ Alexander Lanoszka, “Disinformation in International Politics”, *European Journal of International Security* 4, no. 2 (2019): 229, <https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2019.6>.

¹⁵ Caroline Jack, “Lexicon of Lies: Terms for Problematic Information”, *Data & Society Research Institute*, 2017, pp. 2–4.

¹⁶ Claire Wardle, “Information Disorder: The Essential Glossary”, *Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy*, https://firstdraftnews.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/infoDisorder_glossary.pdf, p. 43.

which stands for the creation of misleading information, typically not maliciously.¹⁷ Besides, misinformation is usually a single act that can be re-connected to an identifiable actor/person, while disinformation corresponds to a consistent effort to instrumentalise distorted messages across a network of information channels targeting a specific audience.¹⁸

The differentiation in understanding, and the ways in which the term has been analysed is consistent in the academic sphere as well. For instance, Lucas and Pomerantsev link disinformation to the concept of “information warfare”, indicating the constant implementation of informational tactics against Russia’s opponents, carried out both during peace and wartime.¹⁹ Following this conceptualisation, Giles notes that information warfare is not a static situation but an evolving process, implying a constant development of approaches, models, and successful and failed attempts.²⁰ Snegovaya asserts that information warfare is part of Russia’s system of carrying out hybrid warfare.²¹ This way of conducting conflict heavily relies on deliberate disinformation campaigns, paired with the actions of intelligence agencies. It is aimed at bewildering the enemy, as well as gaining a strategic advantage within Russia’s budgetary constraints. However, the concept of hybrid warfare itself (*gibridnaya voйна*) has received criticism for being misleading.²² Nimmo has characterised the ways the Kremlin tries to exert its influence on the West as being very simple. According to him, disinformation can follow some precise aims: “dismiss the critique, distort the fact, distract from the main issue, dismay the audience”.²³ In his analysis, Nimmo shows that the simplicity of these techniques constitutes both the strength and the weakness of Russia’s information operations, as essentially it is “repetitive and predictable”.²⁴

The continuity of Russia’s actions with its Soviet past or the novelty of its disinformation techniques has been widely discussed by experts. According to several scholars, disinformation is nothing but Soviet techniques, adapted and updated to the new interconnected and globalised environment.²⁵ Pomerantsev and Weiss, in their study of the weaponisation of information by

¹⁷ Janis Sarts, “Disinformation as a Threat to National Security”, in *Disinformation and Fake News*, ed. Shashi Jayakumar, Benjamin Ang and Nur Diyanah Anwar (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 25, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5876-4_2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, “Winning the Information War: Techniques and Counterstrategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe”, *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 2016, <https://li.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/winning-the-information-war-full-report-pdf.pdf>, p. 5.

²⁰ Keir Giles, “The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare”, *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2016, p. 2.

²¹ Maria Snegovaya, “Putin’s Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia’s Hybrid Warfare”, *Institute for the Study of War*, 2015, pp. 10–12.

²² Mark Galeotti, “The Mythical ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and the Language of Threat”, *Critical Studies on Security* 7, no. 2 (2019): 157–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2018.1441623>.

²³ Edward Lucas and Ben Nimmo, “Information Warfare: What Is It and How to Win It?”, *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 2015, https://cepa.ecms.pl/files/?id_plik=1896, p. 5.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Mark Galeotti, “Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia’s ‘New Way of War?’”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 283–291, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2015.1129170>; Keir Giles, *Handbook of Russian Information Warfare* (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2016); Snegovaya, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–15.

the Kremlin, trace the origins of this approach back to Lenin's time and its idea of "spinning the West against itself [and] 'building communism with non-communist hands'".²⁶ This laid the foundation for the KGB's "active measures" (*aktivnye meropriyatiya*), meaning information and psychological warfare aimed at influencing people in the West.²⁷ Within the various techniques employed by the Committee for State Security, disinformation (*dezinformatsiya*) was one of them. Galeotti stresses the changing nature of today's information environment when assessing disinformation as one of the tools at the Kremlin's disposal.²⁸ He defines this "new way of doing war" not as particularly new in the way in which war is fought, but argues that it is distinctive in terms of the degree to which priority is given to "non-kinetic" elements, especially information warfare.²⁹ He concludes that the novelty is, in fact, the globalised context in which economies are interdependent and media operate without constraints around the globe, thus shaping the state's actions.³⁰ Yet, some experts prefer to mark a clear line when the comparison is made with Soviet propaganda. Lucas and Nimmo distinguish Soviet propaganda – intended to promote the Soviet agenda – from information warfare, which has the aim to "confuse, befuddle and distract".³¹ In the same vein, according to Jankowicz, the Soviet objective to promote a communist-centric worldview has been substituted by the Kremlin's aim of "destroying Western democracy as we know it".³²

What seems to drive Russia's attempt to influence through non-traditional means is the internal unease regarding the country's position vis-à-vis the West and the consequent decision to lean on the West's "weaknesses". Russia understands that freedom of information is sacred in Western countries and decides to weaponise this aspect in order to spread disinformation.³³ This is done because of Russia's constant perception of being threatened by Western countries and their institutions.³⁴ Snegovaya observes that this asymmetric development of information capability is carried out because of Russia's understanding of being in a weaker financial position compared to European and NATO countries, thus requiring the country to achieve superiority in the field of information.³⁵ As a matter of fact, information warfare is mentioned in the latest

²⁶ Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, "The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money", *Institute of Modern Russia*, 2014, p. 8. This is also elaborated by Pynnöniemi and Rácz (2016, p. 33) with the concept "reflexive control", meaning attacks directed to provoke self-destruction, based on "self-organisation" and "self-disorientation".

²⁷ Pomerantsev and Weiss, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9.

²⁸ Galeotti, "Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia's 'New Way of War'?", *op. cit.*, pp. 296–298.

²⁹ Galeotti, "Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia's 'New Way of War'?", *op. cit.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Lucas and Nimmo, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–4.

³² Jankowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³³ Pomerantsev and Weiss, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

³⁴ Keir Giles, "Russia's 'New' Tools for Confronting the West Continuity and Innovation in Moscow's Exercise of Power", *Chatham House*, 2016, p. 15.

³⁵ Snegovaya, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10.

Military Doctrine (*Voyennaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii*) approved in December 2014, although the concept is described as serving purely defensive objectives.³⁶

However, disinformation is not only used to increase Russian influence abroad, but also within its borders. The controlled flux of news is conducted especially in the domestic sphere through state-controlled channels and digital news outlets.³⁷ Pomerantsev and Weiss stress that officials are concerned with domestic support of their actions, so media agencies fill the public sphere with propaganda, conspiracy theories and fabricated narratives in order to keep the Kremlin's audience passive, distracted and paranoid.³⁸ Thus, this phenomenon links both the internal and external dimension of the country's strategy.

The way in which the Kremlin employs information to achieve its aims is manifold, though sometimes understood as highly controlled or orchestrated. The instrumentalisation of the flow of information for achieving strategic aims is carried out through Russian-owned media channels broadcasting abroad in Russian and other foreign languages, while it also attempts to exert influence through journalists, trolls and bots.³⁹ However, Kent warns of the risk of overestimating the tangible dimension of the Kremlin's information ecosystem.⁴⁰ He highlights how these techniques of information operations developed by the Kremlin have been endorsed by actors independent from Moscow, but share the same interest in spreading misleading information, sometimes only for the purpose of earning money from clicks.⁴¹ In addition, Galeotti points out that disinformation is only the tip of the iceberg of the whole set of active measures employed to influence other countries, which can include economic leverage, soft power, religious and ethnic instruments, as well as malign non-state actors; disinformation is just the most obvious constituent of the system.⁴² Thus, it happens that this element is overestimated in its might, effectiveness and goals by Western observers. Often, the mere act of distracting the public and the state's attention from more important matters, increasing suspicion and fear is considered as success for these kinds of campaigns.

New findings show that it is hard to measure the degree to which disinformation campaigns have been successful or fruitful for the actors establishing them. Maschmeyer identifies the fact that a big gap in the empirical data remains on the mechanisms through which online disinformation

³⁶ President of the Russian Federation, "Военная Доктрина Российской Федерации", 2014, <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/41d527556bec8deb3530.pdf>.

³⁷ Snegovaya, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–11.

³⁸ Pomerantsev and Weiss, *op. cit.*, pp. 10–12.

³⁹ Lucas and Pomerantsev, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Thomas Kent, "If We Do It, Is It Propaganda?", *Center for European Policy Analysis*, 29 April, 2020, <https://cepa.org/if-we-do-it-is-it-propaganda/>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Mark Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2017, p. 5.

is able to influence, as well as the actual impact on the audience's beliefs.⁴³ Even in the archetypal case of information warfare – Ukraine – digital disinformation does not seem to exert the expected influence, while traditional pro-Russia television is more effective in having an impact on the audience.⁴⁴ As Nimmo et al. show, the online operation “Secondary Infektion”, which included fake account activities and forged documents using multiple platforms, displays a surprisingly low level of engagement.⁴⁵ Moreover, by applying international relations theories, Lanoszka shows how disinformation is poorly equipped to affect the global balance of power.⁴⁶ Moreover, the author indicates that Russian disinformation towards the Baltic countries has not been particularly successful. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have always been consistently targeted by Russian information operations, but especially since the 2016 Warsaw NATO summit, where the Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) was established to strengthen NATO's deterrence and defence in the Eastern Region of the alliance.⁴⁷ However, the targeted campaign against NATO presence in these countries has not led to a decrease in the military spending of these countries.⁴⁸

In view of these shortcomings and the difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of disinformation campaigns, this paper attempts to look at disinformation through the lens of Russia's objectives. Therefore, in this work disinformation is understood as an element of information operations undertaken by the Kremlin. The term ‘information operation’ stands for a series of actions taken by governments or non-state actors, with the intent of influencing or distorting domestic or foreign political views.⁴⁹ These activities are usually done in order to achieve strategic outcomes. Yet, it takes place in the wider information ecosystem to which Russia contributes. This definition makes it possible to focus on the interests of the Kremlin and on how they transpire from the level of multi-platform and multi-actor coordination. Therefore, it is necessary to try to understand both the long-term interests in which the Kremlin operates and the more immediate needs that Moscow tries to satisfy. It is essential not to misread the opportunistic nature of the system created by President Vladimir Putin as following an all-encompassing masterplan.⁵⁰

2. Disinformation and strategic objectives

⁴³ Lennart Maschmeyer, “Digital Disinformation: Evidence from Ukraine”, *ETH Zürich Center for Security Studies*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.3929/ETHZ-B-000463741>, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Ben Nimmo et al., “Exposing Secondary Infektion”, *Graphika*, 2020, <https://secondaryinfektion.org/>.

⁴⁶ Lanoszka, *op. cit.*, pp. 238–240.

⁴⁷ NATO, “Boosting NATO's Presence in the East and Southeast”, 2021, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.

⁴⁸ Lanoszka, *op. cit.*, pp. 241–246.

⁴⁹ Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, “Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making”, Council of Europe Report DGI(2017)09, 2017, <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Mark Galeotti, *We Need to Talk About Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2019), chapter 1.

Information operations are the most visible of the measures undertaken by the Kremlin to achieve its strategic goals. Although disinformation might seem a source of alarm for targeted countries across Europe and the Atlantic, the degree and the intensity of information campaigns to which states are exposed varies according to Russia's strategic interests, economic concerns, ability to leverage influence on certain groups and the effectiveness of previous campaigns.⁵¹ This implies finding the balance between over-estimating Russia's might and turn a blind eye to these operations.

With regard to the intensity with which it pursues its strategic goals, Cohen and Radin have established that Russia conducts both "direct hostile measures" and "routine hostile measures", implying not only disinformation but the employment of all the tools available to the country.⁵² They argue that most of the effort made in the European Union consists of broader, long-term objectives, principally involving routine hostility. Additionally, they have been able to identify five broad targets which Russia will arguably be interested in pursuing in the upcoming years:

- 1. pursuing security and survival of the regime*
- 2. developing and maintaining great-power status*
- 3. exerting influence within the near abroad, meaning Russia's immediate neighbourhood and desired sphere of influence*
- 4. increasing cooperation and trade with Western Europe*
- 5. undermining enlargement of the European Union (EU) and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).⁵³*

During the first wave of COVID-19, Russia seemed to stick to these wider objectives. For instance, the aim of increasing cooperation and trade was pursued by directing soft-power efforts towards Italy by sending humanitarian help to improve Russia's position when calling for sanctions to be lifted.⁵⁴ It also allows Russia to be seen internally and externally as a great power, playing a prominent role internationally.⁵⁵ This of course was endorsed by the Russian media ecosystem, which did not refrain from attacking Moscow's critics. When the newspaper *La Stampa*⁵⁶ reported the uselessness of some equipment and the military ranking of the personnel

⁵¹ Giles, "The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare", *op. cit.*, pp. 6–8.

⁵² Raphael Cohen and Andrew Radin, *Russia's Hostile Measures in Europe: Understanding the Threat* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019), 5–13, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1793>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Braw, "Beware of Russian and Chinese Aid in Response to the Coronavirus", *Foreign Policy*, 30 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/30/russia-china-coronavirus-geopolitics/>.

⁵⁵ Dario Cristiani, "Russian Motives Behind Helping Italy's Coronavirus Response: A Multifaceted Approach", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 47 (2020).

⁵⁶ Jacopo Iacoboni, "Coronavirus, la telefonata Conte-Putin agita il governo: 'Più che aiuti arrivano militari russi in Italia'", *La Stampa*, 25 March 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus-la-telefonata-conte-putin-agita-il-governo-piu-che-aiuti-arrivano-militari-russi-in-italia-1.38633327>.

arriving in Rome, Russian-backed media retaliated against the journalist, together with Russian diplomatic representatives⁵⁷.

When analysing Russia's disinformation operations, it is important to bear these broad objectives in mind to understand which intentions are hidden behind narratives employed by state-backed media during the first COVID-19 outbreak. In this sense, disinformation is seen as a long-term process with some arguable broad objectives, while allowing for immediate needs to be prioritised depending on the opportunities available. Considering Russia's priorities, some of the main targets in Kremlin-backed information operations attempts will be analysed in the following section, for example lifting Western sanctions, undermining Ukraine and maintaining domestic control.

3. Three narrow goals

According to Clark et al, Russia's efforts in the information environment during the first months of the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak focused on three pillars: lifting sanctions, reinforcing its previous campaign against Ukraine, and managing the domestic information realm.⁵⁸ Indeed, these three focuses are consistent with Russian objectives outlined by Cohen and Radin⁵⁹ and, most importantly, showed organised actions over multiple platforms (though there were some issues and incoherent results).

3.1 Lifting Sanctions

Since mid-March in 2020, revoking sanctions turned into one of the main trends in Russia's information campaigns. The calls for partial sanctions relief by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres provided the perfect pretext for the Kremlin to push forward its economic interests.⁶⁰ This narrative was framed throughout the Russian- and foreign-language media as a humanitarian issue, creating the idea of a "win-win" scenario in which countries would be able to help each other both economically and in terms of aid supply.⁶¹ This trend is particularly important not only because of conspicuous media visibility, but also because it was supported by claims firstly

⁵⁷ TASS, "Захарова: За Вбросами в La Stampa о Российской Помощи Италии Стоит Британская Компания", TASS, 2 April 2020, <https://tass.ru/politika/8144221>.

⁵⁸ Mason Clark, Aleksey Zimnitca, and Nataliya Bugayova, "Kremlin Attempts to Exploit COVID-19 Crisis to Remove Sanctions on Russia and Its Partners," *Institute for the Study of War*, 3 April 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russia-review-kremlin-attempts-exploit-covid-19-crisis-remove-sanctions-russia-and-its>.

⁵⁹ Cohen and Radin, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–13.

⁶⁰ Colum Lynch, "U.N. Secretary-General Calls for Easing Sanctions on Iran, North Korea, and Others to Fight Coronavirus Pandemic", *Foreign Policy*, 24 March 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/24/un-coronavirus-cuba-iran-venezuela-north-korea-zimbabwe-sanctions-pandemic/>.

⁶¹ Clark et al., *op. cit.*

from a Russian member of parliament, and later by Putin on the virtual summit of the G20.⁶² Moreover, according to Clark et al's report for the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), these kinds of actions were reinforced by a series of Kremlin's narratives used to leverage its political influence in Europe.⁶³ For instance, the Russian media depicted Germany as favourable to the measure, quoting the support expressed by a member of the right-wing extremist party Alternative für Deutschland (AFD) as a loose piece of evidence.⁶⁴

Given the weak economic position of the Kremlin caused by the price war on oil with Saudi Arabia, the COVID-19 crisis seemed to be a good opportunity to reach the West for more cooperation on trade by getting sanctions lifted.⁶⁵ Yet, the soft-power attempt did not appear to be very fruitful, partly aggravated by the perceived attempt at the manipulation of information on the part of the Russian state. In general, this has demonstrated how Russian soft power is weak vis-à-vis the EU, especially when Moscow-backed disinformation attempts aggravate its perception abroad.

3.2 Never-ending hostility towards Ukraine

On the other side, in the case of Ukraine, Russia pursued its usual campaign against the country. According to Barros, the flow of disinformation which caused protests against the arrival of Ukrainian evacuees from Wuhan in February of this year is likely to have been orchestrated by Russia.⁶⁶ In this case, the targeting of disinformation was thoroughly accurate, selecting specific cities and engaging in different measures ranging from fake-messages, posts and advertisements on social media, to fake emails presented as having been sent by the Ukrainian Minister of Health.⁶⁷ These measures were accompanied by a constant flow of confusing messages through fringe Ukrainian media outlets which kept publishing false claims and medical advice, often using a combination of alphabets to foil Google's attempts to control coronavirus misinformation.⁶⁸

⁶² iSANS, "Ковид-Политинформация От Кремля: Новые Мутации Вируса Пропаганды", *Reformation.by*, 23 April 2020, <https://reform.by/kovid-politinformacija-ot-kremlja-novye-mutacii-virusa-propagandy>.

⁶³ Clark et al., *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ The Insider, "Вирус пропаганды. Как Кремль распространяет фейки о коронавирусе и использует пандемию для отмены санкций," *The Insider*, 26 March 2020, <https://theins.ru/antifake/209084>.

⁶⁶ George Barros, "Viral Disinformation: The Kremlin's Coronavirus Information Operation in Ukraine", *Institute for the Study of War*, 11 May 2020, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/viral-disinformation-kremlin%E2%80%99s-coronavirus-information-operation-ukraine>. The ISW investigation collected sufficient resources to assess with moderate confidence that this multiplatform information campaign was supported by Russia. Moreover, the Ukrainian Government identified some of the participants in the Novi Sanzhary riots as "professional provocateurs".

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Roman Osadchuk, "Find, Copy, Amplify: How Ukrainian Fringe Media Used Other Alphabets to Disguise COVID-19 Claims", *Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab*, 23 April 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/%C6%92in%C4%91-c%C3%B8py-amp1%C4%B1fy-how-ukrainian-fringe-media-used-other-alphabets-to-disguise-covid-19-claims-58a2f73bb145>.

Overall, harsh criticism against Ukraine never ended up on Russia's media, once again describing the country as a failed state unable to deal with the crisis by itself. What the analysis of "The Insider"⁶⁹ points out is that Ukraine was consistently targeted as a scapegoat. First of all, the country was described as the main factor hampering the elimination of the sanctions against Russia. Secondly, it was held responsible for the spreading of the virus throughout Europe and beyond because of Ukrainian guestworkers and refugees. It is evident that the coronavirus outbreak simply gave a chance to the Kremlin to lay the blame on Ukraine, as it has done consistently since the annexation of Crimea.⁷⁰

3.4 Maintaining domestic control

The final and most important trend in Russian disinformation is broadly related to keeping control of its citizens. Russia was under great pressure during the first half of 2020, first caused by the economic shock of falling oil prices and then by the skyrocketing number of cases since the end of March.⁷¹ The concern for maintaining domestic control translated into the most common practice: diverting attention from local crisis management to the handling of the pandemic in foreign countries, depicting health systems and economies in Europe and the US as being on the verge of collapse, lacking economic cooperation in EU countries and an overall absence of solidarity.⁷² Conversely, since 2014 the Kremlin has been presenting itself as the winning side, especially during the first months of the pandemic.⁷³ The general tactic is to show that "the other" is doing worse while claiming that the national situation is under control. This even led to domestic media criticising the weak pandemic response of Russia's closest partner, Belarus.⁷⁴ Interestingly, this attempt to display success internally in handling the crisis was coupled with Russia Today's English-language content, where Western countries are accused of having "overreacted" to the crisis.⁷⁵

Despite the Kremlin's attempt to control the internet, most platforms and independent media outlets remain accessible within Russia's borders, providing evidence-based information.⁷⁶ When the pictures and footage of ambulances queuing in front of hospitals in Moscow began to spread on 10 April, the Kremlin was then forced to admit that the situation was indeed

⁶⁹ The Insider, *op. cit.*

⁷⁰ See Nimmo et al., *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Financial Times editorial board, "Russia's Economic Woes Will Clip Vladimir Putin's Wings", *Financial Times*, 27 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/d000617c-8620-11ea-b872-8db45d5f6714>.

⁷² Olga Kevere, "The Illusion of Control - COVID-19 Russian Propaganda", *Visegrad Insight*, 13 May 2020, <https://visegradinsight.eu/the-illusion-of-control-russian-propaganda-covid19/>.

⁷³ Ilya Shepelin, "How Kremlin Propaganda Destroyed Russian Healthcare", *Moscow Times*, 11 May 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/11/how-kremlin-propaganda-destroyed-russian-healthcare-a70242>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Daniel Bush, "Virality Project (Russia): Penguins and Protests", *Stanford Internet Observatory*, 9 June 2020, <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/penguins-and-protests-rt-and-coronavirus-pandemic>.

⁷⁶ Pavel Baev, "Coronavirus Crisis Engulfs Russia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 57 (2020).

worsening and subsequently postponed the WWII Victory Day parade throughout the country.⁷⁷ As a consequence of the contradicting messages sent by state-supported media and officials, which added to the facts provided by informal and independent media, support for the government fell sharply, either because of Putin or because of preventing measures against the pandemic.⁷⁸ Unexpectedly for state officials, the polluted Russian media environment resulted in growing mistrust for the authorities coupled with widespread belief in anti-Western conspiracy theories regarding the nature of the pandemic.⁷⁹ The outcome was Russians' unwillingness to comply with quarantine measures and widespread protests⁸⁰, making the whole crisis even more unbearable for the government.

4. Coronavirus: Russia's disinformation golden days, self-harm or routine operations?

As other international newspapers had more overtly done during the previous days, the Deutsche Welle international webpage moderately opened on 20 of March 2020 with an article by Barbara Wesel, questioning: "Is Russia running a coronavirus disinformation campaign?"⁸¹ Many experts were inclined to respond with a positive answer.⁸² Nonetheless, as pointed out earlier, Russia had been feeding the disinformation ecosystem well before COVID-19 had started to raise global concern in the Chinese province of Wuhan.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, disinformation became one of the many worries for governments dealing with a full-scale health crisis, as well as for the public.⁸³ However, it is important to understand that deliberately misleading information can be home-grown or part of foreign state-led campaigns. It is difficult to differentiate between the sources of disinformation, given the extent to which they influence and reverberate one another. As appealing as it might seem, laying the blame mainly on an external actor for the abundance of deceptive claims is not

⁷⁷ Lucas Andriukaitis, "Footage Captures Signs of COVID-19 Overwhelming Moscow", *Medium*, 17 April 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/footage-captures-signs-of-covid-19-overwhelming-moscow-686aaef60352>.

⁷⁸ Andrei Kolesnikov, "Почему рейтинг одобрения Путина бьет антирекорды," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 7 May 2020, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/81735>.

⁷⁹ Ksenya Kirillova, "Russian Population Does Not Trust the Authorities but Still Believes the Propaganda", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 58 (2020).

⁸⁰ In April, hundreds of people protested in North Ossetia against coronavirus restrictions (Marrow and Tsvetkova 2020). After the authorities arrested several objectors, Russians went on expressing their dissent online, through various channels and initiatives, like virtual demonstrations on YandexMaps (Sherwin 2020).

⁸¹ Wesel, *op. cit.*

⁸² See Chatham House's webinar, "Russian Disinformation's Golden Moment: Challenges and Responses in the COVID-19 Era", held on 7th May 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/webinar-russian-disinformations-golden-moment-challenges-and-responses>.

⁸³ See Google trend statistics on the hype that the word "disinformation" got during the month of March 2020 compared to the previous years (https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=2013-04-24%202020-05-24&q=%2Fm%2F011_2z)

fully accurate. As Warren and Linvill⁸⁴ noted in the case of the United States, the domestic production of disinformation is booming and foreign actors are not the main threat to reliable sources of information.

Contrary to expectations, Hutchings and Tolz pointed out that the English-language version of RT is more factually accurate when covering international events like the ongoing pandemic, than issues of Russia's strategic interest.⁸⁵ Conversely, it strongly leans towards disinformation when the events covered concern Russia's foreign policies objectives (such as the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the Salisbury poisoning).⁸⁶ Rietjens⁸⁷, when referring to the disinformation campaign that followed the annexation of Crimea, quotes Robert Coalson⁸⁸ stating that "it became clear very quickly that Russian politicians, journalists, purportedly nongovernmental organizations, state companies, think tanks, the military, the courts, government agencies and the Duma were all working from the same instructions for the same goals". High-level coordination is key in differentiating the usual deceptive narratives spread by Russian media and politicians from information campaigns aimed at a specific goal.

Even if not that stark, a consistent level of multi-platform and multi-actor coordination was noted in the context of events following the seizure of Crimea. During the aftermath of the alleged shooting down of flight MH17, a wide range of Russian actors such as Russian politicians, news outlets and government agencies were consistently involved in spreading the Kremlin's strategic narratives. Rietjens describes how the Kremlin has upheld three main narratives regarding the incident: (1) Ukrainian responsibility for the downing of the aeroplane, (2) Russia as the victim of international collusion and (3) the accidental nature of the shooting.⁸⁹ Rietjens uses examples such as the video broadcast by RT, tweets posted by the Russian Embassy to the United Kingdom, and declarations of the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations which spread these narratives.⁹⁰ Moreover, a Bellingcat investigation⁹¹ showed that the Russian Ministry of Defence spread falsified satellite images to deliberately deceive the domestic and

⁸⁴ Patrick Warren and Darren Linvill. "The Misinformation Russia Spreads about Coronavirus Was Made in America", *Washington Post*, 2 April 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/02/yes-russia-spreads-coronavirus-lies-they-were-made-america/>.

⁸⁵ Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz, "COVID-19 Disinformation: Two Short Reports on the Russian Dimension", *Reframing Russia*, 6 April 2020, <https://reframingrussia.com/2020/04/06/covid-19-disinformation-two-short-reports-on-the-russian-dimension/>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Sebastiaan Rietjens, "Unraveling Disinformation: The Case of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17", *The International Journal of Intelligence, Security, and Public Affairs* 21, no. 3 (2019): 212, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23800992.2019.1695666>.

⁸⁸ Robert Coalson, "Top Russian General Lays Bare Putin's Plan for Ukraine", *Huffpost*, 9 February 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/valery-gerasimov-putin-ukraine_b_5748480.

⁸⁹ Rietjens, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 199–200.

⁹¹ Bellingcat Investigation Team, "MH17 - Forensic Analysis of Satellite Images Released by the Russian Ministry of Defence", *Bellingcat*, 31 May 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2015/05/31/mh17-forensic-analysis-of-satellite-images-released-by-the-russian-ministry-of-defence/>.

international public. In the aftermath of the incident, these deceptive messages were channelled through Russian official media (such as Russia Today, *Vesti*, *TV Zvezda*), international media outlets reporting messages of the Russian agencies, Kremlin-linked troll factories and the Russian state defence manufacturer Almaz-Antey.⁹² These attempts clearly show the extent to which the Kremlin tries to display a consistent retelling of events.

Another example of the Kremlin's attempt to shape narratives around their strategic interests is the Salisbury poisoning. When the British police published the pictures and names of the two suspects for the poisonings, both agents working for Russia's military intelligence agency GRU⁹³, the Kremlin went on denying the evidence. They did this through declarations made by the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, who repeated already-debunked claims spread by conspiracy theory bloggers⁹⁴. However, though recognising the attempt to control the narratives, Tolz et al challenge the extent to which Russia has control over state-backed media.⁹⁵ Adapting the concept of mediatization to the undemocratic example of Russia, they demonstrate how the level of coordination even during a strategic moment for the Kremlin has been inflated by many analysts and experts in Western countries, exaggerating the role of state-funded media in being able to influence multiple public spheres.⁹⁶ The scholars point to the presence of partially free internet in Russia, and citizens' access to foreign news outlets, which set the conditions by which Russian politicians are constrained and cannot channel information solely according to their needs.⁹⁷ Moreover, commercial imperatives and professional norms also deviate state-sponsored journalists from these political objectives.⁹⁸ These factors paint a picture of the Kremlin as less capable of projecting its interest through the power pyramid, even when the strategic goal is clearly defined and not simply driven by an opportunistic approach as during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of the strategic narratives in these cases were designed around the Kremlin interests, while in the case of the coronavirus pandemic they mostly resembled the usual opportunistic strategy surrounded by a mix of contradicting messages.

⁹² Rietjens, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-209.

⁹³ Vikram Dodd, "Salisbury Poisonings: Police Name Two Russian Suspects", *The Guardian*, 5 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/sep/05/salisbury-poisonings-police-name-and-charge-two-suspects>.

⁹⁴ Eliot Higgins, "'God-Level Trolling' - Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Maria Zakharova Promotes Debunked Internet Conspiracy Theories on The Skripal Nerve Agent Attack", *Bellingcat*, 6 September 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/09/06/god-level-trolling-russian-ministry-foreign-affairs-spokesperson-maria-zakharova-promotes-debunked-internet-conspiracy-theories-skripal-nerve-agent-attack/>.

⁹⁵ Vera Tolz et al, 2020. "Mediatization and Journalistic Agency: Russian Television Coverage of the Skripal Poisonings", *Journalism* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920941967>.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

When referring to the case of the pandemic, it is very difficult to establish to what extent Russia's channels are responsible for increasing distrust in the public. "More" quantity does not equate to "more" effectiveness. It is possible to monitor Russia's state-backed media, yet it is hard to fully capture the resonance that the misleading claims have on its audience, especially in such chaotic conditions. In fact, Lanoszka underlines that attempting to understand the effect of foreign disinformation is hard because of difficulties in isolating the effect of the campaign per se.⁹⁹

This, certainly, does not mean that monitoring bodies such as the East StratCom Task Force which publishes its report on EUvsDisinfo should be deemed as useless. Instead, its reports should be taken as the first clear layer of Russia's disinformation campaigns and as part of the solution against the spread of misleading narratives. The EUvsDisinfo reports are an optimal way to find dissonance or continuities between media outlets (such as Sputnik, RT and RIA Novosti) and different platforms or tools (trolls, bots, cyber-attacks, phishing) as well as understanding what is stated by the authorities. Moreover, it shows how consistent Russia is in its routine disinformation campaign and highlights the times when it struggles to build a coherent approach.

The 2021 analysis of the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) on the weaponisation of COVID-19 related rumours seems to show the classic disinformation attempt towards the US: blaming the US for everything.¹⁰⁰ Yet, this attempt appeared to be less organised than prior efforts, due to a more opportunistic approach. In fact, the DFRLab report characterises Russia's current strategy as based on amplifying local narratives instead of forging new profiles spreading divisive content. The information flow towards Europe arguably followed the same tactic. As EUvsDisinfo reported in its April 2020 review, Russian outlets spread narratives against the West, waiting to "see what sticks".¹⁰¹ This lack of consistent approach arguably shows the incapacity of the Kremlin to fully have control over the disinformation ecosystem. In the words of Galeotti, the Kremlin "can't stop the lying".¹⁰² In fact, as these channels spread more and more conspiracy theories, Russia's own success in handling the crisis is at stake. In addition, the incoherent flow of misleading information arguably harms the other more organised information operations and soft-power efforts, as international attention is increasingly directed towards the Kremlin. More and more negative visibility makes the disinformation attempts less likely to be effective, as Russia is automatically accused of being behind them, even when it seeks to exert influence in a less obvious way.

⁹⁹ Lanoszka, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ Luiza Bandeira et al., "Weaponized: How Rumors about COVID-19's Origins Led to a Narrative Arms Race", *Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab*, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/weaponized-covid19-narratives/>.

¹⁰¹ EUvsDisinfo, "Throwing Coronavirus Disinfo At The Wall To See What Sticks", *EUvsDisinfo*, 2 April 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/throwing-coronavirus-disinfo-at-the-wall-to-see-what-sticks/>.

¹⁰² Galeotti, "Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-Linear? How New Is Russia's 'New Way of War'?", *op. cit.*

Certainly, other instances than the ones mentioned above might be taken as examples of Russia machinations to sow chaos and division within societies, even though they appeared to be even less successful. For instance, the Baltic countries consistently remained at the centre of Russia's disinformation attempt, as they were discredited even during the first COVID-19 outbreak. Yet, as the Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkēvičs affirmed that the Kremlin's narratives and tactics have not changed that much, showing continuity and not much innovation in the way disinformation is conducted.¹⁰³ On top of that, the Estonian case reveals how Russian information sources have been losing grip in the region, as more and more people turned to local networks to get reliable information during the health crisis.¹⁰⁴

What is crucial to understand is that the presence of disinformation does not automatically equate with a large-scale increase in the campaign against the West. Sowing confusion, or as the Sputnik logo declares, "providing different views", is the habitual low-intensity tactic of the Kremlin-backed media. The main difference is that COVID-19 provided more controversial material to spread in addition to the necessity for citizens to rely on factual-based information. More importantly, the ability to capitalise on COVID-19-related disinformation and achieve some concrete goals was lacking.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Russia cannot fully control the flow of information internally and at the same time, it suffers from chronic unreliable sources in the bureaucratic machine.¹⁰⁶ This pressure restricts Putin's might and ability to influence foreign countries. Galeotti affirms that as part of its active tools of influence, Russia's disinformation apparatus is to a certain extent independent, though the main input and coordination depend on the president's administration.¹⁰⁷ However, during the pandemic outbreak the media outlets seemed to go in different directions, all resulting in a cacophony of conspiracy narratives. While the Russian government was attempting to leverage its influence in Europe by sending aid to Italy in the hope of gaining support for rolling back sanctions, the disinformation ecosystem kept pouring conflicting messages into Europe and Russia.¹⁰⁸

This analysis attempts to show how the Kremlin has been consistent with its strategic aims. It has focused on the intentions and might of Russian information operations towards the

¹⁰³ DFRLab, "#DFRLabCoffeeBreak with Latvian Foreign Minister Edgars Rinkevics", *Medium*, 9 July 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/dfrlabcoffeebreak-with-latvian-foreign-minister-edgars-rinkevics-b78d791a8ba4>.

¹⁰⁴ ERR News, "Survey: ERR Most Trusted News Source during Emergency Situation," *ERR*, 30 March 2020, <https://news.err.ee/1070435/survey-err-most-trusted-news-source-during-emergency-situation>.

¹⁰⁵ Galeotti, *Coronavirus Propaganda a Problem for the Kremlin, Not a Ploy*, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶ Pavel Baev, "Putin's Non-Decisions Paralyze Crisis-Stricken Russia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 17, no. 61 (2020). Many experts reported Russia's difficulties in dealing with crisis, due to the "power vertical" structure, in which reliable information does not flow smoothly (see Galeotti 2020; Twigg 2020).

¹⁰⁷ Galeotti, "Controlling Chaos", *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ Galeotti, "Coronavirus Propaganda a Problem for the Kremlin, Not a Ploy", *op. cit.*

European Union and its allies during the initial outbreak of COVID-19. What has been pointed out as a “golden age” of Russian disinformation has instead resulted in being a counterproductive foreign policy tool for the Kremlin. Even if it tried to ride the wave of COVID-19 related disinformation, it failed to turn these campaigns in its favour. The objectives of getting sanctions lifted, continuing hostility towards Ukraine and maintaining domestic control were arguably negatively affected by un-controlled disinformation reverberating within Moscow’s information ecosystem. What happened during the COVID-19 crisis, given the overflow of fake news and misleading messages, brought Kremlin-led disinformation into the international spotlight.

Overall, this is not an apologetic view on Russian-backed disinformation, but an attempt to critically view the phenomenon and understand its scope and intentions. Sowing confusion is the background of information operations, and it is not intended by the Kremlin as the main character in its international play. Actually, this diversion puts the Russian Federation in an uncomfortable position. On the Western side, this implies understanding that disinformation is a long-term and low-intensity threat which needs to be monitored and debunked (as EUvsDisinfo is currently doing), but it also requires structural reforms in the information ecosystem to enhance local independent media and to keep track of weak and unregulated areas such as social media and blogs.¹⁰⁹

With Russia’s long engagement in disinformation, it is easy for European democracies to lay the blame on the country for the plentiful nature of false narratives flooding the Internet. Yet, when it comes to disentangling active measures that the Kremlin has been ready to employ in order to influence democracies, one realises that these attempts are just the tip of the iceberg. Most importantly, they do not account for the majority of misleading information available on the internet.

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¹⁰⁹ Giles, “Beware Russian and Chinese Positioning for After the Pandemic”, *op. cit.*

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