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RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

GRIGOL JULUKHIDZE

138

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic has drastically changed the agenda of world politics. All of the important issues or concerns comprising the political climate in the international arena have been overshadowed by the novel coronavirus. The schedules of state and supranational actors are being shaped by the challenges vis-à-vis public healthcare, humanitarian aid and economic stimulus packages. In addition to the dynamic growth in the COVID-19 fatality rate, the world economy has seriously deteriorated owing to a severe financial recession. To make a long story short, the coronavirus pandemic hit absolutely everyone from Bucharest to Buenos Aires, from Antananarivo to Sydney.

Despite the devastating effects of the virus, certain states still manage to find resources for foreign political “games.” In this sense, the Russian Federation and China stand out in the international political arena (in the most negative sense of the word).

The purpose of this opinion paper is to review Russia’s hybrid and propaganda operations of a disinformation campaign which, instead of being stopped due to the state of emergency caused by the virus outbreak, became much more aggressive and intensive.

In the case of China, we can more or less explain the strengthening of its propaganda front (Beijing, as the source of the global pandemic, is now justifying itself to the whole world), Russia’s actions, however, are at first glance inexplicable. If we look more closely at the narrative coming from Moscow and the actors affiliated with it, we will be able to clarify the motives.

Objectives of Russian Propaganda

Analyzing the actions of the Kremlin and its affiliated Internet, media or political actors, it is clear that Moscow’s short-term and long-term goals remain unchanged - the **disintegration of the Western world**, the **paralysis of Euro-Atlantic alliances**, the **demonization of the United States**, **nihilism diffusion** and, most importantly, **an attack on fundamental democratic values**. The only thing that has changed is the style of action. Russian propaganda has become more aggressive and immoral.

Nowadays, the West is experiencing a severe humanitarian and economic hurricane caused by the virus. Because of it and the lack of necessary resources, many Western countries cannot manage to pay proper attention to hybrid threats. Consequently, under these circumstances, Russia is provided with an ideal ground for conducting its undermining propagandistic operations. The Western world has become unprecedentedly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns. Apart from it, during the COVID-19 crisis, Internet news agencies are daily and intensively followed by hundreds of millions of people throughout the world.

Russian propaganda continues its traditional line of circulating various fabricated news items and is tirelessly working to disseminate **myths and conspiracy theories**. If you look at Moscow's narrative, the goal of virus-related information is always to bring the "sensational truth" to the audience. However, such "news" has nothing to do with sensation and especially with the truth.

Myths and Fabrications

The first large-scale myth was reported by the Russian government-funded *Sputnik* on January 22. The "news" was about the origin of COVID-19. According to the above-mentioned online agency, the coronavirus was spread by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from a secret military laboratory of the United States of America. This myth was circulated in 15 languages and became the most resonant in the Arabic world where even the leading media outlets took the supposed story themselves, including one bogus site seeking to imitate the BBC (von Hein, 2020).

The next piece of disinformation was voiced on March 23 when Aleksey Pushkov¹ made the following statement on Twitter: "Poland did not let the Russian aircraft carrying aid to Italy pass through its airspace. This is mean at the public policy level. Especially in the light of the fact that the aid was sent to an ally of Poland, in NATO and the EU. From now on, Russia will not be meeting Poland half-way. In any domain!" (Sabak, 2020).

This propagandistic metanarrative (myth) that "the European Union suffers from a severe shortage of solidarity" was immediately picked up by *RT (Russia Today)*, *Sputnik* and other pro-Russian news actors.

1 A Russian politician, a senator from Perm Krai since 29 September 2016, and former head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the State Duma.

The truth was soon discovered. In fact, Poland did not restrict the movement of Russian planes and Moscow did not ask Warsaw to establish an air corridor (Żaryn, 2020). Slightly later, Jacopo Iacoboni, a journalist for Italy's *La Stampa*, informed the world community that 80% of the Kremlin aid was useless and that this "altruistic" operation had military, intelligence goals rather than humanitarian (Iacoboni, 2020). By the way, after publishing this article, Jacopo Iacoboni became the object of serious psychological pressure and criticism. In addition to receiving insulting letters, he was threatened by the spokesman of the Russian Ministry of Defense, Igor Konashenkov. The General wrote a threatening letter with the following Latin epilogue: "*Qui fodit foveam, incidet in eam*"² (Lopapa, 2020).

Another "hot item" of the Russian "pandemic propaganda" was the video circulated on the Internet in which an Italian man burns the EU flag and replaces it with a Russian one. As the Italian *La Repubblica* reported, Italians were offered EUR 200 (via WhatsApp) to film themselves thanking President Vladimir Putin for the recent coronavirus aid and then post one thank-you video on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram (Tonacci, 2020).

The Kremlin's favorite disinformation narrative is the "impending end of the European Union." From the very first day of the virus outbreak in Italy and Spain, *RT* was declaring loudly that "Brussels abandoned Rome and Madrid in the face of adversity." Russian state television constantly mentioned that the only hope for Italy and Spain is Russian-Chinese medical aid while the European Union has offered them nothing valuable (Sukhankin, 2020). In fact, the humanitarian contribution of EU member states is many times greater than the aid sent from Moscow and Beijing.

According to the data of April 1, 2020, the European Union's External Action Service uncovered up to 80 items of misinformation disseminated by Russian media outlets. The bulk of them aimed at the undermining of the EU and the Western world in general (EU vs Disinfo, 2020).

Russian Propaganda Style

The research discipline in which propaganda should be reviewed has been the subject of long academic debate. This phenomenon is perceived differently by journalists, sociologists, political scientists and psychologists. Kurtz (1998) defined propaganda as the "mastery of breaking the news"

² "He who digs a pit will fall into it."

while Devito called it “harmful and unethical tactics for persuasion” (Devito, 1986, 239). Jacques Ellul saw propaganda in terms of psychological manipulation while Leo Bogart labeled it a non-mechanical art. The explanation of Jowett and O’Donnell is very popular as well: “Propaganda is the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2012, 7). Despite many opinions, the most adapted definition belongs to Barnett (1989) according to which propaganda using mass media is the best way to achieve ideological goals. This is exactly what the Russian government is doing in general and at present when the coronavirus is raging throughout the world. The Kremlin is trying to achieve its propagandistic objectives by diffusing fabrications, spreading lies and consolidating nihilism. To this end, it uses not only the media but also social networks, international foundations, research organizations, educational institutions, experts, advertising companies, independent researchers and celebrities.

In each of the cases of misinformation revealed by the European Union’s External Action Service, Russian media outlets, Internet portals, *RT* and *Sputnik* blame the secret services of the United States and the United Kingdom for the coronavirus outbreak but without any facts to support this claim. According to them, the COVID-19 plot was conceived in Washington and London.

The current global cataclysm is used to promote the image of an invincible Putin – the defender of a “healthy lifestyle, the liberator of Russian lands and the head of a great civilization morally superior to the gay-dominated and degraded Western culture.” In this ongoing information war, the main theme is anti-Americanism, the fight against “fascism” in Ukraine, the renewal of Russian greatness and the distinctiveness of Russian values as shown by the campaigns against the Pussy Riot (the all-female punk rock band) and political opponents with their sexual scandals (Dawisha, 2014, 770-771).

Experience of Moscow

The coronavirus became the subject of global discussion in January 2020. Consequently, the Kremlin’s propaganda intensified its efforts from this period. But it was not the first time that Moscow instrumentalizes the topic of the virus. In 1949, Soviet propaganda began to talk about “beetles

created by NATO” aimed at the complete destruction of crops in the Socialist Republics of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (Sukhankin, 2020).

Another similar myth was fabricated by the KGB on July 17, 1983 through an Indian newspaper according to which HIV was a virus created by the CIA. This “news” was immediately boosted by Soviet propaganda but in 1991, after the collapse of the USSR, Yevgeny Primakov³ acknowledged that the myth served to stir up global anti-Americanism and it had nothing to do with the truth (Darczewska, 2014).

Moscow worked on the information front against Georgia with the same style. In 2011, the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research was established in Tbilisi. The Kremlin immediately began discrediting the laboratory and spreading false information about it. “The lab could be a source of swine flu, measles and various serious infections in the region as Americans are testing new biological weapons there” (Zoria, 2019).

The narrative was similar to the Zika virus as well. As usual, the United States was to blame.

In 2014, when Russian-Ukrainian relations reached a critical phase, some Russian media outlets even prepared a story about how Ukraine was “infecting” the insurgents in eastern Ukraine (Sukhankin, 2020).

For the above-mentioned reasons, it is not surprising that Russia was prepared and quite organized for propagandistic operations as opposed to the health front.

Conclusion

The dynamics of Russian propaganda show that the most difficult and critical situations are opportunities – and not barriers – for it to continue. The more “disrupted” the global socio-political background is, the more maneuverable it becomes. Based on this experience, the Kremlin will continue to carry out its propagandistic operations as it “bombs” the Internet, promotes pseudo-scientists, fabricates facts and puts pressure on the most vulnerable states.

The Kremlin’s objective will not be only the West. Due to the escalating pandemic in the country and the sharp drop in Putin’s approval rating,

³ Russian politician and diplomat who served as the Prime Minister of Russia from 1998 to 1999.

Russians should also expect an intensified wave of disinformation. The main weapon in this campaign will be television. As the Soviet-born British writer Peter Pomerantsev says: “In a country covering nine time zones, one-sixth of the world’s landmass, stretching from the Pacific to the Baltic, from the Arctic to the Central Asian deserts, from near-medieval villages where people still draw water from wooden wells by hand, through single-factory towns and back to the blue-glass and steel skyscrapers of the new Moscow – TV is the only force that can unify and rule and bind this country” (Pomerantsev, 2017, 8).

The disinformation storm will hit Russia with even greater force. Now, not only foreign policy interests are at stake but also the survival of the government which is in a difficult situation. The government means Putin who is fundamentally necessary for Russian propaganda because: «When you watch the Putin Show, you live in a superpower» (Shteyngart, 2015).

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