



# DISINFORMATION IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: **RUSSIA**

Wikistrat's COVID-19 Webinar Series  
April 23, 2020





WIKISTRAT'S COVID-19 WEBINAR SERIES

# DISINFORMATION IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: RUSSIA

## BACKGROUND

The Russian government is well known for its prevalent record of disinformation campaigns intended to undermine the actions of other governments, exploiting existing sources of weakness for maximum effectiveness. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it may not be business as usual for the Russian disinformation campaign efforts. In this interview with Mark Galeotti, we explore a change in direction by the Russian state to work against, rather than with their usual disinformants.



### **Mark Galeotti**

Mark Galeotti is an expert in modern Russia, with a focus on its security politics, intelligence services, and criminality. He is also a Senior Non-Resident Fellow of the Institute of International Relations Prague.

## INSIGHTS:

**Russian disinformation sources are extremely diverse, and Russia has little control:**

The established Russian disinformation model is driven by independent content creators, from which the state picks certain themes in order to push its agenda. The state does not have control over what these independent content creators are publishing about COVID-19.

**The disinformation creators are not united in their motivations:** The disinformation campaign from Eastern Europe is not motivated by one monolithic ideology, but rather a panoply of different ideological backgrounds from the left to right create and spread content to further their own agenda.

**Russian provision of aid as a useful diplomatic tool:** Russia has provided aid to a number of countries including Italy and the USA. Russia may be trying to rebuild its strained relationships in the West with generous overtures to other states.

**Russia is in the middle of competing narratives:** Russia is trying to find a delicate balance between the West and China in order to rebuild relations with the former and maintain their skin-deep strategic alliance with the latter. Russia has thus tried to take an active approach in combating false information campaigns where it may have in other times turned a blind eye.

# LIVE WEBINAR: FULL TRANSCRIPT

## **What main actors – for example, state agencies, groups, or individuals – are operating to deliberately spread disinformation about the COVID-19 crisis?**

Well, I think the thing is when we come to Russia, sorry to have to give a preamble, but I think the thing is they actually have a very distinctive information ecosystem that has been created that, in the main, disinformation comes from below, not from above. They have amassed a whole panoply on creative, facilitated, encourage, a whole panoply of different actors. From TV pundits to independent bloggers to new services and such like, who are, in effect, empowered to create a lot of disinformation content themselves. And the state then, in a way, treats this as a buffet from which it samples the particular narratives, the particular ideas that suit it at that time. And, then, takes those and magnifies it using its own assets, such as foreign ministry and other government agencies, covert arms, and that kind of thing.

In terms of what are the actors we see? What we do see are all these elements, all these individual discrete elements of the info system are creating all kinds of often contradictory and different narratives. Some of which are true-ish, some of which are entirely absolute nonsense, and others are somewhere in between. Which is, in a way, business as usual.

What we're not seeing is, in a way, much role from the state. The state is not particularly looking to create wider campaigns on that basis. Actually, a lot of this disinformation is quite problematic for the Russian state but, in some ways, it can hardly reign in this camp, their activities, precisely because it has chosen this particular model that it doesn't much control.

## **What are the main interests of those content creators that are doing this in a more independent manner? What can you tell us about their motivations?**

Well, again, because it's a very diversified environment, we actually have a whole diversified set of motivations. Now for some, it is really just out of devilry, ego, and clickbait-ness. They just like being the ones who are creating content, who are then being retweeted or picked up off a variety of other means. Then, there are those who are essentially, shall we say, the patriotic disinformants, who see themselves as having a role in fighting the good information fight. And, therefore, what they're trying to do, is to push forward Russia's interests as they see them. Again, there may all be differences of opinion and emphasis amongst them, but their main aim is precisely to say why Russia is good. Why the West, in particular, is bad or misinformed or about to collapse or whatever. That's the second reason. The third element, we might say, is the most straightforward of all, which is basically people who are information mercenaries, who do they do because they are paid to do so.

Sometimes, that means that they're paid by the state, particularly if they were a pundit on TV or whatever. But also, often, they are paid by a variety of other interests. It could be commercial, it could be part of a lobbying arm, agency, or whatever. Again, I think this is why we have such a complex environment, is actually there are different motivations at work.

The fourth factor is, obviously, the state. In this particular instance, I think what the state is trying to do, actually, is ironically enough, dampen the situation down. The government at the moment in Russia is clearly hoping to use the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to restart, even if only to a limited extent, its relationship with the West. We've seen this also with the provision of aid to Italy and maybe to the United States. A whole variety of different overtures it's that kind of, well, we're all in this together moment.

Obviously, this is a means to garner soft power, but above all, to try and undermine the case for the sanctions regime against Russia. And, if at the same time, you have Russian outlets putting out all kinds of toxic disinformation, that becomes problematic. Interestingly enough, we've actually seen in some cases, state outlets try actively to counter disinformation that is being spread by Russians themselves or by Russian outlets. That's the first instance we see of actually trying to damper down. The second thing is, actually, to manage the very difficult situation of being between China and the West.

China has launched this extraordinarily aggressive... genuinely all of government information campaign. And this is going to be a sort of rolling problem that we're going to face even after the pandemic. Because, once you start this, it's very hard to back away from it as a tool. But one in which actually, they're trying to not just simply say, China is not at fault, but that actively, China is a victim. And you have China outlets pushing a lot of conspiracy theory stuff, particularly about American biological warfare experiments and such like. And the Russians find themselves in the one hand... they have a notional strategic alliance with China that's always skin-deep and they are finding themselves being faced with these narratives.

Sometimes you're even getting a government spokesman being actually confronted with them in press conferences. Well, the Chinese are saying this, what's your response? And they're having to play a very, very difficult game of not outright refuting the Chinese model, Chinese ideas, because they don't want to pick a fight with Beijing. But nor, on the other hand, do they want to be backing them, because they don't want to be picking a fight with the West. They're also trying to be very careful, making sure that one shouldn't blame China, but on the other hand saying they have no evidence to support that there is an American connection or whatever. A lot of this is very negative. It's very much trying to actually extricate Russia from the information warfare that it's been involved in for, what, six years?

In the case of things like Ukraine, it's difficult because one of the problems is, it's very hard for us on the outside to be able to precisely say, uh-huh, well that particular creator of disinformation is motivated by this particular intention. We are still seeing a lot of Ukraine-related disinformation. But, the trouble is that the Ukrainian-Russian conflict has become so pitched and so personal, but for many of the creators, this has become a struggle, as it were, for kicks as much as anything else. That's still very present. And I would be surprised if there were not some degree of government support still for that, but I said that's a very specific situation.

### **Is there a noticeable increase in the efforts to manipulate general disinformation campaigns?**

On a state level, it's actually business less than usual. The time when China is cranking up its campaign, actually the Kremlin has been dramatically cranking down. The issue is clearly one of control, is that they don't really have much ability to control much of the disinformation that's going out. All they can really do is just not magnify it at a state level, not feed it into the multi-platform campaigns that they have. When we really do see the Russian state absolutely committed to something. Actually, it's an absence. Obviously, something as big as COVID-19... it brings conspiracy theories. Any kind of big crisis like this does. In some ways, we've seen an upsurge in the amount of disinformation being generated, from the bottom up. But from the state, as I say, actually we see less than usual, not more.

### **What are the main methods that are usually implemented to spread disinformation that we're seeing?**

It's actually very familiar methodology. Which is... after all, nowadays, essentially everything is online, whether directly or indirectly. What we do see in terms of Russia-based disinformation is exactly that – it feeds through social media, in particular. Obviously, there's these specific Russian accounts and Russian bots, and so forth. In many ways, I would suggest that they are not that important in and of themselves. The particular importance is the way they feed into, shall we say, the secondary propagation level, which is particular individuals or accounts that are nodes of interest. Actually, people within certain countries, who have particular mindsets and for whom the information that is coming from Russia, fits their own particular worldview or interest or whatever.

Let me give a specific example based on the Czech Republic. There are some purely Czech news sites which are ideologically anti-NATO, they're anti the general Western liberal establishment, and they are also self-consciously anti-establishment. They want to shock and often their business model is precisely based on click-throughs and, therefore, they want to basically attract attention. Now for them, the great thing about the sources of information or disinformation, rather, from Russia, is precisely to be anti-West, anti-establishment, and shocking. And, therefore, it fits their own personal agenda. In some ways, again, what we once again have, is the Russian disinformation providing a buffet which other people can take from.

And the interesting thing is precisely because there is a difference with the Chinese model. [In] the Chinese model, there is clearly a handful of key narratives that have been generated by the state and everyone is busy pushing those out. With Russia, you have this bewildering and often horrifying array of different narratives being generated from the bottom. In some ways, there's almost something for everyone. If you are an anti-state neo-con, if you are an anti-American socialist, if you are a survivalist, if you are whatever. Whatever your particular orientation, you will find some toxic nonsense that suits your particular interest.

That, I think, is the main instrument. And in a way, therefore – although you might say the state is now doing much less to magnify it – if you look at sort of the classic channels, things like the RT to the vision channel or official government statements and so forth, they're actually being much more measured. But, that doesn't matter, because actually, at the same time, you have so much of the nonsense that has been generated in Russia. It's still being pushed out online. It's still being pushed out over the same channels. And people around the world are independently plucking from it, whatever sort of suits their own worldview.



WIKISTRAT'S COVID-19 WEBINAR SERIES

# DISINFORMATION IN THE AGE OF COVID-19: RUSSIA

For more information on Wikistrat's crowdsourced solutions and systems, contact: [info@wikistrat.com](mailto:info@wikistrat.com)

[www.wikistrat.com](http://www.wikistrat.com)