

Commentary



JUNE 2020

Fighting the false narrative of Russia's COVID benevolence

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This talk was delivered at MLI's online webinar, "Fighting the Spread of Foreign Disinformation in the COVID Era," on June 11, 2020.

Following the spread of COVID-19, the Russian government has suppressed information about the virus' spread at home, amplified Western falsehoods about what caused it in the first place, and positioned Russia as the only country responsible and responsive enough to contain the pandemic even outside its borders. On the whole, the Kremlin's information campaign might be described in a sentence: "The sick man is Europe and we're the cure."

As far as I can tell, the campaign consists of three interconnected tropes. First, there is the customary *schadenfreude* in portraying the real or alleged failures of the EU and its member-states in not confronting the public health crisis early on, before it exploded into a global pandemic. (This is usually accompanied by bombastic claims that the EU as a project is now finished.) Second, there is a drip-drip of disinformation about measures undertaken – or better say not undertaken – by the EU and its member-states to help themselves and their neighbors. Third, and most important, there is the portrayal of Russia as a more competent alternative benefactor: a first responder selflessly swooping in when others have not.

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It should come as no surprise that Russian state media organs have also indulged in the usual nonsense and conspiracy theories about the etiology of the virus – especially to trace its origins to an American billionaire philanthropist. Russia’s most popular television station, Channel One, aired a segment on its “Man and Law” program suggesting Bill Gates created the virus as a way to microchip people and control population growth (Furlong 2020), citing a 2015 TED Talk he gave in which he anticipated a flu pandemic being the single “greatest risk of global catastrophe.” Thus foresight was proof of sinister design.

Channel One, though, was only amplifying what had already become a prominent fantasy of the American far-right, one peddled by the likes of Fox News presenter Laura Ingraham and convicted felon Roger Stone. As RFE/RL pointed out, the “sources” relied upon by the “Man and Law” program were similarly North American: a Canadian pro-life organization, the ramblings of anti-vax activist and attorney Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., and a homeopathy website whose corporate headquarters are in Bonita Springs, Florida. (Funnily enough, the one instance in which Russian state media backpedaled on its Gates fixation apparently had nothing to do with the verifiability of blaming the Microsoft founder for COVID-19 and everything to do with a separate item in an episode of Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Rossia-24* show which criticized Sberbank CEO German Gref for failing to open bank branches in occupied Crimea (RFE/RL’s Russia Service 2020).

Yet the more universal aspect of Russia’s information campaign is to herald the decline and fall of Europe and either implicitly or explicitly present Russia as the true champion of Western health and safety. On March 22, Dmitry Kiselev, the leading Channel One presenter who has been sanctioned by both the United States and European Union for his role in promoting the Russian invasion of Ukraine, said on his “News of the Week” program:

The Schengen Area regime was the first one to collapse. Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Poland and Lithuania have reinstated control of their national borders. That means that the Schengen Area with the freedom of movement between its 26 members states no longer exists.

All the lip-service to solidarity, collective assistance, shared values, human rights and humanism, has gone with the wind the moment when Italy, who lost more people to coronavirus than China, asked the EU for help, and was rebuffed.

Italy requested personal protection items and medical equipment, specifically lung ventilators. In response, Germany and France curbed their exports of medical masks.¹

As Alexey Kozlov (2020) noted in a report for the Free Russia Foundation, all three of Kiselev’s claims were lies. The Schengen system has a built-

in mechanism for restricting or limiting travel within its zone and the implementation of that mechanism speaks to the system's integrity, not its "collapse"; the European Commission dispensed €50 million in emergency aid to Italy early on in the crisis; and France and Germany's export reduction owed to either country's deficits, not to the pandemic.

Kozlov further noted that Kremlin propaganda ran contradictory stories on Berlin's response to the pandemic, primarily aimed at the sizable number of Russian speakers in Germany. Mainly these stories concerned the sensitive subject of refugees and their susceptibility as contractors and spreaders of coronavirus. RT Deutschland assailed the Merkel government for implementing too-harsh lockdown measures on refugees living in camps or state-subsidized asylum-seeker housing in Germany whereas Sputnik DE said the opposite: the government was being too lax and sluggish in keeping its refugee population safe.

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In several cases, Russia has simply outsourced its disinformation to German neo-Nazis, ever happy on both ideological and electoral grounds to whip up racist or xenophobic sentiment in a country host to over a million refugees. The Russian tabloid *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, to name just one, has repeatedly commissioned and published Eugen Schmidt, an AfD activist, to portray stateless migrants as principal quarantine violators.

The Atlantic Council's DFR Lab (2020) analyzed three additional cases of Russian disinformation, all tied to the theme of portraying a Europe divided and lost and Russia as its maligned but willing savior.

In late April, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov alleged that “the Big Brothers,” an unnamed collection of NATO countries, were preventing European states from seeking Russian assistance and aid in containing the virus within their borders. Lavrov provided no evidence for this assertion but it was nonetheless picked up uncritically by various state media outlets including TASS, *RIA Novosti* and RT. The same or similar outlets also erroneously ran with a fake news story that Spain had asked NATO for help but was rebuffed. (In fact, Madrid withdrew its request.)

Moscow has been especially concerned, as DFR Lab noted, in demonstrating to Serbia, an aspiring EU member, that its fortunes lie eastward, not westward. It's had plenty of help in this respect by Serbian leadership.

On April 15, the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić trafficked in the falsehood that the EU had prohibited the export of medical aid outside of its constituent nations (DFR Lab 2020). “As of today, as you know, we cannot even import goods, according to the European Union’s decisions,” Vučić said. “European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairytale on paper.”

Kremlin media naturally seized on Vučić’s statement and didn’t bother to correct it. The European Commission had indeed authorized the export of surgical masks to non-EU countries. But this simple fact stood no absolutely chance against Russia’s more concerted and material contribution to Serbian public opinion – namely its dispatching of a fleet of planes filled with military officers and special equipment to help with the containment of the virus to the Slavic country in early April. As far as influence operations went, this was an only slightly smaller replay of a far more successful one which had occurred just days earlier.

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Between March 23 and 25, 15 Russian planes arrived at the Practica di Mare military airbase, just southwest of Rome, and offloaded equipment, vehicles, doctors and 122 officers of Russia’s Radiological Chemical and Biological Weapons Defence (RChBD) unit. All had come at the invitation of the Italian government, offering their expert assistance in containing coronavirus in the European country – an EU and NATO member – hardest hit by it.

As my colleague Anton Shekhovtsov observed in a lengthy examination of this much-touted “humanitarian” mission, landing at Practica di Mare was a curious logistical choice since the region in Italy most affected by coronavirus was Lombardy, and the city of Bergamo being the epicentre, which lies 372 miles to the north. Bergamo’s fully functional Orio al Serio airport was to become the headquarters of this joint Russian-Italian virus containment effort and it would have been more time-conserving to fly directly in there. Yet a traveling roadshow was precisely the point.

Twenty-two Russian vehicles plus buses transporting military specialists made the six-and-a-half-hour journey across the country, following an intense public relations campaign by the Kremlin to amplify this mission along with the hearty gratitude of the Italian government. The convoy was adorned with banners bearing the slogan “From Russia with love” written in Russian, Italian and English.

Reporters with Zvezda, the Russian Defence Ministry's television station, were embedded along the way, and the ministry itself later produced a photograph of Russian General Sergey Kikot, the deputy commander of RChBD and the head of the operation, in conference with Italian counterparts, studying a map of Italy. Prior to this, Kikot had been an outspoken proponent of the conspiracy theory that Bashar al-Assad's regime did not use chemical weapons in the Syrian city of Douma in 2018 – for which the US and UK launched retaliatory airstrikes on the regime – and that the entire attack was staged by the White Helmets, a team of Western-funded rescue workers. Kikot's arrival on NATO territory therefore wasn't lost on Brussels or Washington.

Other photos circulated showing RChBD officers in hazmat suits spraying disinfectant on Bergamo streets and vehicles and storefronts and ordinary Italians thanking Russia and Vladimir Putin personally. In one video posted to social media, Federico Canet, an Italian man, tore down an EU flag and replaced it with the Russian tricolor, commenting, "We think this way: we learn who our friends are in [times of] trouble. Thanks to President Putin, thanks to Russia." The video was shared by 20,000 people and made news in Russia and Italy.

The goodwill might have grown more fulsome still and lasted even longer but for Russia's self-destructive response to a critical piece of reporting on the operation.

The Italian journalist Jacopo Iacoboni at *La Stampa* published an investigation, citing unnamed Italian officials, that 80 percent of Russian aid was either useless or superfluous and that Italy's Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was indulging a Kremlin geopolitical powerplay out of sheer desperation. Rather than simply ignore the article, both Russia's defence and foreign ministries responded to it in characteristic fashion.

Igor Konashenkov, the Defence Ministry spokesman, trotted out the usual shopworn accusations and buzzwords – "Russophobia," "Cold War" psy-ops, "anti-Soviet" propaganda – before seeming to threaten *La Stampa* and Iacoboni personally with the Latin expression, "He that diggeth a pit, shall fall into it." Moscow's fulminations prompted immediate backlash from Rome and Italian civil society, with even Bergamo's mayor declaring his solidarity with Iacoboni and reaffirming Italy's freedom of the press. Maria Zakharovna, the spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry, intimated that the original investigation was some kind of British commercial plot. Her reasoning? A fringe Russian website had falsely claimed that *La Stampa* was owned by the Chrysler corporation, whose CEO is British.

In the face of such hysterical defensiveness, more Western sources came forward to substantiate the thrust of Iacoboni's reporting, including former and current Italian officials who suggested "From Russia with love" was little more than an active measure with an espionage component built right into it – not exactly a guarded secret given the heavy-handed 007 reference bestowed upon the endeavor.

The convoy's long drive to Bergamo, after all, offered ample opportunity for Russian surveillance and reconnaissance, using not both human and signals intelligence. Furthermore, Italy hardly needed external assistance with chemical and biological defence, its own capability being second to none in NATO and far superior to Russia's. Disinfecting Bergamo's public spaces would have been easy enough to handle domestically, and many Italian epidemiologists and virologists questioned the efficacy of such measures.

Coda Story, a Tbilisi-based news organization devoted to tracking disinformation globally, partnered with Iacoboni and *La Stampa* for a follow-up investigation (Antelava, Iacoboni). Together the outlets cited "two sources inside the Italian military" who substantiated the original allegation that Russia's aid was largely "superfluous." They also quoted Andrea Armaro, the former Italian defence minister, who said: "If NBC [nuclear, biological and chemical] assets were needed in Bergamo, why were they not used already a month ago? And then, why not use the Italian ones? Our army has perhaps the best NBC troops in NATO."

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Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, former commander of NATO's Rapid Reaction CBRN Battalion, told Coda Story and *La Stampa* that Russia's RChBD unit is also connected to the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, which won't have passed up the opportunity to spy on a NATO member's home turf, particularly when it was invited in to do so. "Undoubtedly, there are GRU operatives on the ground in Italy right now," de Bretton-Gordon said. "Any intelligence service would take advantage of this situation, and especially the Russians. They will want to be finding out as much as possible about the Italian forces. They will be setting up intelligence networks, there will be an enormous amount of activity going on right now."

"Russia has a long history of sending help – men and equipment – to countries suffering from natural disasters," Andrei Soldatov, a Moscow-based journalist and author specializing in the Russian security services, told me. "These operations used to be carried out by the Ministry of Emergency Situations."

As Soldatov pointed out, however, that the Ministry offered to send a plane filled with relief workers to New York City after the 9/11 attacks, although the Americans declined, citing their own capacity for performing triage for downtown Manhattan. The ministry did, however, manage to send two

planes filled with 50,000 blankets to New York after Hurricane Sandy in 2012. “Guess who headed Emergency Situations on both occasions?” Sol-datov said. “Sergei Shoigu, the current defence minister who of course now oversees the RChBD unit.”

In April of this year, Shoigu pulled off his best trick to date – and against his main adversary. Russia’s Defence Ministry sent a large An-124 military transport plane filled with boxes of masks and ventilators to New York’s Kennedy International Airport and all for American use (Troianovski). While it is unclear who paid for what (Russia says it paid for half and donated the rest, while the US claims it purchased everything), the consignment prompted heartfelt thanks from Trump administration and anger from ordinary Russians and dissidents.

Alexey Navalny, the leader of the anti-Putin opposition, tweeted that doctors in his own country were working without such badly needed personal protection equipment and contracting the virus as a result. The best part, however, was that these particular ventilators were manufactured by a company controlled by Rostec, a U.S.-sanctioned Russian conglomerate and so Washington not only licensed another propaganda victory for the Kremlin but also formally violated its own sanctions on Russia to do so.

About the author



Michael Weiss is the Editor-at-Large at the Daily Beast. He is the co-author of the *New York Times* bestseller *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. He is currently working on a book about the history of Russian military intelligence.

(Photo: Larry D. Moore CC BY-SA 4.0)

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Endnotes

1 See <https://vesti7.ru/video/2007938/episode/22-03-2020/>.



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