



Russian Disinformation Apparatus Taking Advantage of Coronavirus Concerns

REPORT:

The Global Engagement Center (GEC), through coordination with a trusted-partner, tracked the global activity of Russian state-linked false personas and proxies which often push disinformation and propaganda. Coronavirus has been a top subject for these accounts since 24 January. The Coronavirus, as a topic, is being propagated by these Russia-linked accounts in English, Spanish, Italian, German and French – indicating that this disinformation campaign is intended for a global audience.

These same Russia-linked accounts have previously been tracked by the GEC because of their involvement in the Chilean protests, the Yellow Jacket protests in France, the conflict in Syria, and other geopolitical events. (See companion document for an example of how one of these accounts pivots between the topics.)



The drastic increase in posts related to the Coronavirus, depicted in the above graph, is reflective of the global media coverage of the issue. Russia, following its known tactics, likely sees this as an opportunity to shape the global conversation against the United States and Western countries.

Specifically, the false narratives being propagated by false Russian personas and proxies include:

1. **Speculation about the origin of the virus:** Attributing the development of the virus to global bat community research conducted at the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China, and naming the scientist involved as the “[man behind the global coronavirus pandemic](#).”



2. Exacerbation of general concerns related to the Coronavirus by:

- Amplification of a [video](#) originally posted by the *China Global Television Network* reporting that a second hospital in Wuhan had been expanded to accommodate additional beds.
- Using catchy headlines to cause panic such as:
 - “[BREAKING](#): Japan and Germany confirm coronavirus cases in individuals who never travelled to Wuhan, China”
 - “[BREAKING](#): Japan confirms coronavirus case in individual who never travelled to Wuhan, China.

3. Blaming [Bill Gates](#) for running a simulation test six weeks prior to the outbreak in China.

4. Describing the Coronavirus as an [engineered bioweapon](#).

5. Attributing the appearance of the virus in China to the [CIA](#):

With China rising to eclipse the economic power of the West & Trump's war against China failing, what better means than a virus cooked in the [@CIA](#)'s labs to inject an unstoppable lethality there?

Anyone who knows CIA history knows this is possible.



7:30 PM · Jan 26, 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)



On 3 February, the narrative shifted to reports of Sinophobia circulating online, as demonstrated in the below tweet:



Finally, the suspension of the ZeroHedge Twitter account led to another flurry of disinformation [narratives](#). ZeroHedge's most recent post received high engagement (10,999 retweets and 14,300 likes), and focused on supposedly [organic matter](#) burning in Wuhan, as judged by increased levels of sulfur dioxide.





ANALYST COMMENT

The false claim accusing the United States of artificially creating the Coronavirus appears to have emerged in the Russian media on 20 January. The key disinformation narratives were set by the Russian observer on chemical and biological weapons Igor Nikulin, who reportedly had served on the UN Commission for Chemical & Biological Weapons from 1998 to 2003. In an interview with Zvezda TV, an outlet run by the Russian Ministry of Defense, Nikulin stated that Coronavirus was potentially an American bioweapon aimed to pressure China. Nikulin also suggested that U.S. corporations could have created the virus in order to profit from selling pharmaceuticals to fight the disease. Nikulin mentioned that the United States operates around 400 military bio labs around the world, where it conducts “unsanctioned experiments.”¹

The anti-American conspiracy theory was picked up by a variety of Russian pro-Kremlin and state media. On 22 January, the issue was discussed on “Vremya Pokazhet” the political talk show broadcast on the state-funded television channel *Perviy Kanal*.² One of the guests proposed that “somebody is testing bioweapons and it is not the Chinese.” On 25 January, the state news agency *RIA Novosti* quoted Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, a controversial leader of the Russian party LDPR, who said that the Coronavirus was an American provocation to hurt China economically. Zhirinovskiy pointed to similar past U.S. provocations such as H5N1 “bird flu” and Creutzfeldt-Jakob “mad cow” disease.³ As of 29 January, about two dozen additional media outlets also reported on his false claims.⁴ On 26 January, Zhirinovskiy repeated disinformation during his appearance on “Voskresniy Vecher with Vladimir Solovyov,” the flagship political talk show on the stat TV channel *Rossiya 1*.⁵ Another popular political talk show on *Rossiya 1*, “60 Minut” discussed the conspiracy theory on 27 January, with one guest suggesting that the virus was possibly developed by either the United States or China.⁶

Nikulin’s “perspective” reappeared in the media on 26 January, when he was quoted on *REN TV*, a TV channel known for sensational, conspiracy theory-driven content; in *Moskovskiy Komsomoletz*, a mass circulation print daily with a tabloid reputation; and in the state news agency *RIA Novosti*.⁷ Nikulin said that the outbreak looked like a subversive activity against China conducted by one of the 400 U.S. military bio labs. *REN TV* added that in one such lab, the Lugar Center in Georgia, scientists had reportedly developed drones carrying malaria-infected mosquitos.

¹ https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/2020120172-BPEmb.html

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfJ_uWytzX8

³ <https://ria.ru/20200125/1563865685.html>

⁴ <https://news.yandex.ru/yandsearch?text=%D0%96%D0%B8%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8%D0%B9+%D1%81%D1%88%D0%B0&rpt=nnews2&grhow=clutop&rel=rel>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLQlimue5iA>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0rInVJzo8Y4>

⁷ <https://ren.tv/news/v-mire/653042-mutatsiia-tainaia-laboratoriia-ili-provokatsiia-otkuda-prishel-koronavirus;>
<https://ria.ru/20200127/1563927253.html>; <https://www.mk.ru/science/2020/01/27/ekspert-uvidel-priznaki-amerikanskogo-bioterrorizma-v-rasprostranении-koronavirusa.html>



According to Nikulin, both the location and the timing of the outbreak were suspicious. Wuhan is a transportation hub and the outbreak took place on the eve of the Chinese New Year, when masses of people plan to travel abroad. He said that the U.S. Consulate in Wuhan could have delivered the virus. “Everywhere where the American biolabs are present, there are outbreaks of diseases, which are often unknown,” Nikulin added, citing an example of the lab in Georgia where “more than 100 people died...in the vicinity of the lab in one month,” but no journalists were allowed to enter the lab to investigate. On 1 and 8 February Nikulin appeared on Perviy Kanal’s political talk show “Bolshaya Igra,” repeating his false assertions.⁸ On 5 February, the

Coronavirus disinformation was featured on Perviy Kanal’s main news program “Vremya.”⁹ As of 29 January, Nikulin was quoted in about 20 outlets.¹⁰

Disinformation on Coronavirus was also promoted on Russian state propaganda outlets targeting foreign audiences and appears to have been picked up globally:

- *Sputnik Azerbaijan*: it is very probable that the United States is using Coronavirus to undermine the Chinese economy and reduce the Chinese population.¹¹
- *Sputnik Mundo*: the United States may be purposely spreading panic about Coronavirus to isolate China.¹²
- *Sputnik Belarus*: Coronavirus is the West’s revenge for China refusing to become hostile towards Russia.¹³
- *RT Arabic, Face Iraq, Assennara, Veto Gate, Sana, Syria Friends, Sada News, Alwasat Today, Almayadeen, Lebanon Today, Shafaqna, AlKuwait Online, Shamra, Albawabh News, Wattan TV, Oman Info, Asian Society Information Agency, al-Azmenah, Akhbarak.net, Iraq Orl, Almasdar, Sada 4 Press, Iraq Akhbar, EM News, Akhbaar, News Sinaa, Head Topics, National Iraqi News Agency, Syrian News Station, Bawabaa News, Almogaz, al-Qalam Centre, and Min al-Akher*: the United States is behind the spread of coronavirus.¹⁴
- A video released by *Shri Lankan Hiru TV* on social media, reporting on the trending piece that states that Russian scientists claim that the novel Coronavirus is a biological weapon created by the United States, trended heavily on online including on WhatsApp and Viber.¹⁵

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwIWEWY8xr4>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fQeijeguPI>

⁹ <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2020-02-05/380033->

[virus na voennoy sluzhbe proverka na prochnost teorii zarazivshey ne odno sredstvo massovoy informatsii](#)

¹⁰ <https://yandex.ru/search/?text=%22%D0%B8%D0%B3%D0%BE%D1%80%D1%8C%20%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA%D1%83%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BD%22%20%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81&lr=213&p=1>

¹¹ <https://sputnik.az/columnists/20200203/423042902/yeddi-gunun-icmali.html>

¹² <https://mundo.sputniknews.com/asia/202002041090351142-el-coronavirus-un-arma-caida-del-cielo-para-eeu-en-su-lucha-contra-china/>

¹³ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/coronavirus-is-the-west-s-revenge-for-china-refusing-to-become-hostile-towards-russia/>

¹⁴ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/us-behind-the-spread-of-coronavirus/>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=526006111370186>