

COVID-19 AND THE KREMLIN

Summary:

Russia is exploiting the worldwide struggle against the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, in an attempt to reinforce its standing as a world power and assail Western, liberal forms of government. Russian actors have employed a mix of diplomatic tools and misinformation techniques to wage this battle. The effort was aided initially by low numbers of reported COVID-19 cases within Russia through early April, but publicly available information now indicates the domestic challenge posed by the virus is increasing. Now the Kremlin and other Russian leaders must mitigate the virus' effects through any means available, including military resources, while further perpetuating the narrative that the Russian model of governance offers advantages in crises like this.



BLUF:

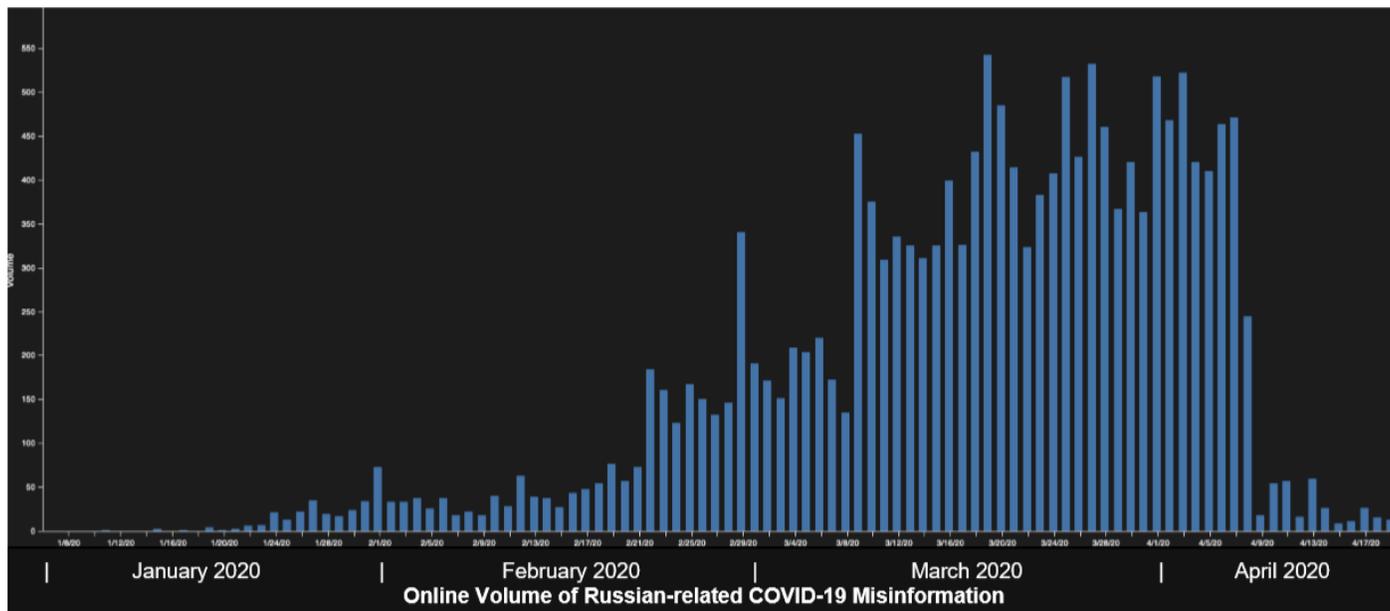
- Russia hopes to use COVID to improve standing in the world and validate its form of governance over liberal Western democracies
- Overt medical diplomacy and obfuscated web-based disinformation campaigns being used to bolster Moscow's image
- The COVID-19 situation in Russia is likely worse than reported numbers indicate based on Russia's recent actions and increased infections along the border with China
- The Russian military will be an important part of counter-COVID-19 efforts, but the National Guard and police continue to serve as the chief means of enforcing lockdowns
- Marked increases in Russia's infection rate will likely complicate Russia's international information operations and could lead to increased disinformation efforts

Messaging High and Low:

The worldwide struggle to contain the impacts of COVID-19 presents Russia with an opportunity to demonstrate its status as a world leader, especially given relatively low numbers of reported cases early on in the crisis. By 3 April, officials in Moscow claimed there were only 3,548 COVID-19 cases in the country—only a small fraction of the hundreds of thousands of cases across Europe up until that point. Russia launched a sophisticated medical diplomacy campaign in light of these facts. Military doctors were deployed to Italy to combat the worst outbreak at that point in time. Russia also dispatched military aircraft to deliver medical supplies to numerous countries including Iran, Venezuela, China, Mongolia, Former Soviet States, Serbia and even the United States.

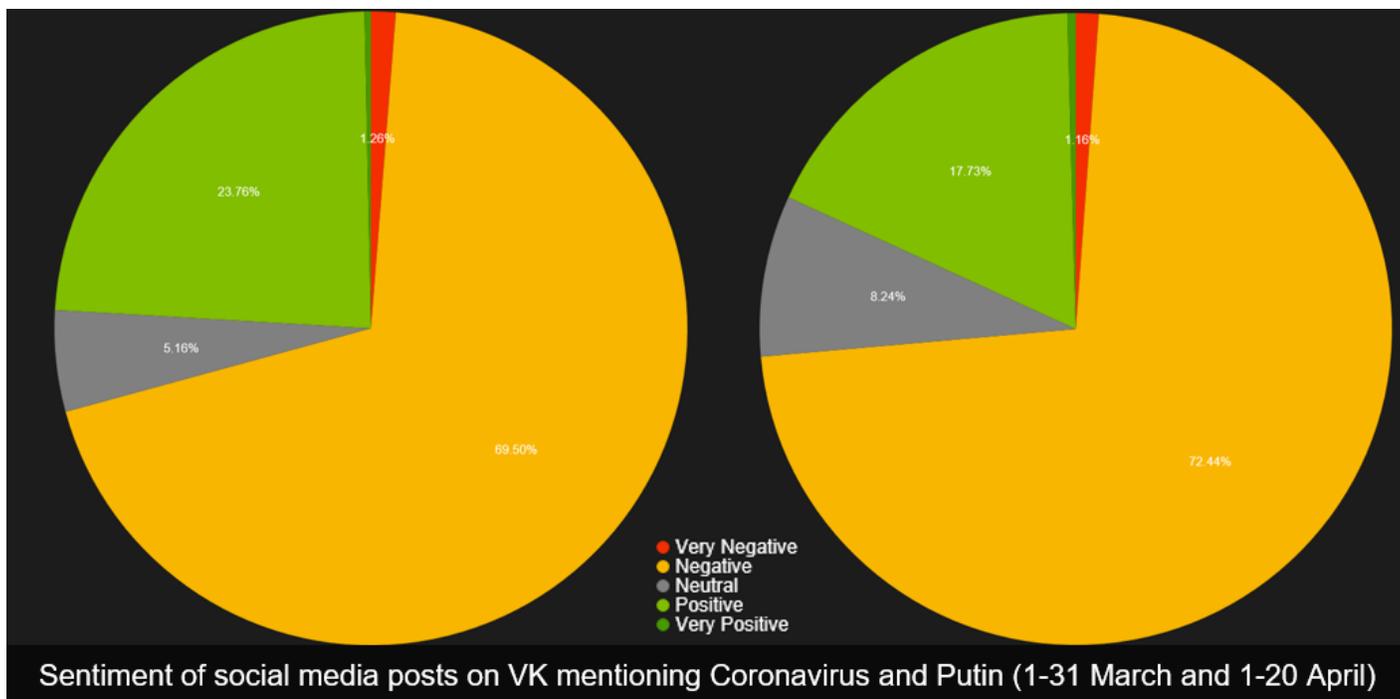
While Russian military and medical resources publicly represented Moscow across the globe, behind the scenes, Russian actors worked diligently to sow disinformation and increase chaos in the West. Russian efforts to spin the coronavirus into a boon for Moscow began early. The European Union's External Action Service issued a nine-page report on 16 March saying that "the overarching aim of Kremlin disinformation is to aggravate the public health crisis in Western countries in line with the Kremlin's broader strategy of attempting to subvert European societies." The report, seen by *Reuters*, states an EU database recorded almost 80 cases of disinformation about coronavirus between 22

January and mid-March, some of them claiming coronavirus was a U.S. biological weapon. Babel Street's trend analysis of topics related to Russian fake news revolving around COVID-19 corroborates these claims by showing an increase in activity throughout March and early April. As the virus became more severe within Russia, however, the Kremlin began to rein in the spread of online disinformation. According to *Reuters*, the government issued an order on 10 April preventing the spread of "fake news" online, and Babel saw a corresponding drop in online misinformation traffic linked to Russia. By silencing the disinformation noise, Moscow officials are likely hoping their official narrative will prevail.



Deteriorating Condition:

Despite early claims by the Kremlin that Russia was better suited to deal with COVID-19 and prevent large-scale outbreaks, Babel X publicly available data suggests an increasingly challenging domestic situation for the Russian government. Signs began to emerge in early April the virus would be a much larger challenge than official statements and figures indicated. Even with only a few thousand confirmed cases, President Putin extended a nationwide lockdown through the end of April. By 15 April the number of cases reported in Russian media had ballooned to over 24,000 with 198 reported deaths. As the number of imported coronavirus cases increased, China was forced to impose stricter border controls along its border with Russia—another indication of more widespread infection.



President Putin stated on 13 April that the situation was “not changing for the better,” according to reports by Interfax, and Putin has also stressed the need to use all available means to combat the virus, including the military. He and his press secretary have emphasized the expertise gained by Russian medical professionals in Italy would be invaluable to Russia’s struggle. Despite these public comments, Putin has been criticized by the *Moscow Times* for punting responsibility to other government officials while largely staying out of the COVID spotlight. Moreover, this point has not been missed by Russian citizenry as reflected in Babel X sentiment analysis as voiced through social media. In March, only 24% of posts on Russian social media site VK that mentioned coronavirus and Putin were positive; in the first two weeks of April positive posts had dropped below 18% while negative and very negative posts climbed above 73%. It is possible that Putin is copying the strategy of Chairman Xi Jinping who avoided media attention and responsibility in the most chaotic period of China’s coronavirus response, only to insert himself in a central position once the battle against the virus was more under control. Putin’s relative absence from the public eye is even more striking, however, considering his efforts to reform the Russian constitution and remain in power for decades to come.

The Military’s Role:

The opaque nature of Russia’s national security apparatus creates difficulties in identifying actions and intentions of the Russian military, but Babel Street’s data offers valuable insights on how the armed forces fit into the Kremlin’s COVID-19 contingencies. Official figures released by the Ministry of Defense (MoD) on 14 April show only three confirmed cases of the virus within the military, but that statistic was as of the end of March with no further updates provided. Given the 700% increase in reported cases within the general Russian population during the interceding weeks and the indications noted above of even more widespread infection, the military is likely dealing with containing its own outbreak. Extensive quarantine and precautionary measures have been adopted in order to mitigate the spread within the ranks. Even so, some signs of continued military activity were readily visible through mid-April. As late as 14 April, preparations proceeded for the Victory Day parade and military demonstration scheduled for 11 May, with the Air Force announcing airspace restrictions for practice flights throughout the rest of April and early May. On 16 April, however, the parade was postponed, and preparations were put on hold. One Ministry insider told *Kommersant* on 14 April the overall status of the military’s ability to handle the virus was “unstable.”

Parts of the military have also mobilized to combat the crisis. In addition to military medical personnel deploying and military airlift delivering supplies around the world, specialized biological response teams have been seen in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod and other cities conducting sterilization operations. The military has also been working since late March to build 16 new medical facilities across the country; crews worked seven days a week in hopes of opening the first of these hospitals by mid-April. After President Putin’s 14 April declaration that MoD resources would be brought to bear in the fight against COVID-19, some Russian voices online posited that the military could be used to enforce lockdowns and bolster police forces. However, the MoD has asserted this is not the intent and the Ministry’s medical resources were the focus of Putin’s comments. Thus far, local police forces and the Russian National Guard—an internal security service separate from the MoD comprised of 340,000 members reporting directly to the Russian Security Council—enforced Russia’s coronavirus-related restriction.

Conclusion and Outlook

Russia is facing a growing domestic crisis caused by COVID-19. Despite early attempts by the Kremlin to paint their response as competent and complete, increasing infection rates and the Kremlin’s own words (and actions) indicate the situation in Russia will likely get worse in the coming weeks and further lockdowns are likely. As the virus has spread, so too has Russia’s online disinformation efforts. With domestic fallout continuing, a renewed effort to portray foreign efforts negatively and create more chaos are likely concomitant Russian themes. While officially only facing a very small number of infections, the Russian military will likely curtail activities to contain the spread of coronavirus, obfuscate the actual military impact, and devote more resources to fighting the pandemic.

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