

“Epidemic of Disinformation” Around Sars-Cov-2: Are Russian Counteractions Effective Against COVID-19?

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Accusations concerning the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic are mounting between Western and Eastern countries, where Russia is far from being an exception. Division lines exist even within blocs of countries having very similar political, socio-economic and cultural identities. There are as many ways to handle the COVID-19 pandemic as governments, international organisations etc., but the necessity of at least some forms of lockdown is almost universally agreed. Unfortunately, instead of abandoning previous conflicts and maximising international cooperation to successfully contain the pandemic, minimising casualties and social stress, virtually all aspects of the pandemic become over-politicised and used to advance competing interests. Russia is an important part of the “blame-game”. Having a culture of strong presidential power, harsh measures had been introduced meeting compliance of most of the society. As of November 2020, the number of newly infected people was still rising quite rapidly and systematically. Thus, the effectiveness of Russian countermeasures to tackle the pandemic was debated not only in Russia, but around the world.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, elections, government actions, international cooperation, lockdown, manipulation, presidential power, Russia

INTRODUCTION

A total of 1 971 013 coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2 virus, causing the COVID-19 pandemic) patients were registered in Russia as of 17 November 2020. The number of people who recovered was 1 475 904, and 33 931 patients died in total (TASS, 2020).

As of 17 November 2020, the Moscow region had the highest number of officially diagnosed coronavirus patients, that were 522 456 cases (TASS, 2020).

Based on the graphs in the APPENDIX, it can be concluded that, compared to the size of Russia and its population of about 145 million, it belongs to the part of the world that is still moderately affected by the coronavirus pandemic. This is true despite the fact that the number of infected people has reached a plateau in the first phase, however, as of November 2020, the number was still rising quite rapidly and systematically during the second phase (TASS, 2020). The overall picture could have been worse, should countermeasures by the Russian Government, such as school closures, border closures, restrictions on aviation, economic stimulus etc. have not taken place.

The number of newly infected people during the second phase – as a tendency – was increasing in November 2020. The number of recovered patients and the number of deaths showed similar tendencies, but these were a result of previous infections and therefore “lagging” behind previous events. We can

assume with some optimism that the coronavirus pandemic in Russia will soon reach a plateau again during the second phase.

The Russian Government has been constantly expanding its package of measures to mitigate the negative effects of the economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Russia's crisis plan is largely based on the British and South Korean models, and concrete measures include a tax moratorium, fewer controls and support for voluntary isolation. The state is also working to ease restrictions on imports from the pharmaceutical industry.

A coronavirus information centre has been set up in Moscow, which has included data from surveillance cameras to enforce quarantine regulations. Test capacities are being significantly expanded: the original goal was to be able to perform 10 000 tests a day in the Russian capital in a short period of time. Various vaccines are being tested in Russian laboratories, of which there could be a marketable product by the end of the year. The Russian Government also monitors social media to screen for spreading of panic and for speculators. They are monitoring the shortage of goods in stores, as the population has started mass purchases of certain items since the first news of the spread of the coronavirus pandemic emerged. The monitoring of the shortage of goods covers not only Moscow, but the whole country. In addition, Russia decided to build two large hospitals to treat coronavirus patients.

THE OFFICIAL POSITION OF RUSSIA

According to an official assessment by Russian President Putin, the coronavirus pandemic is under government control and the mass spread of the virus has been prevented, at least during the first phase of the pandemic. The Russian Government did not “overstretch” its “success-propaganda” for their own population during the second phase of the pandemic, since people needed to be convinced concerning the necessity of hard measures. Russia’s official position denies that the country is running a disinformation campaign over the pandemic data. The Russian Government is asking for the understanding and cooperation of the population in the field of anti-pandemic measures. They also ask the public not to give credit to self-appointed “experts” or panic makers..

THE WESTERN CRITICISM OF RUSSIA

Russia has received a number of criticisms from some Western governments, media and experts, the most important of which are:

- the Russian Government has concealed real data on the spread of the disease and is running a disinformation campaign, which has also contributed to the spread of the pandemic outside Russia,
- the Russian Government missed the opportunity to curb the pandemic by failing to take timely action,
- Russian healthcare is unable to deal with the pandemic,
- the Russian Government has gone into an “overreaction”, making decisions that are too harsh (Cobb, 2020; Jang, 2020) The system also malfunctions when it creates or maintains weak points during pandemic management,
- many patients do not trust the healthcare system and start treating themselves,
- there are many misdiagnosed patients who were actually infected with a coronavirus but were not diagnosed with it, but with some form of pneumonia (Reevell, 2020),
- Russian foreign aid to combat the coronavirus pandemic is “dishonest”, a “propaganda coup” (Troianovsky, 2020) “useless” and provides an opportunity for “hybrid warfare”.

RE-ELECTIONS OF PRESIDENT PUTIN AND THE CORONAVIRUS

Putin was last elected to be president in the spring of 2018 for a 6-year term. If the COVID-19 global pandemic lasts for 1-2 years (Winsor, 2020), as internationally renowned experts claim, it will still remain two or three years from Putin's presidency after the pandemic is over in Russia. The second phase of the pandemic will most probably peak in Russia in the foreseeable future, hopefully within a few months. However, the government has not yet been able to suppress it (Тимаков, 2020). For such reasons the success of the control of pandemic measures could be doubted, although reaching the plateau of the number of people infected on a daily basis could be within reach is promising. Accordingly, official Russian communication considers it premature to argue for Putin's "eternal" presidency because of his successful extraordinary measures against the pandemic. At the same time, it is likely that once the pandemic is overcome, this argument will come up during the presidential election campaign.

Putin's future presidential re-election seems to be legally secure. The latest draft amendment to the Russian constitution stated that "*presidents may be elected no more than twice, but the incumbent president may be re-elected*". Since Putin was already elected president in 2012 and then in 2018, Putin's new presidency would be allowed by the constitution if voting would approve the amendment, that was the case. This is because "incumbent president" means the *current* president, that is Putin, and *not any incumbent presidents* in general (because then there is no point in limiting the consecutive possibilities to be elected to president to up to two terms). So: *Putin can be president consecutively for the third time and his successors only twice.*

Interestingly, some points have been included in the constitutional amendment that would not have allowed Putin to become a President today (see the ban of long-term foreign residence, etc.). Thus, the constitutional amendment makes it nearly impossible for the strong candidates of the pro-Western, liberal opposition, that is weak altogether, existing almost exclusively outside of the parliament (State Duma), to be elected to president. It means, that the preparation for the re-election of not only Putin, but that of his successor is also underway.

It was not possible to vote on the points of the constitutional amendment separately, only on the whole package of amendments, as a whole, by "yes" or "no". In all likelihood, The package has been will be approved by the voters. However, the vote has been postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. As the majority of the voters supported the amendments of constitution in the future, the constitutional amendment would have entered into force on that day.

RUSSIAN "DISINFORMATION" ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) of the United Nations (UN), the coronavirus pandemic is associated with a global "disinformation epidemic" (Richtel, 2020). Even though such figures cannot be proved with scientific rigour, about 7 percent of social media communications can be disinformation. For the sake of objectivity, it should be noted that both Western and Eastern pandemic-related behaviour and communications have a subject of allegations of disinformation.

The West has accused China, Beijing is accusing the West on a reciprocal basis. Israel has accused Europe by claiming that another crisis is coming from Europe with the coronavirus pandemic. The West accuses Russia, Moscow denies the accusations and in turn accuses the West.

In the case of pro-Russian media, the Kremlin is not always taking official responsibility for the news on its own behalf (like *all* other governments in the world), thus some cases of distortions, typically the interpretations of information coming from foreign sources are difficult to associate with the Russian Government.

Typical cases of coronavirus disinformation (Broad, 2020) not limited to Russia (my remarks are shown using *Italics*):

- the coronavirus is a biological weapon (Rettman, 2020) manufactured by China, the US or the United Kingdom (*however, this does not mean, that the already existing coronavirus cannot be used as biological weapon; to the contrary*),

- the coronavirus pandemic did not originate from China, but from the United States, and Washington disguises the source (Kuo, 2020),
- the outbreak of the coronavirus was caused by *migrants (however, it does not mean, that illegal, massive migration cannot contribute to the spreading of the virus)*,
- non-smokers are at greater risk than smokers (Gretler, 2020) *(however, nicotine surprisingly provides somewhat protection against the virus, but smoking kills and it is against the advice of mainstream medical science to improve overall chances of overcoming the virus by smoking)*,
- the coronavirus has been patented in the United Kingdom (Marlasca, 2020),
- the coronavirus pandemic is a means of achieving total power (Linville & Warren, 2020) *(embarrassingly, Hungarian neoliberal and “left wing” opposition often accuses our Government of doing so)*,
- correlation between coronavirus and 5G networks (Schraer & Lawrie, 2020) *(even if unapproved yet by official science, elevated intensity of various radiations and their enhanced presence surrounding us virtually everywhere could indeed degrade the human immune system, especially if we are exposed for a long time, thus contributing to factors facilitating the spreading of a pandemic)*,
- the coronavirus is a “hoax”, it does not even exist, thus it is not dangerous.

RUSSIAN AID TO COUNTRIES AFFECTED BY CORONAVIRUS

The Kremlin has spectacularly helped Italy (Ellyatt, 2020) severely affected by the pandemic, in ways similar to China. Fifteen military transport aircraft were sent to Italy with about 100 specialists, materials, equipment and vehicles needed for pandemic management.

Given the negative state of Western-Russian relations, it is surprising that, following a telephone conversation between Presidents Trump and Putin, Russia sent an AN-124 heavy military transport aircraft to the United States on 31 March 2020, with materials and equipment already in deficit in the US due to the pandemic (Troianovsky, 2020), Putin expressed hope that when the production of these materials and equipment in the US has already increased and Russia might need them, America would be able to reciprocate the Russian shipment.

This cooperation, although it has provoked the politicized suspicion and criticism of some (Troianovsky, 2020), is a good example of how, in a crisis, the leaders of the great powers must put aside their differences and act together on short deadlines. If this were to become commonplace, it would have a positive impact on the entire international system, especially concerning security issues.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Criticisms of the Russian Government's actions include partial truths. It is clear that the fight against the pandemic poses dilemmas for politicians (decision-makers) in all countries. If measures are introduced too soon, too “painfully” (causing great material damage and inconvenience), politicians would lose popularity, they would be subject to criticism and the public will not necessarily be convinced that the measures are justified. If the pandemic is prevented successfully and timely, the need for such actions would remain a matter of debate.

If the pandemic spreads while the appropriate measures are delayed, the harsh measures would not be much questioned, but politicians (decision makers) would be accused of spreading the pandemic due to their fault. This is exactly the kind of dilemma that has arisen in the case of Russia as well.

In general, authoritarian socio-economic-political systems with a higher share of economic involvement by the state find it easier to introduce and enforce strict, anti-pandemic regulations than in Western democracies. Accordingly, the Russian Government has a great chance to curb the pandemic, even during its second phase.

In the case of Russia, the large size of the country and the low average population density have a positive effect on the enforceability of anti-pandemic restrictions and the reduction of the risk of the pandemic spreading. In the cities, traditionally well-organized Russian law enforcement and military forces increase the effectiveness of such measures.

Measures introduced by the Russian Government certainly have a positive effect. Reaching the plateau and the slowly decreasing number of newly infected patients in the first phase – as a tendency – proved that Russian statistical data was promising. However, during the second phase of the pandemic, Moscow has yet to prove the effectiveness of government action. This might be viewed as a fact, should government measures allow reaching a new plateau of the pandemic in Russia within a few months.

The effective protection of extremely long Russian borders is questionable, as it would require disproportionate resources. An increasing risk is posed by the growing Chinese community in the East of the country, which is not substantially controlled by either the Russian or Chinese central authorities.

A significant portion of the Western world criticizes Russia (Roth, 2020) and China for dealing with the coronavirus pandemic in a way that whatever they do cannot be good. Thus, Russian aid shipments to Western countries (Italy, USA, etc.) and the activities of Russian specialists sent to the scenes of the pandemic were often subject to negative assessments. This is a warning sign to all thinking and objective-minded people, fundamentally eroding the credibility of the Western world. Russia's offers of materials, equipment and expertise are positive, even if the Kremlin seeks to forge political capital, or divert attention from its own pandemic management shortcomings, and so on.

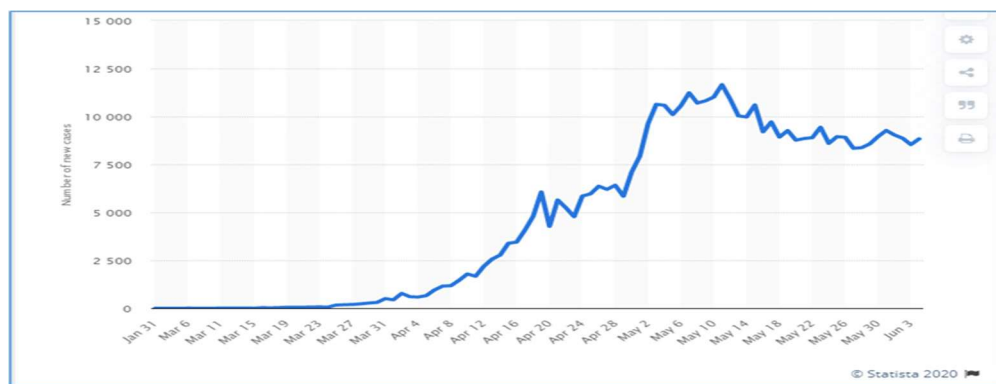
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APPENDIX

FIGURE 1
NUMBER OF NEW CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) CASES CONFIRMED IN RUSSIA AS OF
November 17, 2020, BY DATE OF REPORT



Statista, 2020

FIGURE 2
PEOPLE INFECTED BY CORONAVIRUS, RECOVERED AND DEAD IN RUSSIA,
AS OF JUNE 2020



Red: infected
 Blue: recovered
 Black: dead

TASS, 2020

FIGURE 3
THE NUMBER OF CORONAVIRUS INFECTIONS IN RUSSIA PER REGIONS,
AS OF JUNE 2020



TASS, 2020