

A photograph of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping walking side-by-side. Putin is on the left, wearing a dark blue suit and a maroon tie, looking slightly to his right. Xi Jinping is on the right, wearing a dark blue suit and a light blue tie, looking forward. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

INFORMATION BEDLAM: RUSSIAN AND CHINESE INFORMATION OPERATIONS DURING COVID-19

Edward Lucas, Jake Morris,
and Corina Rebegea

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Edward Lucas is a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

Jake Morris is a Program Assistant with the Democratic Resilience Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

Corina Rebegea is the former Director of the Democratic Resilience Program at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

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Cover: Russia's President Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping walk down the stairs as they arrive for a BRICS summit in Brasilia, Brazil November 14, 2019. REUTERS/Ueslei Marcelino.

Executive Summary

The covid-19 public health crisis involves more than a fight against the coronavirus. It has prompted an information war in which the United States and its allies are losing ground to adversaries, particularly Russia and China. While the pandemic enables disruption of the information environment, it also presents a research opportunity. Based on a literature review through January 2021, evaluated at an expert seminar, this policy brief provides a baseline analysis of changing tactics, narratives, and distribution strategies in Russian and Chinese information operations (IOs) relating to the covid-19 pandemic.

Key findings:

- **China** copied Russia's tactics, spreading disinformation globally for the first time, particularly on the virus's origins. But it lacks Russia's skillset;
- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) turned to destructive and conspiratorial narratives in an attempt to blunt criticism of its initial failure to contain covid-19;
- China's previous approach built economic ties and influence with political elites, whereas Russia's lies and disruption targeted broader public opinion;¹
- **Russia's** approach evolved little; it recycled previous narratives, spreading a broad range of covid-19 disinformation;
- Evidence supports the theory that Russia seeks to strengthen itself in relative terms by weakening the West, while China seeks to strengthen itself in absolute terms;
- Collaboration agreements between state media and circular amplification of

narratives during the pandemic do not (yet) amount to evidence of strategic **Sino-Russian** coordination; and

- Covid-19 disinformation has not only hampered public health provision, it makes societies more vulnerable to future IOs.

Russian and Chinese Information Operations Before Covid-19

Russia

Russia's strategic aim is to undermine the foundations of the liberal democratic order by delegitimizing the United States as a credible partner, intensifying divisions within the transatlantic alliance, and eroding public support for values and institutions.² Its approach is confrontational, destructive, and often clandestine.

Russia conducted social media manipulation campaigns in at least 70 countries in 2019, twice as many as in 2017, marking a continued increase in sophistication and intensity.³ Tactics include concealing, disguising, coopting, penetrating, and manipulating.⁴ Spreading conspiracy theories muddies the information environment and undermines public confidence in the nature of truth.⁵ Local proxies help Russia exploit social tensions and obfuscate the origins of its disinformation. Their existence also hampers regulation by raising freedom of speech concerns.⁶ The Kremlin mainly relies on Western social media platforms, whereas China can also use its own platforms that are subject to control from Beijing.⁷ While geopolitical success attracts the attention of others, China was slow to converge with Russia's aggressive IO tactics before covid-19.

China

Before 2020, China's IOs were more subtle, patient, and risk-averse than Russia's, even though Xi Jinping brought a more aggressive approach to Chinese foreign policy.⁸ The CCP started spreading disinformation on social media outside of mainland China as early as 2017, but this focused on elites, building a positive image of China and creating a consistent narrative.⁹ Global influence campaigns included promoting favorable content through state media outlets and cultivating or purchasing foreign outlets as proxies.¹⁰

Before 2020, Chinese disinformation focused on hot-button issues that impacted the CCP's core claims to legitimacy: Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Xinjiang.¹¹ In 2018, China used disinformation to interfere in Taiwan's legislative elections, apparently benefiting the pro-Beijing opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT).¹² Chinese embassies and ambassadors began opening social media accounts on Western platforms in 2019 during the protests in Hong Kong, a trend that continued into 2020.¹³

Notable Differences

- In 2020, half of English-language Chinese state media reporting was about China, while only 5% of Russian English-language state media reporting focused on Russia. Despite recent changes (see below), these statistics confirm that Russia seeks to strengthen itself in relative terms by weakening the West, while China seeks to strengthen itself in absolute terms.¹⁴
- China is confident whereas Russia doubts its soft power. China has its own strengths in the media and information space and already owns five of the six most-followed news pages on Facebook.¹⁵ China inserted content into mainstream foreign publications whereas Russia largely influenced the



Polish healthcare workers put on their PPE during a mass nationwide testing for coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Zilina, Slovakia, January 23, 2021. REUTERS/Radovan Stoklasa.

information environment through social media, fringe proxies, and its own media outlets.¹⁶

- Russia's IOs were more confrontational, while China's were more under-the-radar.¹⁷ The Kremlin was willing to live with the consequences of interfering in elections and spreading disinformation. China acted more cautiously with the hope that building influence in a less overt and disruptive manner would bring future benefits.
- Unlike the Kremlin, the CCP relied more on suppressing negative information, both domestically through its censors, and overseas through the growing Chinese media presence, companies' dependence on the Chinese market, covert funding of think tanks

and universities, as well as links with political elites.¹⁸

- During covid-19, experts witnessed significant convergence between the two state actors with China spreading mutually contradictory conspiracy theories and Russia further closing its information space; it remains to be seen whether these are long-term changes.

The Covid-19 Experiment

Russia's approach to disinformation didn't evolve as rapidly as China's. But its success has inspired other actors to use the Russian playbook. In 2020, China's IO tactics converged with Russia's "firehose of falsehood" model, including

spreading multiple conflicting conspiracy theories to undermine people's trust in facts.¹⁹ For the first time, China actively spread disinformation on a global scale, partially with diplomats' increased use of Western social media.²⁰ But Kremlin-sponsored content receives substantially more engagement, reflecting Russia's better understanding of Western political dynamics.²¹ This potentially provides China with a ready-to-use toolkit that complements its own strengths.

Russian Narratives

During the covid-19 pandemic, Russian disinformation has recycled many anti-Western narratives from previous crises. Disinformation plugs into existing master narratives such as NATO's nefarious role, the European Union's (EU's) incompetence and decay, democracies' failure to deal with crises, and endemic Western Russophobia. With time, conspiracies build upon each other and prime target audiences for ever more disinformation.

Covid-19 as a Western bioweapon

Allegations that the United States created the covid-19 virus received the largest social media engagement.²² This echoed Operation Denver, the Soviet attempt in the 1980s to blame the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the United States.²³ Russia revived narratives that tied military laboratories and U.S. troops to the outbreak, including accusations that a U.S.-led military exercise helped spread the virus.²⁴ This disinformation particularly affected the largest Western democracies and countries on Russia's periphery.²⁵ Special targets were Ukraine and Georgia, where Russia shared more information about covid-19 than local media in an attempt to dilute the information environment with pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives.²⁶

The failure of Western response

Russia also spread propaganda and disinformation criticizing the West's response, including prophesying an imminent collapse of Schengen, NATO, and the EU.²⁷ An underlying, sometimes overt theme, was that authoritarian governments can more effectively control the virus than democracies, which are inherently weak.²⁸ China and Russia used the Capt. Crozier incident — the firing of the commanding officer of a U.S. aircraft carrier after he raised the alarm about a covid-19 outbreak on his ship — as a prime example of the failings of U.S. public administration.²⁹

Medical solidarity

At the start of the covid-19 pandemic, the EU banned the export of medical supplies and EU member states reimposed border controls.³⁰ Legitimate criticism of this soon turned to disinformation. Russian media praised its own aid to the Western Balkans and countries within the EU even though the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* discovered that most of the equipment was purchased as normal exports — not received as aid — and that it was mostly faulty.³¹ A Russian senator played up historical Russian-Polish animosity to push a false story that Poland refused Russian access to Polish airspace while Russia attempted to send humanitarian supplies to Italy.³² Sputnik Italia amplified the disinformation and the narrative received three million Twitter impressions.³³ The distribution of narratives differed depending on the target country. In the Balkans, where public opinion is largely supportive of EU accession, Russian media falsely showed Italians replacing EU flags with Russian flags.³⁴ In the developing world, Russian IOs painted Russian and Chinese vaccines as public goods compared with Western pharmaceutical companies who had profit motivations.³⁵

Covid-19 anti-vaxxer narratives

Russian vaccine disinformation appeared as early as January 2020 after a long effort to cultivate relationships with anti-vaccine campaigners.³⁶ Some of the most prolific vaccine disinformation came from a Russian-backed separatist group in Ukraine which claimed that vaccine tests from U.S.-based Moderna killed five Ukrainians.³⁷ This disinformation reached 14 million people by targeting right-wing and left-wing vaccine skeptics.³⁸

Russian authorities expanded digital surveillance capabilities and tested the use of facial recognition and QR codes for quarantine control

In August, Russia announced that it had developed Sputnik V, the world's first covid-19 vaccine, though safety concerns had not been addressed.³⁹ A state-backed disinformation campaign argued that it was the world's only safe option.⁴⁰ Russia was betting that even if the vaccine fails, it would still receive a short-term soft-power victory with non-allies like Mexico and Brazil signing up to buy the vaccine and German Chancellor Angela Merkel considering producing the vaccine in the EU.⁴¹ Even though Russia did not join, it also criticized the United States for being irresponsible for not joining the multilateral COVAX effort.⁴²

Engaging with anti-vaxxers, yet simultaneously promoting its own vaccine, exemplifies Russia's embrace of contradictory conspiracy theories. Forfeiting a singular narrative allows the Kremlin to target a larger population.⁴³ The virus is simultaneously a plague and a hoax, with responses incited including

panic, fake cures, and conspiracies about 5G towers.⁴⁴

Russian Tactics, Distribution Strategies, and Target Audiences

The pandemic has enabled the Kremlin to entrench control over the information environment. While Russia's IO tactics did not change as noticeably as China's, the Kremlin continued refining existing tactics, particularly on how to blur the lines between legitimate and illegitimate sources and obfuscating reliable information. Overseas, Russian IOs advanced geopolitical goals.

Suppression and surveillance

The Russian government used the pandemic to consistently suppress information about the virus and targeted doctors who criticized the government.⁴⁵ With technology bought from China, Russian authorities expanded digital surveillance capabilities and tested the use of facial recognition and QR codes for quarantine control.⁴⁶ While its information space is more open than China's, Russia has been inspired by China's model of closed internet standards and cyber sovereignty — supporting international norms that recognize a country's right to tight control over its internet and censorship of political content.⁴⁷ Russia learning from Chinese approaches to information control, including China's export of its closed information system, deserves more research.⁴⁸

Use of proxies

Russian tactics include using proxies and impersonating real organizations.⁴⁹ Russian media amplified statements by Italian politicians praising Russian medical equipment.⁵⁰ In Ukraine, proxies spread panic about evacuees returning from China.⁵¹ This led to violent protests and a governor's resignation.⁵² Recently, 20

journalists learned they had unwittingly become writers for a Russian-backed outlet called Peace Data [the name is a pun on Russian obscenity] which was impersonating a real media outlet.⁵³ In France, researchers discovered websites of GRU front organizations spreading covid-19 disinformation.⁵⁴ The average viewer would not have noticed the Russian links.⁵⁵ Websites have removed Russian authors and hidden Russian-language content.⁵⁶ Pro-Kremlin outlets have begun copying text from other sources to avoid mistakes, using fewer hashtags to avoid detection by natural language processing systems, and blurring or removing watermarks.⁵⁷

While many individual websites in the pro-Kremlin information environment receive limited engagement, their content is still amplified by more popular sites which makes it challenging to trace disinformation to its source. On Twitter, 1% of Russian disinformation accounts tweeted more than 35% of shared tweets while 0.1% tweeted 18% of shared tweets.⁵⁸ Russian disinformation is usually already spreading on fringe websites and in online alt-right circles and subsequently amplified by government-backed outlets.⁵⁹

Targeted approach

Russia also uses diverse tactics and distribution strategies. In countries where Russian is widely spoken, the Kremlin spreads its disinformation through Russian-language TV and proxies like the Russian Orthodox Church.⁶⁰ For elderly populations, Russia focuses on chain emails instead of social media.⁶¹ In the Middle East and Latin America, Russia wants citizens to view RT as a legitimate news source, though it still spreads disinformation through Sputnik Mundo and News Front-Español.⁶² During the covid-19 pandemic, RT en Español has been largely neutral, sometimes even critical of Russia and China.⁶³

Narrative laundering

Throughout 2020, Russia consistently tied covid-19 IOs to its geopolitical goals, particularly regarding sanctions and the Kremlin's interests in Russia's near abroad. Russia argued that Western sanctions were inhumane, and its Foreign Ministry spokesperson even said that sanctions on Venezuela were approaching genocide.⁶⁴

Ukraine and Georgia have traditionally been testing grounds for Russian hybrid warfare and the pandemic has been no exception. To reduce Ukraine's maneuverability in peace talks, Russia incited violent protests and used organic covid-19-related protests to portray western Ukrainians as particularly violent and ignorant.⁶⁵ In the Caucasus, Russian media falsely accused Georgia of exploiting the pandemic to violate the South Ossetian border with EU support.⁶⁶ Farther afield, Russian outlets amplified narratives already circulating in the West that Syrian relief groups like the White Helmets were using the pandemic to accelerate regime change.⁶⁷ The Kremlin is particularly adept at amplifying disinformation already circulating in the West. This blurs the lines between foreign and domestic disinformation. Russia had at least some short-term geopolitical success with polls finding that most Serbians falsely believed Russia delivered more aid to their country than the EU.⁶⁸

Chinese Narratives

The pandemic has put the CCP in a vulnerable position, forcing a turn to more destructive and conspiratorial narratives in an attempt to change global opinion about China's initial failure to contain covid-19.⁶⁹ State media and government officials spread disinformation about the origins of covid-19 at the beginning of the pandemic, and this continues into 2021. The CCP insists that the origins of the pandemic are unknown.⁷⁰ Once China successfully contained the virus within its borders, its



Workers unload a shipment of Chinese Sinopharm's coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine as it arrives at Budapest Airport, Hungary, February 16, 2021. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (KKM)/Handout via REUTERS.

propaganda focused on vindicating China's draconian approach while criticizing the West for its failed response. Finally, China amplified stories about its international leadership, including collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) and sending shipments of medical assistance to hard-hit countries. The underlying narrative was that China's governance model is more effective than the West's.⁷¹

The origins of the virus

Starting February 11, 2020, in an early sign that China was attempting to shift blame away from itself, Chinese media dropped any mention of #Wuhan in their Twitter posts about the virus.⁷² Chinese media started mentioning a now-deleted Japanese TV report arguing that covid-19 might have been present in the United States in 2019.⁷³ On March 12, Zhao Lijian, the spokesman

of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, retweeted a video which argued that the U.S. military could have brought covid-19 to Wuhan during the 2019 World Military Games.⁷⁴ Chinese think tanks blamed U.S. military bioweapons labs for the origins of the virus.⁷⁵ While not recycled to the same extent as Russia's, these tactics have a history: Mao Zedong blamed the United States for spreading viruses during the Korean War.⁷⁶

In October, a spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Prague stated, "China was the first country to report the epidemic, but that does not mean that the epidemic originated in China."⁷⁷ They went on to spread disinformation that the virus appeared in many countries before China.⁷⁸

China's success in containing the virus

China's narrative followed the common theme that democracy is messy and ineffective compared with authoritarian systems. In praising its own response to the pandemic, the CCP wanted the world to believe that China's official data was accurate and transparent, that the outbreak was under control, and that the country could serve as a model.⁷⁹ To gain legitimacy, Chinese media amplified positive comments from Western leaders like former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin who said that the Chinese government "has manifested extremely effective organization and mobilization ability, which is exactly the advantage of the Chinese system."⁸⁰

Like other Chinese narratives about its response to the virus, there was a mixture of potentially truthful propaganda and disinformation. Zhao, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, tweeted a photo of a hospital being constructed in 16 hours, but researchers discovered that the photo was in fact of an apartment building.⁸¹ By late February, "wolf warrior" diplomats [the term comes from a popular Chinese action movie] became increasingly critical, accusing the West of using covid-19 as an excuse to contain China's rise.⁸² In France, the Chinese Embassy called out French authorities for letting the elderly die in their nursing homes.⁸³

Chinese mask diplomacy

To boost its image as an international leader, China sent doctors and medical equipment to other countries. Most Chinese reporting about this was disinformation since the majority of China's aid was faulty or purchased as normal exports instead of given freely.⁸⁴ Chinese media also made no distinction between assistance from the government and nominally private Chinese organizations.⁸⁵ Chinese media and local

embassies amplified praise from Europeans thanking China for its support with pro-China sentiment in Italy rising from 10% in January to 52% in March 2020.⁸⁶ Like Russia, China criticized the EU for its initial ban on the export of medical equipment and the United States for its lack of support for the WHO.⁸⁷

Chinese Tactics, Distribution Strategies, and Target Audiences

After its initial failure to contain the virus, the CCP quickly attempted to shift blame away from China with a coordinated global disinformation campaign by media and diplomats about the origins of covid-19. Researchers began witnessing Chinese covert IOs, but they are still relatively rudimentary. Like Russia, China is using the pandemic for its geopolitical advantage, including the export of vaccines to the developing world.

Information suppression

Disinformation starts at home, and as early as December 30, 2019, the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission issued a gag order on covid-19-related topics.⁸⁸ For the first month of covid-19, there was virtually no reporting from Chinese media about the outbreak due to tight control from the CCP and schedules for editors to publish articles on certain topics.⁸⁹ Before Chinese President Xi Jinping's first public remarks about the virus on January 21, 2020, state media focused on the U.S. flu outbreak instead of covid-19.⁹⁰ Once the coronavirus went global, the government rigorously censored international criticism of China while allowing screenshots of inflammatory tweets from Zhao and others to filter downward in the domestic information environment.⁹¹ Censorship is not always done directly by the state. Chinese platforms often performed self-censorship because of intermediary liability rules.⁹²

China is using the covid-19 pandemic to secure geopolitical benefits, particularly through vaccines

Spreading conspiracies and denying facts

Contrary to its traditional focus on creating one narrative with total certainty, covid-19 prompted China to follow the Russian model of diluting the information environment, particularly to make people question the origins of the virus. After a fourfold increase in their Twitter presence since January 2019, Chinese diplomats conducted a coordinated campaign of complementing disinformation from the Chinese media.⁹³ This coordinated blame-shifting campaign also worked in reverse. Chinese state media outlets amplified favorable narratives, including Zhao's tweet about the U.S. origins of the virus.⁹⁴ Chinese diplomats have continued working closely with state media to float new theories on the origins of covid-19. To add a veneer of legitimacy, China has frequently taken words out of context from respected scientists like Dr. Robert Redfield at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Dr. Alexander Kekulé at the German Institute for Biosecurity Research.⁹⁵ The CCP has also used China's own scientists. In November 2020, scientists affiliated with the state-run Chinese Academy of Sciences published a paper claiming that Wuhan was not the first place where covid-19 transmission occurred.⁹⁶ China's wolf warrior diplomats have used doctored images to attack those that have criticized this disinformation, particularly Australia.⁹⁷

Covert digital operations

While still relatively rudimentary, China has used inauthentic social media accounts to amplify positive messages about itself

while spreading disinformation and harsh criticism about its adversaries. After China sent assistance to Italy in March 2020, Chinese bots amplified the hashtags *#forzaCinaeItalia* (Go China Go Italy) and *#grazieCina* (Thanks China).⁹⁸ Many of the inauthentic accounts also posted content praising Hong Kong's leaders and criticizing protesters.⁹⁹ In September 2020, an uptick in inauthentic videos showed that Chinese actors are not afraid to adopt new tactics.¹⁰⁰ So far, most Chinese covert operations have had limited reach since they have been in Chinese and primarily targeted the Chinese diaspora.¹⁰¹ For the few that have also targeted non-Chinese speakers, they have been even less effective since they are targeting the diaspora and English-language audience with the same material.¹⁰²

Vaccine propaganda and geopolitical goals

China is using the covid-19 pandemic to secure geopolitical benefits, particularly through vaccines. It wants to be the supplier of first resort for developing countries who don't have the capacity to handle the storage requirements of the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines.¹⁰³ Experts believe that China can use its vaccines to bolster economic and political influence in the developing world where countries are struggling to secure vaccines.¹⁰⁴ As early as May 2020, Xi was promising to make China's vaccines a global public good which would be distributed at a reasonable price.¹⁰⁵ With the United States shying away from equitable global vaccine distribution efforts, China's narrative of international leadership is portraying China as the solution to covid-19 instead of the problem.¹⁰⁶ China's focus on the developing world, and Africa in particular, has not been limited to vaccines. Chinese embassies in Africa were the most likely to retweet disinformation about the U.S. origins of the virus, potentially because China believes Africans are more



A visitor stands near an image of Chinese President Xi Jinping during an exhibition on the fight against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, at Wuhan Parlor Convention Center that previously served as a makeshift hospital for COVID-19 patients in Wuhan, Hubei province, China December 31, 2020. REUTERS/Tingshu Wang.

vulnerable to health disinformation after the Soviets spread disinformation about HIV/AIDS.¹⁰⁷

In order to improve transparency and counter a history of bribery and poor safety standards, Chinese vaccine makers Sinopharm and Sinovac conducted clinical trials in coordination with other governments.¹⁰⁸ Not only do vaccines give China an important soft-power boost, but China is likely attaching strings to the purchases. Uyghur activists are concerned that Turkish promises to step up counterterrorism cooperation along with vaccine purchases will endanger the large Uyghur community in Turkey.¹⁰⁹ Other experts are particularly concerned that China will use the pandemic to advance its global governance ambitions through the Belt and Road Initiative

(BRI).¹¹⁰ During a virtual forum with 17+1¹¹¹ leaders, Xi mentioned his willingness to create a community of common public health destiny.¹¹² As of January 2021, poor testing results out of Brazil and low public confidence in Chinese vaccines show that the effectiveness of China's vaccines, and success of its vaccine diplomacy, is still an open question.¹¹³

Sino-Russian Overlap and Coordination

During the pandemic, researchers have noted several instances of narrative overlap between pro-Kremlin and CCP sources. Both actors borrowed various tactics from each other's toolkit, but there is, however, very little evidence to support the idea of policy coordination between Russia and China based on their covid-19 IOs.

So far, the only explicit Sino-Russian cooperation in the information environment has been collaboration agreements between state media outlets.¹¹⁴ This collaboration has continued during the pandemic with a China Daily article in December 2020 stating, “Digital media from China and Russia should ... jointly fight against attacks and provocations from Western countries, [and] establish a healthy international public opinion environment ...”¹¹⁵ In October 2020, foreign ministers from both countries called for strengthening media cooperation.¹¹⁶ For several years, state media outlets in Russia and China have produced common messaging to counter Western influence and promote positive stories about themselves.¹¹⁷ In the long term, many experts think that this exchange of best practices will deepen through mechanisms like the China-Russia Media Forum as both countries seek to create an alternative information ecosystem.¹¹⁸ State media in both countries can learn from the other; China has moved faster in using its media apparatus to export digital authoritarianism, while Russian media still receives substantially more engagement than China’s.¹¹⁹

Since November 2019, two out of five of the most retweeted outlets by CCP-linked accounts were RT and Sputnik, which allowed for circular amplification of covid-19 disinformation between Russia and China.¹²⁰ Some of China’s most inflammatory disinformation came from Global Research, a pro-Kremlin conspiracy site.¹²¹ This included tweets about the origins of the virus from Zhao, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson. China latched on to the Russian narrative that the Lugar Center in Georgia, operated by the U.S. Biological Threat Reduction Agency, is part of a secret U.S. bioweapons program.¹²² Pro-Kremlin media has been largely positive about China, and even though Chinese media sharply criticized the U.S. border closure to Chinese travelers, Russian authorities

received little criticism from China when they closed their border.¹²³

Covid-19 meta-narratives were also relatively similar: both countries criticized democracies as corrupt and inept while praising their own global leadership and pointing to a lack of Western leadership.¹²⁴ Circular amplification and state media collaboration agreements come from the mutual interests driving Russian and Chinese digital influence operations.¹²⁵ Their complementary geopolitical objectives include undermining liberal democratic norms and institutions, weakening cohesion among democratic allies and partners, reducing U.S. global influence, and advancing their own interests.¹²⁶ Both countries want a decoupling of the United States and Europe, and they share many of the same political assets in Hungary, Serbia, and the Czech Republic.¹²⁷ During the pandemic, China joined Russia in calling sanctions inhumane as a result of the virus.¹²⁸ The West’s failures to respond to covid-19 presented Russia and China with an opportunity for closer cooperation, cooperation that was already on display in 2019 when Russia supported Chinese accusations that the United States was inciting protests in Hong Kong.¹²⁹

Nuances in covid-19 narratives show that the threat of Sino-Russian IO cooperation is serious, but important differences between the two countries will persist. China placed a much greater emphasis on promoting a shared community and had a larger focus on its global responsibility than Russia.¹³⁰ Normative affinity often makes it appear that Russia and China have a coordinated approach, even if in reality it is lacking.¹³¹ For the foreseeable future, divergent geopolitical outlooks will likely prevent China from acting as aggressively as Russia in the information environment. The beginning of the pandemic provided a prime example, with Russian actors overtly spreading disinformation in January 2020 before China.¹³² Surprisingly, some experts

found a lack of coordination between state-backed media outlets and Russian officials on social media. Potentially due to Russia's relatively weak soft-power capacity, analysis from Omelas showed that even though at least 14 state-backed Russian outlets and some members of parliament spread covid-19 disinformation, government officials largely refrained from this behavior.¹³³ It remains to be seen whether covid-19 presents a permanent change in China's approach to the information environment and if its first resort in future crises will be spreading disinformation.

Implications for Researchers and Policymakers

Lessons Learned

Research on Russian and Chinese covid-19 disinformation has uncovered important details about the evolution of malign narratives and tactics. However, important questions regarding definitions and the significance of the covid-19 infodemic remain.

- The focus on emerging areas of research is too limited. More attention is needed on deepfakes, crowdfunding platforms, as well as machine learning and natural language processing systems;¹³⁴
- Researchers concentrate too much on distribution instead of sources. The intentionality and strategic use of disinformation or propaganda narratives also remains underexplored;¹³⁵
- China's party-state is surprisingly transparent about its goals. Researchers need to examine CCP documents and look beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;¹³⁶

- The failure to track, catalogue, and analyze disinformation campaigns in local languages is a significant weakness. Content moderation by social media platforms is consistently weaker in non-English-speaking countries;¹³⁷
- The combined use of different avenues of influence, not just disinformation, remains underexplored. Russia and China have utilized off- and online tools;
- Researchers underexplored vaccine disinformation for most of 2020 and largely focused on Russia instead of China. In 2021, China has aggressively criticized Western vaccines, particularly Pfizer-BioNTech;¹³⁸
- Until we understand the long-term impact of infodemics and prioritize accordingly, we risk embarking on a wild-goose chase;¹³⁹ and
- While significant overlap was present during covid-19 IOs, the extent and trajectory of Sino-Russian convergence or collaboration is still unclear.

Policy Relevance

- For liberal democracies, the free flow of information is a strength and a weakness. It is also a target: for the regimes in Russia and China, the existence of open societies is an existential threat.¹⁴⁰ For all these reasons, infodemics will still feature in authoritarian toolkits even when the pandemic abates;
- Disinformation has a direct effect — in the case of covid-19, hampering public health provision — but it also has an indirect effect, weakening trust and cohesion and thus making societies more vulnerable to future IOs.¹⁴¹ Russia has already weaponized this dangerous

feedback loop to divide and weaken societies. China could do the same;

- If China is able to shift blame for the pandemic, the world may see only a success story instead of the failures of its authoritarian system which allowed the virus to spread so rapidly in the first place;
- With China's IO tactics increasingly converging with Russia's playbook, it has never been more important to bring Russia, China, and disinformation experts together. An implicit division of labor and circular amplification of covid-19 disinformation could soon lead to explicit cooperation; and
- In a previously clear implicit division of labor, Russia focused on security and energy, while China exploited its

advantages in telecommunications and infrastructure. China's rise is changing this, notably in Central and Eastern Europe. This, along with competitive vaccine diplomacy, could add tension to the Sino-Russian relationship and present Western policymakers with opportunities.

Conclusion

Countering Russian and Chinese IOs will require a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach across the transatlantic space. This includes civil society, media organizations, social media platforms, think tanks, and government agencies. Western countermeasures are still limited, while the threat is grave. It is time to stop admiring the problem.

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Center for European Policy Analysis
1275 Pennsylvania Ave NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20004
info@cepa.org | www.cepa.org