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# COVID-19 Effects and Russian Disinformation Campaigns

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# Abstract

The effects of the novel coronavirus and its related disease COVID-19 have been far reaching, touching American society and its Western partners' health and mortality, economics, social relationships, and politics. The effects have highlighted longstanding societal divisions, disproportionately harming minority groups and the socioeconomically disadvantaged with Black Americans and their communities hit especially hard. The problem being considered is the potential for Russian malign foreign influence to exploit the divides exacerbated by the coronavirus and target the United States and its European allies during the period leading to the 2020 elections and beyond. Possible coronavirus effects are inventoried and categorized into economic, healthcare, and environmental issue areas that may be leveraged and weaponized. The article includes the scenarios of such weaponization, including the description of focal points that may be attacked. We conclude with a set of recommendations to counter malign foreign influence.

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## Introduction

In late-May 2020, the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and its related illness COVID-19, had resulted in the deaths of more than 100,000 Americans and infected nearly 1.7 million. By mid-October 2020, deaths had increased to over 210,000 and nearly 8,000,000 have been infected. Worldwide, in late-May over 350,000 had died and more than 3.7 million infected. The October numbers had reached 1 million deaths and over 37 million infected.<sup>1</sup> The virus has depressed economic activity and unemployment claims have reached a level not seen since the Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> Concurrently, COVID-19 has highlighted or exacerbated national divisions along many of society's fault lines. Racial divides and socioeconomic inequalities have been emphasized alongside issues that include urban versus rural communities, resort towns and second-home owners, and essential workers and those working from home. Many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to it have been politicized with Republicans and Democrats divided on the national response, virus lethality, and even the efficacy of wearing a mask.<sup>3</sup>

This article was prepared in the spring of 2020 in advance of the period leading up to the November 2020 United States election and beyond. It was intended as a guide to potential Russian interference and its objectives. Recently, Russian social media postings have reportedly been detected containing misinformation intended to influence voting.<sup>4</sup> In August 2020, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Acting Under Secretary for Intelligence & Analysis was removed from office.<sup>5</sup> In a whistleblower complaint, the official alleged that beginning in May 2020, he was instructed to suppress intelligence on Russian interference with the election process.<sup>6</sup> This could mean that interference with the election has not been fully documented by one of the cabinet departments charged with detecting and reporting it.

In April 2020, Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State and National Security Advisor in the Bush Administration, stated that the international community did not respond to COVID-19 crisis; instead individual countries responded on their own with no cooperation or coordination.<sup>7</sup> Concurrently, competitive relationships also did not yield to cooperation against the virus. COVID-19 has widened the gap between the United States and its competitors. In the past, countries like Russia have exploited similar crisis, using them against the United States, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Iran and Russia state-sponsored media have pushed conspiracy theories about the United States and SARS-CoV-19 and has included criticism of the Trump Administration's response.<sup>9</sup> Both China and Russia have used the pandemic to further their own national goals including sending medical aid to Italy but the shipments seem to have been for geopolitical gain rather than for altruistic reasons.<sup>10</sup> The problem being considered in this paper is how Russia might weaponize effects from COVID-19 against the United States and its Western partners during the period leading up to the November 2020 presidential election as well as beyond in its longstanding campaign to undermine the legitimacy of democratic government.<sup>11</sup>

This article is organized into several areas. It first examines historical Russian objectives with the West and the use of active measures against western populations and interests including disinformation campaigns. Then it examines how active measures and disinformation have been used against partners in Europe. Next, we consider the use of influence operations and the interference with the 2016 U.S. elections and how they could be applied against the November 2020 election and beyond. Vulnerabilities to disinformation are considered and COVID-19 outcomes are inventoried. We consider how they might be weaponized including scenarios that take advantage of racial and socioeconomic divides. As a caveat, an active measures campaign will likely utilize current issues that may add fuel to an already divisive situation. Narratives are not necessarily false but can be crafted to further Russian national goals. Finally, we outline scenarios that consider a wide range of COVID-19 effects, but an actual disinformation operation may only need to raise one or two issues to further inflame a tense or even violent situation.

## Russian Objectives with the West and Active Measures

Russia has had a long-standing adversarial relationship with the United States and its Western partners. Following the Cold War, it perceived that the United States and the West took advantage of Russia and its weakness in the 1990s, expanding the western sphere of influence into Eastern Europe including Ukraine, a long-time part of the former Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> The fourth and fifth rounds of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion brought former Warsaw Pact countries into the alliance and expanded the alliance to Russia's western borders.<sup>13</sup> There is no reason to expect that COVID-19 will alter Russia's behavior towards the United States and the West. Instead, we should expect continued attempts to undermine Western democratic legitimacy.

Russia, and the Soviet Union before it, has had a long history of conflict with the United States and its allies and continuation should be expected. Vladimir Putin's overarching goal is to subvert the United States and its Western allies.<sup>14</sup> Putin has had a long-standing effort against the United States, its system of government, and institutions.<sup>15</sup> Following the aggressive Russian actions in Ukraine, a new conflict has broken out with the United States. Additionally, Russia wants revenge for the economic sanctions imposed following the incursion into Ukraine and annexation of Crimea.<sup>16</sup> With economic sanctions damaging its economy, Russia struck back by attacking the 2016 presidential elections.<sup>17</sup>

Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov stated in 2013 that nonmilitary means of conflict have grown to exceed the effectiveness of military force in many cases.<sup>18</sup> He proposed that asymmetric methods be used to undermine a target state's legitimacy in the eyes of its population.<sup>19</sup> The use of asymmetric methods or hybrid warfare techniques and procedures should be viewed as activities short of kinetic warfare along a spectrum of conflict. These methods target both the population as well as attack the decision-making process of the target state.<sup>20</sup> Hybrid warfare influence campaigns include propaganda, malinformation, and disinformation to influence the thoughts and beliefs of the target population.<sup>21</sup> A defining element of hybrid warfare is targeting of the population alongside traditional political, economic, and information aspects of conflict.<sup>22</sup>

**Propaganda:** Propaganda is true or false information spread to persuade an audience, but often has a political connotation and is often connected to information produced by governments.

**Disinformation** is false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological, or social motivations.

**Misinformation** is information that is false, but not intended to cause harm. For example, individuals who don't know a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful.

**Malinformation** is genuine information that is shared to cause harm. This includes private or revealing information that is spread to harm a person or reputation.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 1:** Propaganda, Disinformation, Misinformation and Malinformation defined.

Russia will continue to use disinformation and malinformation campaigns against the West including against election processes.<sup>24</sup> The purpose is to undermine the legitimacy of democratic government by aggravating societal divisions including race, political, ideological, and religious differences. Amplifying existing grievances and messaging may potentially manipulate the United States and other countries' audiences.<sup>25</sup> Russian disinformation does not necessarily seek to establish falsehoods but instead pollute discourse to lead populations to doubt the

truth and objective facts.<sup>26</sup> This effort doesn't necessarily pick a side in a disagreement but instead may support both sides in order to increase tensions. Occupy Wall Street co-founder Micah White reported that Russia co-opted the Occupy movement and will shift from actively supporting established social movements to directly instigating social protests themselves.<sup>27</sup>

The Russian influence effort is part of the overall strategy of *active measures*, which seeks to use all of the tools available to undermine the United States while creating societal tensions and weakening democratic legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> Russia has not limited these efforts to the Internet and social media and has increased its malinformation efforts through its state-controlled media like RT, the former Russia Today, in order to make audiences perceive that there is doubt about a particular event.<sup>29</sup> These attacks are used to change the perception of a situation by an individual, group, or population in order to reframe thinking or create dissension. In 2014, Russia used a disinformation and malinformation campaign to legitimize its annexation of Crimea, casting itself as a defender against Ukrainian aggression against the resident Russian speaking population.<sup>30</sup>

Russia uses disinformation and malinformation through a variety of venues including social media, state-controlled news, pseudo-science, and official statements to disseminate lies and distortions.<sup>31</sup> An important tool is the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA), which specializes in the creation and dissemination of false information using social media.<sup>32</sup> The rise of social media has provided Russia with new tools to use against the West. Russia has consistently used ads designed to exacerbate racial tensions and related issues including police brutality, violence against police, white supremacy, and immigration.<sup>33</sup> Simultaneous ads are used to fan mutual suspicion on both sides of issues.<sup>34</sup> Another method used to pollute discourse is to support groups including fringe political parties, nongovernmental organizations (NGO), think tanks, and environmental groups that cause unrest or problems for the target government or country.<sup>35</sup>

## The European Experience

Russia is attempting to weaken European public support for the European Union by both criticizing and undermining its ability to manage the pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Before Russia's malign influence campaigns are employed in the United States, they are frequently used against European allies and partners, particularly in the areas formerly occupied or controlled by the Soviet Union. Russia seeks to undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions in Europe and attack the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). According to diplomatic sources, Central and Eastern Europe is often a testing ground for disinformation tactics prior to their being used in Western Europe and the United States. The U.S. Ambassador to Poland, Georgette Mosbacher, stated that Poland is a testing ground for Russia and China to try out their campaigns using their trolls and bots.<sup>37</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia shifted the focus of its propaganda efforts in Europe and elsewhere to SARS-CoV-2, spreading conspiracy theories about NATO, a major target of the its effort.<sup>38</sup>

**Troll:** A person who intentionally initiates online conflict or offends other users to distract and sow divisions by posting inflammatory or off-topic posts in an online community or a social network; their goal is to provoke others into an emotional response and derail discussions.

**Bot:** An automated social media account run by an algorithm, rather than a real person; it is designed to make posts without human intervention.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 2:** Trolls and Bots defined.

The Polish Institute for International Affairs (PISM) stated that the pandemic has become an opportunity for China and Russia to conduct disinformation campaigns that include both overt and covert propaganda directed at the European Union (EU), NATO, and the United States.<sup>40</sup> According to PISM, Russia's influence campaign related to COVID-19 is carried out by many entities including RT, for former Russia Today, Sputnik, the intelligence services, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, as well as trolls, bots, and fake accounts.<sup>41</sup> The Russians draw on their experience in similar actions against Ukraine in 2013–2014,<sup>42</sup> the United States 2016 presidential campaign,<sup>43</sup> French yellow vest protests in 2018,<sup>44</sup> and Poland in 2019 and 2020 related to historical Second World War issues.<sup>45</sup>

The Russian campaign undermines the durability of American guarantees to Europe, seeking to damage or eventually break up NATO. In March 2020, Russia used fake news related to the U.S.-led DEFENDER EUROPE 2020 international military exercises in an effort to convince the European public that American soldiers were responsible for the spread of the pandemic in Europe.<sup>46</sup> It has sent medical assistance to some EU countries in order to gain their support in lifting EU sanctions against Russia. Russia continues its efforts to discredit Poland in the EU, referencing Poland's alleged blockage of a Russian aircraft with medical assistance seeking passage to Italy, and interfering with the transport of face masks on the Polish border.<sup>47</sup> Videos have been distributed through the Russian media in which Italians removed the EU flag from Italian city buildings, with the Russian national anthem resounding in the background.<sup>48</sup> The goal was to damage unity in the EU and weaken Polish arguments on economic and political sanctions. In addition, Russian media publishes false information about the intentions of the Polish government stating that Poland would take the opportunity to annex the Kaliningrad Oblast exclave.<sup>49</sup>

Both the United States and the European Union governments have recognized Russian disinformation campaigns directed against the Western democracies during the COVID-19 pandemic. During a 2020 official briefing to the U.S. Department of State, Lea Gabrielle, the U.S. Special Envoy and coordinator of the State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC), said that throughout the COVID-19 crisis, "... Russia[n] and Kremlin platforms were pushing out false narratives, those false narratives being repeated by other state actors, including Beijing, and then Russia re-tweeting them again and pushing them out as though they originally came from those state actors."<sup>50</sup> In early 2020, the Avast Security News Team<sup>51</sup> reported that an internal document circulated among EU officials alleged that Russia launched a significant disinformation and malinformation campaign about COVID-19 in order to cause panic and worsen the impact of the outbreak on the European countries.<sup>52</sup> The Russian malinformation campaign attracted worldwide

media attention with Reuters<sup>53</sup>, The Guardian<sup>54</sup>, and Deutsche Welle<sup>55</sup>, among others, reporting disinformation. The European External Action Service, the EU's foreign policy arm, claimed Russia is continuing to pursue its goal to subvert European societies by pushing disinformation online in English, Spanish, German, and French regarding the virus in order to confuse and hinder the EU's response to the pandemic.<sup>56</sup> The campaign also includes malinformation and disinformation including the narrative that the virus is a U.S. biological weapon.<sup>57</sup>

A European Parliament study on disinformation and propaganda states that some of the Kremlin's disinformation efforts target underprivileged communities abroad in order to feed on the frustration of these groups.<sup>58</sup> Some argue that the economic crisis and resulting social inequalities and frustrations might potentially fuel violent extremism and home-grown terrorism; however, such correlation requires further study and analysis.<sup>59</sup> One of the objectives of Russia's hybrid warfare strategy is to instigate riots and mass protests abroad.<sup>60</sup> Russia is believed to back and finance, directly or indirectly, various, sometimes competing, protest groups in foreign countries, such as the Occupy movement.<sup>61</sup> Russia interfered in the U.S. presidential elections, where Russian trolls posing as Americans made payments to genuine activists in the United States to help fund protest movements on socially divisive issues.<sup>62</sup> It is believed that the Kremlin played a role in social media activity that amplified the "yellow vests" movement in France, leveraging the extant economic problems and helping the protests to become a more serious threat to the French government.<sup>63</sup> According to the Central and Eastern European think-tank, the Visegrad Institute, the Russian agency RIA Novosti is already preparing narratives instigating socioeconomic fear and unrest in the West, by publishing disinformation narratives as media accounts alleging that Europe and the United States are preparing for hunger riots as an outcome of the pandemic.<sup>64</sup> The potential for foreign actors to utilize the deepened financial disproportions as a tool to activate, support, or inflame social divide, unrest, or even conflict cannot be underestimated.

## Interference with the 2016 Election

The prolonged Russian effort to undermine democracy in the United States and the West reached a new level with the 2016 elections representing an escalation in focus, level, and scope. According to the United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Russian objectives in attacking the 2016 elections were to undermine the legitimacy of U.S. democracy by eroding faith in the process and attack Hillary Clinton and her potential presidency.<sup>65</sup> Favorable outcomes of attacking Clinton included her losing the election; if she won, degrading legitimacy of her presidency; and intensifying U.S. social tensions.<sup>66</sup> During the election campaign period, Russia developed a preference for Donald Trump as president but only as a tertiary consideration. The attacks on Clinton and her potential administration were specifically attacks on democratic legitimacy and conducted only against her after it looked like she would win. Russia's campaign against the 2016 presidential election was a continuation of Soviet active measures to attack the United States and its allies.<sup>67</sup> Contextually, the attacks were directed against the election process to further attacks against democratic legitimacy, the overarching Russian objective.

During the 2016 presidential election, Russia used several issues to disrupt the political process and manipulate public opinion. Their efforts often targeted stakeholders on both sides of an issue attacking, for example, both Black Lives Matters and white supremacy groups.<sup>68</sup> Russian activities against the 2016 election used all of the major social media platforms to influence and interfere.<sup>69</sup> Russia did note that a downside to their campaign against the election process existed if the U.S. Intelligence Community detected and reported on it. The Intelligence Community did, in fact, detect and report on it, however, the consequences were likely not at a level that concerned Russia.<sup>70</sup>

The Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), closely tied to Putin and the Kremlin, used social media including Facebook to organize rallies both supporting and opposing candidates in the election including nine instances cited in the Mueller Report.<sup>71</sup> In Texas, the IRA organized both a protest and counter-protest in the same location and on the same date, encouraging both sides to fight in the streets.<sup>72</sup> Immediately following the 2016 election, Russia used an IRA-controlled group named BlackMattersUS to organize an anti-Trump rally in Manhattan that drew as many as 10,000 protesters including documentary filmmaker Michael Moore.<sup>73</sup> At the time of this writing, Russia has already begun its activities against the 2020 election including targeting related to presumed presidential nominee Joseph Biden, promulgating counternarratives on meddling in the 2016 election, and attempting to incite white nationalist violence.<sup>74</sup> The Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) has tried to exploit a wide range of societal divides including racial and cultural divides against the United States. COVID-19 has created an environment conducive to the spread of inaccurate or deliberately false information intended to disrupt the election process.<sup>75</sup>

## Vulnerabilities to Malign Influence Campaigns

America is experiencing growing polarization based on race, ideology, and culture because of demographic and cultural changes which gives rise to hostility against any opposing party and its leaders.<sup>76</sup> When a society divides into mutually distrustful and polarized factions, democracy is endangered.<sup>77</sup> Social groups and identity have always been part of American society and were previously a source of stability, however, many of the divisions have become aligned with political parties.<sup>78</sup> The divides in U.S. society continue to widen, creating opportunities for adversaries. Since the 1960s, the United States has experienced polarizing conflict with the underlying divisions important factors in American politics.<sup>79</sup> Americans increasingly dislike and distrust those aligned with the other political party.<sup>80</sup>

U.S. divisions that have been highlighted and may be exploitable during and after the COVID-19 pandemic include racial differences, economic inequality, political parties and polarization, the urban/rural divide, and the digital divide. COVID-19 has afflicted Black Americans harder than whites with both higher infection rates and mortality.<sup>81</sup> Wealthy individuals have better access to health care that is not available to the poor.<sup>82</sup> The national conversation on SARS-CoV-2 has been divided largely along political lines with Democrats extremely concerned and Republicans generally not concerned.<sup>83</sup> Differences in geographic infection rates between urban and rural areas have supported thinking that COVID-19 is someone else's problem.<sup>84</sup> As New York City's COVID-19 cases spiked in the early spring, wealthy residents often fled to second homes in surrounding rural



and resort communities to the consternation of permanent residents.<sup>85</sup> Most Americans believe that the Internet has been essential during the pandemic; however, a digital divide exists with a less connected population challenged with completing everyday tasks including schoolwork.<sup>86</sup>

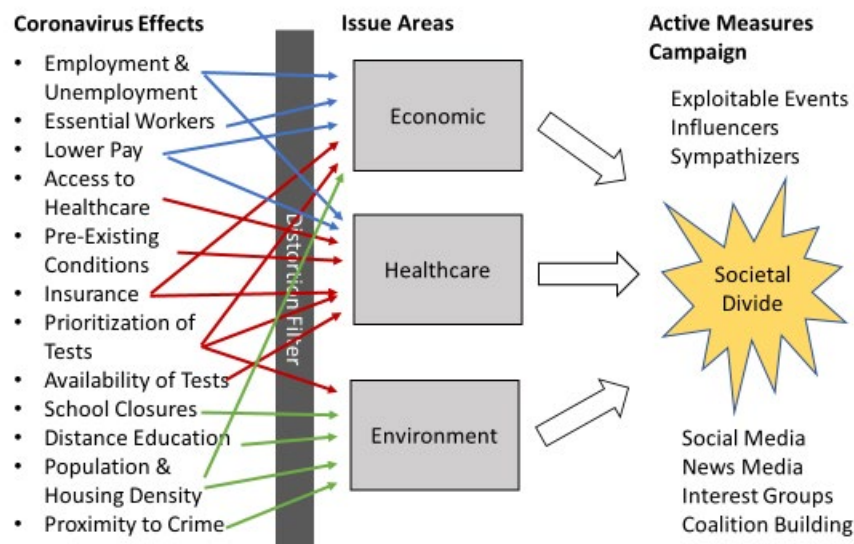
Recent rallies have been held in California, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and other states in favor of ending the shutdowns and reopening the United States. The rallies have often been cast in a political light with racial undertones and may have served to underscore societal divisions. In California, minority groups perceive recent protests in Sacramento, Orange County, and San Diego as displays of white privilege.<sup>87</sup> Damage to the economy has resulted in significant pressure to reopen for business from Republican politicians and the media.<sup>88</sup> In many of the state protests, concerns have been raised about carrying firearms at these protests, incorporating gun control, another divisive social issue.<sup>89</sup> Numerous effects from the pandemic may be exploited for malign disinformation campaigns.

## Weaponizing COVID-19

COVID-19 has created numerous opportunities for adversaries to weaponize its effects and attack the United States and its allies. COVID-19 anxieties have made people especially susceptible to disinformation and made the public more conspiracy-minded. Russia will certainly recognize the utility of conspiracy theories and malinformation about COVID-19. Numerous detrimental outcomes include undermining medical experts, announcements of fake COVID-19 cures, stressing financial markets, and advancing racism.<sup>90</sup> The Russians are using the chaos and uncertainty that the virus created to attack the distribution of accurate information and to leverage existing societal divisions.<sup>91</sup> Russia has used their state-backed English-language media outlets RT and Sputnik to disseminate politicized health news related to COVID-19 and characterize democracies as corrupt and incompetent.<sup>92</sup>

Many of the effects of COVID-19 can be aligned with pre-existing controversies and could be exploited and weaponized by Russia. Numerous effects of the virus have been noted through the news media, policy discussions, and public discourse. For the purposes of weaponization, these effects have been categorized into three issue areas: economics, healthcare, and the social environment. The issue areas and effects may be the result of the virus itself, structural problems in society, or topics that have arisen in previous controversies. For the purposes of weaponization, the effects may be distorted to increase their ability to inflame societal divisions. Accuracy of a narrative is not essential, and this lack of veracity may even be desirable and may include both disinformation and malinformation. It may not be necessary to employ all the effects or even the issue areas themselves as the increasingly vociferous political discussions are sufficient to advance Russian objectives. Inaccurate news and information, lacking professionalism, often counterfeit, containing bias, and not credible was shared just as often on social media as reporting from traditional sources.<sup>93</sup>

## Weaponization



**Figure 3:** The weaponization of COVID-19.

Two hypothetical narratives were constructed as examples of COVID-19 being weaponized to exacerbate existing cleavages in the United States and Western societies. The first draws on COVID-19 outcomes based on race and the second on socioeconomic differences. Both outcomes could be used to further existing conflict, however, similar outcomes could be drawn from both past and future crises to attack democratic legitimacy, interfere with democratic processes, and advance adversary's objectives. While the model is used here to leverage COVID-19, there is likely utility for understanding the weaponization of other events such as natural disasters.

The response to the pandemic has become politicized at every level. COVID-19 has highlighted U.S. political differences with Democrats and Republicans experiencing related outcomes differently.<sup>94</sup> In mid-April, a month into many of the U.S. lockdowns, COVID-19 has exposed inequities in society, creating both winners and losers with many divisions perceived to be along political lines.<sup>95</sup> In early April, 77% of COVID-19 cases and 80% of deaths were in counties won by Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election.<sup>96</sup> As of late-May, the pandemic was hitting Democratic states harder than Republican ones.<sup>97</sup> In California, polling has suggested that conservatives are less supportive of measures to control the pandemic with this division perceived to be based largely along racial lines.<sup>98</sup> COVID-19 has exacerbated the existing antipathy between polarized political factions leading to inaction and vulnerability to malign influence operations.<sup>99</sup>

There are numerous pre-existing divisions in American society that can be exacerbated using the effects of COVID-19 and the national response. Generational differences may be highlighted because of the economic stimulus package structure, increases in the national debt, proposed payroll tax reductions, and the declining health of the Social Security Trust Fund. The vaccination/anti-vaccination debate will likely arise with the development of vaccines to be used against

COVID-19 as they are developed and rushed to distribution. Employment differences that may be exploited include designation of essential and non-essential workers; blue-collar and white-collar workers; insured and uninsured people for health and unemployment insurance; undocumented aliens; and the employed and unemployed. Additional divisions include urban populations against rural ones, progressives versus conservatives, and the coastal states against the flyover states. Closing of schools has highlighted the digital divide and has put inner city and rural children at risk of falling behind their peers. COVID-19 outcomes are fungible and can be used to attack many of the social divides. The two scenarios to be explored were selected because they build on existing social movements identified with Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street. Racial differences in COVID-19 experiences can be used to increase tensions against the 2020 election and beyond. It is important to remember the long-term Russian goal is undermining the democratic legitimacy of the United States and its Western allies. Socioeconomic differences have also been highlighted by COVID-19 with different access to healthcare and employment alongside the ability to telework and designations as essential workers.

## Weaponizing COVID-19 Against Racial Divides

Many of the differences that have resulted from COVID-19 are being defined by the media and others as race-related, mostly by looking at effects of the virus in the Black community. In the past, Russian-linked Facebook and Twitter accounts have attempted to increase racial tensions.<sup>100</sup> During the 2016 election period, a fake Black Lives Matter group was able to garner more followers than Black Lives Matters itself.<sup>101</sup> Thus far, there has been only limited discussion about other ethnic origins. Many of the divides here can be associated with race but that may not be the whole story.

Russian use of race, disease, and a public health crisis to further its objectives harkens back to the Soviet use of AIDS in an active measures malign influence campaign against the United States. *Operation Infektion* was initiated in 1983 by the *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* (KGB) and attributed the epidemic to U.S. Army research at Fort Detrick, Maryland that led to the development of AIDS as a biological weapon.<sup>102</sup> Assisted by the East German Ministry for State Security (Stasi), the campaign lasted until 1987 when the United States refused to assist the Soviet Union with its own AIDS problem until the disinformation campaign was stopped.<sup>103</sup> Conspiracy theories around AIDS continued to circulate. In 1997, a survey of African Americans found 29% believed it was true or possibly true that AIDS was manmade in order to infect Black people.<sup>104</sup> Currently, in Russian media, the theory has appeared that SARS-CoV-2 virus was engineered in the United States in order to hamper China's economic development.<sup>105</sup> Russia has also echoed Chinese narratives that the virus was developed as a weapon against China and introduced to Wuhan by the United States.

COVID-19 is infecting and killing Black Americans at a disproportionate rate. Racial data on COVID-19 cases and deaths is not uniformly collected and reported, however, disproportionately Black counties account for half of U.S. cases and almost 60% of deaths.<sup>106</sup> Black Americans have higher levels of underlying conditions and less access to healthcare, hold more jobs defined as

essential, and experience racial disparities in housing that increases their risks.<sup>107</sup> In Michigan, Blacks are 14% of the population but 33% of cases and 40% of deaths while whites are 75% of the population and account for 25% of cases and 26% of deaths.<sup>108</sup> The situation in Illinois is similar where Blacks are 16% of the state population but account for 30% of positive diagnoses. In Chicago, Blacks account for 70% of COVID-19 deaths.<sup>109</sup>

A second racial division COVID-19 has highlighted is distinctions in employment, both prior to and after the onset of the pandemic. There have been record numbers of unemployment claims and the numbers, as a percentage of the unemployed have grown dramatically, raising memories of the Great Depression. Differences based on race are significant. Since the onset of COVID-19, 16% of Blacks and 20% of Hispanic adults have reported being laid off in comparison with 11% of whites.<sup>110</sup> Black Americans are more likely to hold jobs that were declared essential during the pandemic.<sup>111</sup> Black workers and their families are more exposed and cannot stay at home to protect themselves. Nationally in the United States, they are 30% of all bus drivers and almost 20% of food service workers, janitors, and cashiers.<sup>112</sup>

General environmental conditions can be weaponized. Compared with whites, Blacks are more likely to live in densely populated areas with a lack of food options, parks, recreation, lighting, and where safety is a constant concern.<sup>113</sup> Through late May, there seems to be higher levels of infection associated with more densely populated areas. Certainly, the more populated an area is the more cases there will be. A better metric is likely to be the number of cases per 100,000 reported as a ratio rather than the nominal numbers of those affected. Several sociologists have observed that the United States has historically “solved” social issues through segregation and boundaries, concentrating unhealthy conditions and other hazards into poor neighborhoods.<sup>114</sup> U.S. urban areas, where COVID-19 has been hitting the hardest, is where racial minorities, especially Black Americans, are typically concentrated.<sup>115</sup>

## Weaponizing COVID-19 Against Economic divides

The second set of the societal divides that can be leveraged and exploited as a background for the disinformation campaigns during the pandemic are economic differences. Disparities aggravated by the unprecedented social crisis could be especially useful to create “Us versus Them” or “Have versus Have-Nots” narratives during the pandemic and its expected long-term aftermath. The socioeconomic divide deepened during the pandemic<sup>116</sup> affecting the poorer sectors of society as COVID-19 spreads, creating a *Pandemic-Inequality Feedback Loop*.<sup>117</sup> This loop is a situation where a health crisis hitting entire segments of society sets off a cycle in which declining economic status leads to rising rates of chronic illness. That chronic illness, in turn, further depresses productivity and raises health care costs, leading to more poverty, which leads to more disease.<sup>118</sup> According to a Polish Academy of Sciences review, the pandemic may be a phenomenon that strengthens the social hierarchy, as people with higher social and economic status treat health-promoting behaviors as an investment and part of their life strategy,<sup>119</sup> with their financial situation and opportunities allowing them to avoid the activities requiring personal contact and exposure to higher risks of infection.

Although Russian propaganda is primarily based on the dissemination of partial truths and outright fiction through multiple channels,<sup>120</sup> the Kremlin's disinformation strategies do not have to rely on completely fabricated claims and conspiracy theories. As Russia's primary objective is to undermine democracy in the West by destabilizing institutions and polarizing societies,<sup>121</sup> it is effective to utilize an existing crisis or disaster situation,<sup>122</sup> such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to aggravate any discussion by exploiting the real problems and presenting them in such way that results in deepened divisions in the affected societies.

There are in fact important distinctions between the situations of affluent and disadvantaged segments of society in regard to the COVID-19 emergency.<sup>123</sup> They translate to different opportunities, prospects, and coping mechanisms with respect to the crisis and its immediate and long-term repercussions.<sup>124</sup> For the purpose of explaining the socioeconomic divides, distinctions are grouped into four general categories: income, housing, healthcare, and nutrition. Each of them, either alone or in combination, can be weaponized and used in disinformation campaigns, using inflammatory narratives oriented towards sowing social discord and animosities amplified by the real and perceived threats connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. It needs to be stressed that such socioeconomic differences have always existed in Western societies, but the extraordinary emergency resulting from the pandemic facilitates the intensification of grievances, benefiting the agenda of disinformation campaigns.<sup>125</sup>

Higher income levels are correlated with higher quality of education<sup>126</sup>, which decreases the risk of long-term unemployment. A wide range of personal and professional advantages and contacts due to education and subsequent work history increase potential options to be successful in finding replacement employment in case of losing a job.<sup>127</sup> High-earners are more likely to have emergency funds, savings, and investments, allowing them to maintain economic security during the pandemic.<sup>128</sup> Wealthier individuals are also less likely to suffer long-term consequences of a recession, which translates directly to psychological well-being and mental health.<sup>129</sup> The more affluent families are likely to own multiple Internet-connected devices and the access to fast data transfer and connections making them better informed.<sup>130</sup> Hence, they are unlikely to suffer from digital exclusion,<sup>131</sup> but are more prone to be able to work and study remotely without any significant drop in productivity.<sup>132</sup>

Wealthier members of society tend to live in larger houses located in better and more attractive areas.<sup>133</sup> Larger housing, predominantly located in the suburbs, usually detached and with an access to gardens, parks, or recreation areas<sup>134</sup> provides for much safer living conditions during a health emergency such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Wealthier areas support social distancing,<sup>135</sup> reducing the need to use shared common spaces, particularly likely to facilitate the infection rates such as hallways, staircases, or elevators.<sup>136</sup> It also translates to more private space for its residents, supporting telecommuting<sup>137</sup> and distance education.<sup>138</sup> Larger housing and more private space is safer for mental health:<sup>139</sup> lower depression levels, lower anxiety, and lower levels of frustration and aggression. More affluent families are also more likely to own "safe havens" such as a second house or vacation property<sup>140</sup> allowing for the planning of a potential evacuation during a lock-down or emergency period.

More prosperous socioeconomic groups are more likely to have access to better health insurance and private plans. They also have better opportunities to access high quality telemedicine and access to reliable medical information allowing them to base their decision-making on dependable and trusted, well-researched data and sources. Higher income levels also support faster access to reliable rapid testing for infection and antibodies and to receive a 'health clearance' enhancing psychological wellbeing and supporting the return to daily routine. According to quantitative medical data, there is also a correlation between higher income level and better general health and level of physical fitness. These lifestyle opportunities and choices significantly reduce the threat of serious outcomes from potential COVID-19 infection.

Wealthier persons are also likely to already have a balanced vitamin and mineral intake, which helps them to maintain a stronger immune system. In general, they do not have to rely on public transport and can avoid non-essential travel altogether or use private vehicles, significantly decreasing exposure to infection. More private living space also translates to the lower risk of added mental health consequences and stress related to the prolonged lock-down. Better education allows wealthier persons to be better informed and aware of various preventive strategies and coping methods, and more likely for this cohort to implement these strategies and methods in their daily routine. Finally, they can afford sourcing the Personal Protective Equipment, even at radically inflated prices.

Wealthier families have – in general - access to better quality food<sup>141</sup> and are less likely to suffer from diseases related to poor diet.<sup>142</sup> Better-off persons are more likely to have larger storage space and opportunities to stockpile food and other supplies.<sup>143</sup> They are also more likely to have access to better quality grocery shopping including specialty shops, farmers' markets, private shopping services, and grocery stores with wider aisles and shorter queues<sup>144</sup> which also limits the risk of viral infection. Higher income classes are more likely to have access and means to afford fast home-delivery of high-quality, on-line grocery shopping and meals.<sup>145</sup>

## Utilizing Weaponization Scenarios

There are numerous divisions existing that can be manipulated and leveraged malign influence campaigns. Any combination of economic or racial discrepancies aggravated by the COVID-19 crisis outcomes can be used and distorted – on local, regional, national, and international levels. Disinformation operations would most likely employ all available social media platforms, used to disseminate fake news through the network of trolls and bots, most probably using and running accounts set up through the Virtual Private Network (VPN) servers consistent with the location of the attack sites. Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) is known to have utilized the VPN technology to conceal the origin of their disinformation campaigns, as illustrated by the IRA operations during the US presidential elections.<sup>146</sup> The disinformation would then be broadcast further with the use of social media groups and individual profiles, thus getting momentum and allowing for the spread of disinformation beyond the group of original followers of specific accounts or user clusters. Such a strategy of using various platforms of networking sites and communication channels has proven effective, at least since the 2011 London Riots, where Blackberry Messenger notes, used for encrypted communication, were instantly amplified by Twitter and Facebook re-posts.<sup>147</sup>

The probable focal points of disinformation and malinformation dissemination would be the

areas vulnerable to a specific type of division intensified by the pandemic or other events. Ethnically diverse towns and neighborhoods nationwide are susceptible to instigating the racial and socioeconomic unrest, as the scale of infection rates and the mortality toll is disproportionately higher for ethnic minorities, which – in the scope of disinformation campaigns – can be exploited. As seen in the case of the protests originating from the death of George Floyd, the original cause of the demonstrations can quickly metastasize into riots inflamed by the home-based activists and leaderless groups such as the Antifa – potentially exploitable by Russian media outlets such as RT, formerly Russia Today, and Sputnik News utilizing genuine grievances.<sup>148</sup> The killing of Floyd was not linked in any way to the pandemic, but the general state of unrest and economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 crisis is likely to have played a role in the scale and scope of the disturbances that followed. RT instantly linked the COVID-19 narrative with the death of Floyd, titling its May 30, 2020 editorial: “Riots in the COVID-19 era are the ‘language of the unheard,’ looted bare by white elite.”<sup>149</sup> Amplifying the racial grievances and the economic situation of the disenfranchised population is the most likely disinformation scenario in both the near term and beyond. Due to the high number of options for the narratives oriented on racial divisions in the society, the instigators of disinformation have an exceptional opportunity of using numerous permutations of factors including healthcare, income, housing and nutrition to initiate disinformation and malinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Travel hubs, cities with major international airports, and the proximate wealthier neighborhoods could be a target of blame for the narratives focused on “bringing the disease in.”<sup>150</sup> The potential scenarios could involve rich businessmen and holiday-makers returning from resort destinations and infecting the service staff of the airport, taxi or Uber services, local shop-keepers, or other groups of essential workers. Utilizing the “holiday” storyline, foreign vacations are easy to exploit, instigating anger at irresponsible travelers jeopardizing the health and safety of the underprivileged populations in the United States. In a similar way, resort communities and fashionable retreats could be targeted using the context of wealthy city dwellers invading peaceful communities and bringing disease with them. The real or fabricated story of a previously healthy population exposed to the major health risk by “unwanted” visitors is likely to raise anger on a local level and then become replicated and calibrated to fit specific communities in a similar manner.<sup>151</sup>

The largest cities with high density populations and high infection rates are especially prone to become the targets of disinformation and malinformation in the aftermath of COVID-19. The differences in the outcomes of infection distribution<sup>152</sup> could be amplified and translated into scenarios showing an alleged genocidal conspiracy behind COVID-19. Such a scenario is illustrated by the disinformation campaigns described by the European Union East StratCom Task Force. One of the conspiracy theories used by the pro-Kremlin media is that COVID-19 is a tool which “the elite circles use to reduce the excessive number of useless eaters to a smaller and more docile cohort of helot-like servants.”<sup>153</sup> Disinformation could be based on real situations and media accounts, such as narratives about take-out food delivery drivers congregating in highly infected areas in order to bring expensive products to their rich customers.<sup>154</sup> Scenarios of disinformation could be based on fabricated accounts from grieving families who supported their loved ones taking up dangerous and unnecessary tasks and then dying from the disease.

The Us versus Them narrative can take several forms – from the moderately benign to the

most extreme. As in the case of the leveraging the racial divisions in the society to run the disinformation campaigns, the socioeconomic differences are also easily exploitable and offer the significant number of “primers”, whose combination can be utilized to run fake news campaigns.

## Conclusions

Russia is likely to use effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as part of its ongoing campaign to undermine Western democratic legitimacy. Active measures campaigns will continue to utilize all types of influence activities. Efforts to counter this influence need to consider troll activities from the Internet Research Agency as well as the reporting from Kremlin-aligned news media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. Russia may try to co-opt the efforts of groups legitimately raising social problems and inequalities with the intent not to address issues but to use the groups’ efforts to continue to undermine society. We are likely to see new active measures techniques used against Eastern European countries. The continuation of narratives against racial and socioeconomic divides are probable as COVID-19 feeds a whole of society approach to conflict termed “hybrid warfare” by Western observers.

COVID-19 feeds the Pandemic-Inequality Feedback Loop, which further exacerbates societal divides. This has widened racial and socioeconomic divides, supporting potential Russian use of narratives on racial differences as they did during the 2016 election campaigns. Russia may take advantage of new areas of difference such as wealth inequality, access to testing and healthcare, essential workers, unemployment, telework, and even vacation homes.

We should also expect that weaponized effects can be injected into multiple simultaneous crises such as we saw in late-May 2020 with the ongoing pandemic,<sup>155</sup> the economic downturn related to the pandemic,<sup>156</sup> racial tensions from police shootings,<sup>157</sup> and the Central Park dog leash incident.<sup>158</sup> Effects from other crises such as natural disasters may also have the potential to be weaponized, such as the suffering in the Lower Ninth Ward following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.<sup>159</sup>

Protecting civil rights and civil liberties is often considered to be in opposition to countering malign influence. In fact, the exact opposite is likely true. Occupy Wall Street co-founder Micah White is concerned about movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter being co-opted by entities, such as the Internet Research Agency, and diverted from their original organizational mission to supporting Russian interests.<sup>160</sup> This could potentially lessen the legitimacy of these and other social movements if it is understood that Russian trolls may be behind at least some aspect of them.

## Recommendations

The attention focused on the U.S. election process needs to be shifted to include the overarching Russian objective of undermining the legitimacy of Western democracy. Activities against the election process and candidates are part of a larger campaign. Efforts around the 2016 election directed against Hillary Clinton were intended to undermine the legitimacy of her potential administration when it seemed that she would win the election. The reasons for the



Russian preference for Donald Trump were not disclosed by the U.S. Intelligence Community.<sup>161</sup> Malign influence needs to be thought about in a larger context than the election cycle and considered in the context of the overarching Russian objective of undermining the legitimacy of democratic government.<sup>162</sup>

Eastern European countries, especially those that were part of the former Warsaw Pact and Soviet Union, are often the first to be the target of a Russian active measures campaign. Increased engagement with them could yield numerous potential benefits. Early looks at new Russian malign influence tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) would provide early warning before the campaigns were used against Western Europe and the United States. Having expertise on the ground would assist these countries to identify and potentially counter the measures being used against them. There are numerous federal agencies and departments that have the potential to play a role in reporting malign influence TTPs.

Establishment of an academic center or institute could create an additional venue for information exchange, particularly if attention is paid to establishing international relationships with the Eastern European countries that first see new Russian influence tactics. We recommend the initiation of a designated research center that would cooperate closely with affiliated academic partners in the former Warsaw Pact countries, which are most heavily affected by the Russian disinformation campaigns including Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia and Poland. The Subject Matter Experts and practitioners representing government institutions and intelligence services of all countries involved should assist this transatlantic alliance of scholars specializing in the domain of Russian influence and disinformation operations. What would make such a research center unique is the opportunity to study the Russian disinformation in real time and in the actual field of malign operations. The experience and observations gained would then be calibrated to the specificity of the U.S. situation and tested in the war-gaming exercises. Such approach would allow for the creation of the proactive, plausible and empirically based strategies for prevention, mitigation and interdiction of information warfare in the United States.

U.S. federal engagement with state and local partners is strong in many areas and defending against Russian and other adversaries' malign influence activities is another area in which all partners bring unique capabilities to the table. State and local communities are the first to see political movements and are potentially able to detect foreign influence through engagement with those movements and protect their integrity. The federal government can engage with foreign governments such as those in Eastern Europe and detect Russian activities that might be used against local interests and movements.

Interagency and international exercises could potentially provide a venue to develop linkages for information sharing related to malign foreign influence. An initial step could be exercising this sharing among U.S. federal, state, and local partners. Local law enforcement, for example, may be the first to detect such attacks as the election interference, outreach to right-wing extremist groups,<sup>163</sup> or interfering with the redress of racial divides.<sup>164</sup> Inclusion of other stakeholders would likely increase the value of exercise outcomes.

Significant benefits would likely be realized through engaging international partners alongside stakeholders from state and local government, academia, and the private sector. With Russian use of former Warsaw Pact countries as initial targets of information campaign, exercises would enable early sharing of information between them. Advance warning would also be provided to the United States, Western European allies, and Asian partners of the likely Russian tactics that could be used against them. Academic research can bring a fresh perspective to a problem and is less subject to the daily pressures placed on government organizations. Finally, the private sector is often the target of malicious online attacks and can bring different resources to bear including the ability to develop new security products and bring them to market.

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