



## THE RETURN OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN THE CORONAVIRUS ERA

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### RUSSIAN ELECTION DISINFORMATION AND COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic created a U.S. election season like no other, infiltrating the lives of every American and transforming the world into a “new normal”. Concern for the coronavirus has distracted many voters from an enduring problem that dominated the headlines of news outlets during the 2016 election cycle: Russian influence in U.S. elections. Despite its reduced media coverage, the threat persists. Russia will use COVID-related information operations in the upcoming 2020 presidential elections to degrade public trust in the U.S. electoral system and shift the election in favor of Donald Trump.

### INFODEMIC

On August 7, U.S. counterintelligence [warned](#) that foreign states use “covert and overt influence methods” to interfere in the upcoming U.S. presidential election. The report highlights Russian disinformation as a predominant threat to U.S. democracy, possibly amplified by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This follows the World Health Organization’s Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declaring in February an [“infodemic”](#) surrounding COVID-19, with false and misleading information about the virus spreading across the internet. Russia remains a primary contributor to the so-called infodemic, with both the U.S. Global Engagement Center and EU External Action Service [reporting](#) Russian disinformation promotes inaccurate health information and undermines Western organizations. Several narratives aim to shift the blame for the pandemic onto the United States, including claims that the United States [manufactured](#) the coronavirus for biological warfare and Microsoft co-founder [Bill Gates](#) created the coronavirus in a lab. Between January and mid-March alone, the EU EAS recorded [80 cases](#) of Russian disinformation relating to the coronavirus.



## ELECTION INTERFERENCE

The United States should not underestimate Russia's information operation capabilities, which proved highly competent during the 2016 election cycle. A Dartmouth [study](#) found that over a quarter of voting-age Americans visited a fake news website and consumed an average 5.45 fake news articles in October and November 2016 alone. Fake news [effectively](#) divides and further radicalizes opposing factions of the U.S. public by reinforcing confirmation biases related to political candidates. To preserve the credibility and legitimacy of Russian media, Russia practices "[astroturfing](#)", posing as U.S. activists and community organizers to proliferate Russian narratives, and utilizes "sock puppet" fake social media accounts to further spread disinformation without direct ties to the Russian state. Despite increased awareness of fake news this election cycle, U.S. citizens remain vulnerable to Russian disinformation, especially considering the already contradictory and confusing nature of coronavirus news.

Russia will further utilize coronavirus disinformation to influence the 2020 U.S. presidential election. In March, U.S. intelligence officials warned that Russia is [already](#) engaging in information operations for the upcoming election, aggravating racial tensions online in an attempt to incite violence and decrease black voter turnout. The COVID-19 pandemic presents Russia with more [ammunition](#), as the virus's peak coincides with the U.S. campaign season and conspiracy theories run rampant across the internet.

Current Russian information operations exploit domestic U.S. issues resulting from the pandemic, including the vote-by-mail debate. The Department of Homeland Security [reported](#) that Russian state media and its proxies promote opposition to vote-by-mail expansion and allege corruption in adapted COVID-19 voting processes, reiterating allegations from March that technical errors in the primary voting process resulted in Democratic candidate Joe Biden's Super Tuesday victory. These articles echo President Donald Trump's [claims](#) that increasing vote-by-mail availability will lead to Republican defeat and increase voter fraud, possibly indicating Russian support for Trump's campaign. Beyond the vote-by-mail debate, Russian disinformation amplifies alternate conspiracies



relating to COVID-19 that favor Donald Trump. A March 3 [article](#) by Russian disinformation outlet *Geopolitica.ru* stated that “transnational capital” created COVID-19 to use against Donald Trump prior to the presidential election. Another March 26 [article](#) by *RT* accused Democratic candidate Joe Biden of using the COVID-19 pandemic to “hide from voters” and avoid campaign obligations, such as participating in the presidential debates. These reports, combined with [alternate](#) Russian narratives that praise Trump and his chances of winning while negatively reporting Biden as corrupt and pro-establishment, aim to help Trump’s reelection campaign.

Russian information operations during the COVID-19 pandemic remain a threat to U.S. democracy. Given its active disinformation apparatus, success during the 2016 election cycle, and opportunity presented by COVID-19, Russia will continue to proliferate coronavirus-related disinformation across the social media landscape to undermine confidence in the U.S. electoral system and aid Trump’s 2020 campaign.