



This is a repository copy of *Meaning-making in times of trouble: COVID-19 conspiracies on Russian Telegram*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/234849/>

Version: Published Version

---

**Article:**

Yablokov, I. [orcid.org/0000-0001-7766-8867](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7766-8867), Moen-Larsen, N. and Blakkisrud, H. (2025) Meaning-making in times of trouble: COVID-19 conspiracies on Russian Telegram. Problems of Post-Communism. ISSN: 1075-8216

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2025.2591711>

---

**Reuse**

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



[eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk)  
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



## Meaning-Making in Times of Trouble: COVID-19 Conspiracies on Russian Telegram

Ilya Yablokov, Natalia Moen-Larsen & Helge Blakkisrud

To cite this article: Ilya Yablokov, Natalia Moen-Larsen & Helge Blakkisrud (17 Dec 2025): Meaning-Making in Times of Trouble: COVID-19 Conspiracies on Russian Telegram, Problems of Post-Communism, DOI: [10.1080/10758216.2025.2591711](https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2025.2591711)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2025.2591711>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 17 Dec 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 167



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Meaning-Making in Times of Trouble: COVID-19 Conspiracies on Russian Telegram

Ilya Yablokov <sup>a</sup>, Natalia Moen-Larsen <sup>b</sup>, and Helge Blakkisrud <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Information, Journalism and Communication, University of Sheffield, Sheffield UK; <sup>b</sup>Research Group for Eastern Europe and Asia, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo Norway; <sup>c</sup>Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages, University of Oslo, Oslo Norway

## ABSTRACT

Many Russians harbor distrust toward government institutions and official information. Amid the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, they turned to social media for advice. This article analyzes how the Russian-language Telegram channel “COVID Resistance” contributed to the process of making sense of the situation. Based on a close reading of selected posts, we reconstruct four conspiratorial narratives promoted by this channel: “toxic vaccines,” “fascistoid restrictions,” “coronavirus as a hoax,” and “besieged nation.” We find that these narratives, despite often contradicting each other, served as a form of meaning-making, offering explanations that helped ordinary people navigate the crisis.

## Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, trust in the government was considered to be an important determinant of people’s compliance with public health policies (Bargain and Aminjonov 2020; Douglas 2021). In a Russian context, while trust in certain key institutions, such as the presidency, has experienced periods of stability or even growth (Latov 2021), generalized social trust and confidence in public institutions, such as healthcare and law enforcement, have either remained weak or declined in recent years, creating fertile ground for skepticism toward official policies and recommendations (Frye 2021). This was particularly evident during the pandemic (Makusheva 2020), when widespread distrust in state institutions likely contributed to Russia’s high infection rates and significant death toll.<sup>1</sup>

The decline in trust must be understood in the context of the Kremlin’s many disinformation campaigns aimed at the Russian public (Chapman 2025; Radnitz 2021; see also Oates 2016).<sup>2</sup> Since the mid-2000s, Russian authorities have utilized state media and other official channels to disseminate various forms of disinformation, including conspiracy theories, to explain and legitimize the Kremlin’s policies and positions (Yablokov 2018). For example, Russian officials and state-controlled mass media have systematically promoted conspiratorial narratives suggesting that “the collective West” is responsible for various “anti-Russian” activities (Meduza 2022). Beyond contributing to the construction of a hostile Western “Other,” this type of disinformation reinforces the belief among the Russian population that there is invariably “someone” behind every undesirable event and outcome, fostering increased distrust within society.

In 2020, confronted with the uncertainties of the global health crisis and feeling unable to adequately assess the risks due to a lack of trust in official information, many Russians turned to online communities for advice, including a rapidly increasing number of sites that provided conspiratorial rumors and speculations (Arkhipova et al. 2020), contributing to the emergence of a parallel “epidemic of rumors” (Arkhipova et al. 2020, 261). This was not a phenomenon limited to Russia; rather, it was part of a global upsurge in conspiracy theories (see e.g. Birchall and Knight 2023). Such theories serve as epistemic frameworks through which individuals navigate and make sense of ambiguous and complex events (Butter and Knight 2020; Douglas 2021; Einstein and Glick 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic was undoubtedly one of the most disruptive events in recent history, creating an urgent demand for alternative explanations. Although the pandemic has now faded as a dominant global concern, its lasting impact on state–society relations and the digital information environment remains significant. Moreover, no society is immune to future crises, making it essential to study and learn from societal responses to past crises. It is against this backdrop we explore the role of COVID-19-related conspiracy theories that circulated in Russia during the pandemic.

To date, studies on the production and dissemination of conspiracy theories in a Russian context have primarily focused on top–down processes, examining how conspiracy theories are channeled from political and intellectual elites to the public (Borenstein 2019; Livers 2020; Yablokov 2018). Research on the content of conspiracy narratives emerging from the Russian grassroots remains scarce (for an example, see Radnitz 2021). We aim to contribute to filling this gap by analyzing grassroots-driven conspiracy narratives on Russian Telegram during the pandemic through a case study of what

was one of the most popular Telegram channels among Russian-speaking COVID-19 dissenters, “COVID Resistance” (*Kovid soprotivlenie*). This channel served as a platform for the production, consumption, and further dissemination of conspiratorial rumors.

We approach the activities within this Telegram channel as a form of “meaning production” (Louw 2001). Through a close reading of selected posts, we seek to understand how, in the context of state-sponsored disinformation and institutional distrust, conspiracy theories function as tools for meaning-making during times of social distress. Based on our case study, we explore how online conspiracy narratives may flourish in an environment where government control is strong, yet the digital sphere is fragmented, creating a space where state-led messaging competes with diverse non-state actors for public trust. The study thus illuminates how people utilize platforms like Telegram to articulate skepticism and cultivate alternative “truths” and meaning.

In the following sections we explore the process of meaning-making in the “COVID Resistance” channel by examining plotlines and characters in the narratives shared by the channel admins during the pandemic. We begin with a broad introduction to conspiracy theories and meaning-making, before focusing on the role of conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, we present Telegram and explain why this online platform attracted so many COVID-19 dissenters. After outlining our research design and data selection strategy, we proceed to analyze four conspiracy narratives identified in our data. Finally, we discuss how these narratives, although frequently contradicting each other, provided explanations that could help people to make sense of the crisis.

### Conspiracy Theories as Meaning-Making

Throughout history, people have used conspiracy theories to explain complex social and political phenomena, including major societal crises, such as plagues and pandemics. Defined as “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors” (Douglas et al. 2019, 4), conspiracy theories posit that hidden groups maliciously influence outcomes for their own gain, often harming the wider community in the process (Barkun 2003; Uscinski 2019).

While often linked to marginalized groups, conspiracy theories also function as tools of power, not least in authoritarian regimes, where they are strategically employed to reinforce legitimacy, suppress dissent, and control public narratives. Modern autocrats increasingly rely on media manipulation rather than outright repression to manufacture legitimacy and simulate democracy (Guriev and Treisman 2022). In Putin’s Russia, the state has tightened control over the media (Lipman 2009; Lankina, Watanabe, and Netesova 2020), creating an environment marked by misinformation and post-truth politics (Ostrovsky 2017; Pomerantsev 2014). Since 2012, conspiracy theories have become central to Kremlin propaganda, “demonizing” the West and undermining domestic opposition (Yablokov 2018).

Conspiracy theories function as a form of collective meaning-making, helping people make sense of confusing or

distressing events by fitting them into broader explanatory narratives (Park 2010). A narrative is an account of a causal sequence of events involving a plot and a set of characters (Moen-Larsen 2020, 128). This plot shapes the relationships between the characters, often positioning them in binary terms, such as “hero” versus “villain” or “protagonist” versus “antagonist.” Plotlines also convey desirable and undesirable versions of the future (Polletta et al. 2011). Typically, “the elite” are cast as antagonists conspiring against “ordinary people,” whose failure to resist supposedly enables these evil plans. Such narratives foster group cohesion and stigmatize external threats, serving as potent tools for social and political mobilization (Bertuzzi 2021; M. J. Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012).

While these narratives often employ populist rhetoric by creating a binary between “the corrupt elite” and “the pure people,” conspiracy theories are distinct from populism in one crucial aspect: they allege that the elite are not merely corrupt or out of touch but are actively engaged in a *secret plot* to harm the populace for their own gain (Fenster 2008; Yablokov 2018). This assertion of a hidden, malevolent intentionality is a defining trait of conspiracy theories.

In the digital age, the spread of conspiracy theories has greatly intensified (Bridgman et al. 2020; Enders et al. 2023). The internet amplifies these theories’ visibility and potential impact by enabling rapid, unchecked dissemination (Birchall and Knight 2022, 2023; M. Wood 2013). Unlike traditional media, online platforms often lack gatekeeping and fact-checking processes (Hanley, Kumar, and Durumeric 2023), with algorithms fostering echo chambers, and anonymity providing safe havens (Uscinski, DeWitt, and Atkinson 2018). Viral content, meme culture, and “do your own research” attitudes normalize misinformation, at the same time as many of its consumers are transformed into “prosumers” who not only consume, but also actively (re)produce and spread misinformation (Avramov, Gatov, and Yablokov 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, conspiracy narratives surged. As people faced inconsistent government messaging and uncertainty, social media became inundated with theories about the origins of the virus, the “hidden agendas” behind public health measures, and the dangers of vaccines (Enders et al. 2020; Miller 2020; Uscinski 2020). Beliefs in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories have been linked to decreased support for public health measures and lower compliance with government regulations (Earnshaw et al. 2020). By undermining confidence in institutions, such theories directly obstructed efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus (Pummerer et al. 2022). The World Health Organization (WHO) labeled this crisis an “infodemic” (WHO, n.d.).

Although some major technology companies introduced moderation measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 misinformation, other online platforms became refuges for dissemination of conspiracy theories. One such platform was Telegram.

### Telegram as a Social Media Channel

Telegram, created by Russian IT entrepreneur Pavel Durov back in 2013, is a widely used encrypted messaging app that allows users to create channels and participate in unmoderated

groups. Today, it ranks among the most downloaded social media apps globally (Backlinko 2025). Unlike platforms with strict content moderation, Telegram has adopted a hands-off approach, providing encrypted private chats and anonymous channels. Its lax policies enable the unchecked spread of misinformation, something which has turned it into a refuge for conspiracy theorists, extremists, and disinformation agents (Walther and McCoy 2021).

Within Telegram's digital echo chambers, conspiracy narratives rapidly gain momentum. A single message can be forwarded thousands of times, jumping from one private group to another, and across borders. Unlike platforms driven by algorithmic visibility, Telegram allows users to manually amplify content, facilitating organic and hard-to-trace misinformation spread. Even when channels are banned, new ones quickly emerge to reestablish connections with their audiences (Squire and Newton 2024).

Telegram's popularity in Russia is attributed to its strong encryption and its role as a hub for alternative news channels. Attempts by Russian authorities to ban the platform, such as in 2018, inadvertently boosted its popularity. Over time, as independent media faced growing censorship, Telegram has become a vital space for dissent, enabling Russian journalists and activists to bypass state restrictions (Bawa et al. 2024).

During the pandemic, "deplatforming" and the removal of accounts from various social media for violating platform rules led thousands of users to migrate to Telegram (Rogers 2020), establishing it as a key platform for sharing uncensored content about COVID-19 (Peeters and Willaert 2022). Telegram attracted COVID-19 dissenters from around the world and across the political spectrum (Curley, Siapera, and Carthy 2022; Marlière 2021), serving as a springboard for resistance against COVID-19 restrictions in multiple countries, including Russia.<sup>3</sup>

### A Deep Dive into "COVID Resistance"

The Telegram channel "COVID Resistance" serves as an interesting case study of how social media reacts to social crises, and how misinformation finds its audience in times when people actively seek to make meaning of unfamiliar situations. "COVID Resistance" was established in January 2021 by Evgenii, an "IT professional and yoga coach."<sup>4</sup> From the outset of the pandemic, Evgenii, who did not believe in the existence of the coronavirus, began collecting what he referred to as "interesting material" from the internet to share with his friends and acquaintances. By the end of 2020, he decided to create a Telegram channel to share "content of high quality" with a broader audience.<sup>5</sup> "COVID Resistance" quickly attracted more than 120,000 subscribers. Throughout the pandemic, it remained relatively large and active, featuring daily posts from the admins and lively discussions among subscribers.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the pandemic – although it lasted for another full year – lost its newsworthiness. The loss of interest in COVID-19 is mirrored in the life cycle of "COVID Resistance": After a severe drop in followers in spring 2022, the owner in April 2022 attempted to broaden its appeal by renaming it "Conspiracy Theory" (*Teoriia zagovora*).

However, this rebranding failed to have the desired effect, and by the time of writing, the channel had disappeared from Telegram.

While it is difficult to assess the channel's online impact, in terms of subscribers "COVID-19 Resistance" was by far the most popular Russian-language Telegram channel among COVID-19 conspiracy theorists during the pandemic, making it a significant node in this alternative information network. Other similar channels, such as "Immune Response" (*Immunnyi otvet*), "NASTIKA," and "The Independent Doctors Association" (*Nezavizimaia assotsiatsiia vrachei*) typically had less than half as many subscribers as "COVID-19 Resistance."<sup>6</sup> Another indication of the channel's prominence is the fact that when the Kremlin initiated a campaign against online anti-vaxx communities, "COVID Resistance" was specifically targeted for blocking by Roskomnadzor, the Russian state agency for media monitoring (REN TV 2021). Although a broader analysis of the COVID-19-conspiracy landscape would be valuable, a deep dive into a prominent channel like this allows for a more granular examination of the specific narratives being constructed and circulated.

### Data Sampling and Design

Our data-gathering strategy was based on harvesting all posts published by the admins of "COVID Resistance" during three months of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Since the "COVID Resistance" channel was launched only in January 2021, we selected three data points between then and April 2022, when the channel was renamed and shifted its focus from COVID-19-related misinformation to conspiracy theories in general. The three data points – March 2021, December 2021, and March 2022 – were chosen due to key political events or decisions likely to catalyze activity in the "COVID Resistance" channel:

- In March 2021, President Putin was vaccinated against the coronavirus (TASS 2021a), spurring heated discussions about vaccine resistance;
- in December 2021, the authorities attempted to introduce legislation on QR code vaccine certificates, causing widespread on- and offline protests across Russia (TASS 2021b); and
- in March 2022, the Kremlin claimed that US-funded biolabs in Ukraine were experimenting with new strains of lethal viruses (Landay, Pamuk, and Lewis 2022; Ling 2022), a conspiracy theory promoted by the authorities to play on COVID-19-related anxieties and anti-Western sentiments.<sup>8</sup>

We used the social media content analytics tool Popsters to download data, resulting in a total sample of 1,735 posts across the three data points (see Table 1).<sup>9</sup> Depending on their focus – whether they primarily addressed developments abroad or in Russia – posts were coded as either "global issues" or "domestic issues."<sup>10</sup> Posts featuring Russian speakers outside of Russia whose message was directed toward a Russian-speaking audience were coded as "global domestic" and listed under "domestic" in Table 1.

From this dataset we selected 120 posts for in-depth, qualitative analysis, using a two-step process. First, we used Popsters to identify the 20 most-viewed posts at each data point, irrespective



**Table 1.** Overview of Data

Month	Number of posts	Average number of views per post	Global issues	Domestic issues
March 2021	649	13,205	508 (78%)	141 (22%)
December 2021	732	32,878	526 (72%)	206 (28%)
March 2022	354	27,389	255 (72%)	99 (28%)
Total	1,735	24,491	1289 (74%)	446 (26%)

of category.<sup>11</sup> Next, given our interest in exploring Russia-specific conspiracy narratives, we decided to systematically sample an additional 20 posts from the “domestic” category at each data point. This yielded a dataset with 37 posts related to “global” conspiracies (all selected based on the number of views) and 83 focusing on domestic issues (selected based on both views and the domestic category “booster”).

Since we do not analyze user comments or account for consumption patterns, we cannot reliably assess the grassroots nature of emergent narratives. Instead, our aim is to zoom in on the processes of meaning production and dissemination within a bounded digital community during times of social distress. At the same time, the significance of this study extends beyond the pandemic-specific discourse, demonstrating how online communities can act as platforms for anchoring experiences and beliefs in an alternative “reality” in times of crisis.

### Analysis: COVID-19 Conspiracy Narratives

The 120 posts selected for in-depth analysis include texts, videos, and images.<sup>12</sup> The most frequently appearing topic in the dataset is vaccines (53 posts) (see Table 2), followed by posts about COVID-19 restrictions, such as the mandatory use of face masks or the introduction of COVID-19 certificates (QR codes) (29 posts). An additional ten posts concern information about restrictions being *lifted* in Russia and abroad. Hence, altogether, we coded 39 posts pertaining to restrictions. Further, 19 posts discuss the coronavirus either as a bluff, denying its existence, or, alternatively, as being manmade. Five posts represent the pandemic primarily as an attack on Russia by its external enemies, activating the national-patriotic conspiratorial trope of Russia as a “besieged nation” (Lipman 2015). Finally, four of the selected posts do not address COVID-19 as such, and accordingly are coded as “other.”<sup>13</sup>

Based on these four topics, in the following sections we (re)construct the corresponding collective narratives promoted by the “COVID Resistance” Telegram channel. We identify the most common *plotlines* (the series of events and actions seen as intentionally set in motion to harm people), as well as the main *characters* (the protagonists along with those conspiring to cause harm). Throughout, we contextualize these narratives

by viewing them in relation to the Kremlin’s lockdown policies and other restrictive measures that the authorities introduced, actions that contributed to triggering the emergence and spread of these conspiracy theories.

### Narrative 1: Toxic Vaccines

As mentioned, the most common topic in our data is “vaccines,” with extensive debates about the merits of the new vaccines, their efficacy, and potential side-effects. On August 11, 2020, Putin announced that Russia had become the first country in the world to develop an effective COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V (Reuters 2020). In December that year, the government rolled out its national vaccination program, accompanied by a major information campaign on the importance of getting vaccinated. However, the rush to launch the new vaccine (phase III clinical trials had yet to be completed) spurred doubts among the public about the vaccine’s safety and efficacy (Stronski 2021). Moreover, when the Russian authorities countered international skepticism toward Sputnik V with claims about the “questionable efficacy” of vaccines developed by Western pharmaceutical companies (Stronski 2021), this further stoked vaccine skepticism in the Russian public.

Our data contain multiple videos and photos depicting the alleged side-effects of the vaccines – those produced domestically as well as foreign ones. One popular theory spread in the “COVID Resistance” channel concerned the vaccination program being part of a plot in which global elites were seeking to build a “New World Order,” thus linking the vaccination program to a widespread global conspiracy theory (see, e.g., West and Sanders 2003; Yablokov 2020). According to one post, COVID-19 vaccine development was “a textbook example of capturing global control.” Another post alleged that Rospotrebnadzor, Russia’s health and safety agency, was “slowly and quietly grabbing power” in Russia. Several posts claimed that through vaccines people are injected with nanotechnological microchips connected to the 5G network, and these chips either turn the vaccinated into slaves of a secret global elite or, according to another plotline, kill the vaccinated off to reduce the planet’s population. The collective narrative constructed around vaccines thus links up to global conspiracies about global elites (see Figure 1).

A frequent *conspiring Other* in these posts is the Gamaleia National Center for Epidemiology and Microbiology – the Moscow-based research institute behind the Sputnik V vaccine – and its director, Aleksandr Gintsburg. In an illustrative post, demonstrating how the plotline seamlessly integrates the Russian domestic agenda and global conspiracies, this institution is presented as being in cahoots with the

**Table 2.** Main Topics in the Dataset

	Global	Domestic	Total
Vaccines	17	36	53
Restrictions	11	28	39
Virus	7	12	19
Under attack	–	5	5
Other	2	2	4
Total	37	83	120



**Figure 1.** The global conspiring elite: Clockwise from the upper left: then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel, billionaire George Soros, and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg; the evil capitalist Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*; the Illuminati; and US President Donald Trump (Screenshot of a “COVID Resistance” post).

WHO, George Soros, and Bill Gates, among others. A member of the Moscow City Council deplores the state of affairs:

How long will they continue to lie about the vaccine giving immunity? (...) The WHO, the Robert Koch Institute and even Gintsburg and his team have acknowledged in prestigious international medical journals that the virus mutates because of the vaccination. So what are they doing? Do they want to create more mutations?

After complaining that the “New World Order” was turning the world upside down by portraying healthy people as deviant and contagious, she goes on to assert that

in 2009 in New York, David Rockefeller gathered 15 billionaires—Gates, Soros, Buffett and others, calling themselves the Good Club. Later they were joined by 154 other billionaires who all agreed to spend half of their fortunes on reformatting the world from pharma to green energy, and, most importantly, through relocation and reduction of the population of the planet. Only the most naive believe that the goal of these people is to save us all. (...) On the contrary their goal is to save the planet from the people.

Another global COVID-19 conspiracy theory represented in our dataset holds that there is an unholy alliance between national governments and Big Pharma (cf. Introne et al. 2020), which, due to greed and the big money involved, deceives people into believing that the vaccines are efficient, while suppressing information about the potential side-effects – or even lethal consequences – of being vaccinated. People who willingly get vaccinated are disdainfully referred to as “cattle” (*bydlo*), that is, as people with no will to question the agenda and policies promoted by the elite.

Several posts stem from Russians currently living abroad. Apparently attempting to add weight to the “toxic vaccine” narrative, these voices share information on how local governments

handle lockdowns and vaccination programs. For instance, a community admin shared a post from “Vladimir,” a blogger said to be living in Florida, who had posted a letter from a woman describing how her son, after being vaccinated with the Pfizer booster, suffered from various respiratory problems. However, after he injected sodium thiosulfate, she relates, he recovered within hours. She thus concludes that the sodium thiosulfate must have “neutralized the effect of the metal” injected through the Pfizer vaccine, which had damaged the boy’s immune system. Under this post, the “COVID Resistance” admin urged everyone to share this experience, so that, rather than there being a globalist “Great Reset” (see, e.g., Christensen and Au 2023), there would be a “great fiasco” (*velikii oblom*).

The admins of the “COVID Resistance” channel also regularly re-posted international news, adding short summaries of stories they found to be relevant for demonstrating the hazards related to COVID-19 vaccines. In December 2021, for example, they reposted reports about the death rate among US pilots allegedly increasing by 1,700% due to vaccination. Another post points to a media coverup of excess deaths among the vaccinated. According to the admin, there were attempts to explain away a reported increase in deaths due to blood clots. Although blood clots were a known, potentially fatal, side effect of getting vaccinated, a number of major media outlets around the world claimed that many of the reported deaths could allegedly be explained by the effects of cold weather, as “sudden temperature changes cause thermal stress on the body.”

The “toxic vaccine” narrative forms a subplot of an overarching story of elites conspiring against “ordinary people.” Representatives of the Russian elite who joined the campaign to promote vaccines are thus labeled as “enemies of the

people.” The Sputnik V vaccine had allegedly been developed in a rush to beat the West in the global vaccine race and boost Russia’s international status. To maintain the image of Russia as a pharmaceutical superpower, the Russian authorities hid the truth about side-effects and the number of fatalities from its own population, it is argued. Of particular concern here were children: several posts claimed that the authorities were secretly testing new vaccines on children in kindergartens and orphanages. This focus on vulnerable groups was not limited to Russians; in March 2022, just after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the admins reposted several stories about the forced vaccination – referred to as “poison injection” (*iadoukalyvanie*) – of Ukrainian refugees in Western Europe.

### Narrative 2: Fascistoid Restrictions

The second most frequent topic in the dataset concerns COVID-19 restrictions. On March 25, 2020, with Russia facing the first wave of infections, Putin announced a week of paid holidays (later extended until May 11) and urged people to stay at home. The lockdown was not accompanied by any compensation or financial support, leaving many private companies facing financial difficulties, and many employees without an income. The poor planning and subsequent inconsistent implementation caused widespread frustration.

The second round of lockdown measures, gradually introduced from early 2021 onwards, spurred protests across Russia. These peaked in November/December 2021, after the State Duma put forward a legislative initiative on mandating QR codes for attending public events and visiting public places. According to the Russian “National Index of Anxiety,” Russians were at this

stage actually more worried about the implementation of QR-code legislation than about potentially being infected by the coronavirus (Blackburn et al. 2022, 35). Protests against QR codes extended even into the State Duma, where members of Russia’s otherwise docile “systemic” opposition staged a rare example of open protest: During the first round of voting on the legislative package, MPs from the Communist Party (CPRF), adopting one of the global anti-vaxx slogans, flew a banner with the text “CPRF against QR fascism” (BBC 2021).

In the “COVID Resistance” channel, stories about QR codes, face masks, and lockdowns reveal “the sensational truth” behind these restrictions. Posts frequently identify those responsible for the measures, domestically as well as at internationally, as “fascists.” The community members thus tap into plotlines that are very familiar to a Russian audience: With the Soviet victory in WWII having been actively and extensively promoted as a “foundation myth” during Putin’s years at the helm (E. A. Wood 2011), the Kremlin today routinely refers to its opponents as “fascists” (e.g., calling the authorities in Kyiv “a fascist junta”), creating a symbolic bond between past and present struggles. In the posts of the “COVID Resistance” channel, opposition to COVID-19-related restrictions is juxtaposed with resistance to fascism during the war, while the narrative is interspersed with war-inspired tropes such as referring to the QR regime as a “digital concentration camp” and the vaccination certificate as a “QR Ausweis.” The restrictions the authorities imposed were allegedly used to segregate people into “wanted” and “unwanted” citizens, not unlike the case of the Jews during WWII. And in relation to the debate about QR codes, reference was made to Nazism and Hitler to denounce Russian authorities and politicians (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** “A Corona vaccination certificate should be the same as a passport” [Tatiana Golikova, Russian Deputy Prime Minister responsible for health and social policy]. “Between the vaccinated, that is, people with QR codes, and unvaccinated, we need to draw a line” [Aleksandr Gintsburg, director of the Gamaleia Center, the developer of Sputnik V]. “QR codes should become one of the main instruments for fighting the pandemic” [Vladimir Zhirinovskii, leader of nationalist-populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia]. “You are my good people” [Adolf Hitler] (Screenshot of a “COVID Resistance” post).



However, although numerous posts attack the authorities, President Putin himself is never mentioned in this context, indicating a distinction between the president and the rest of the elite, a distinction that is constantly reinforced in official state propaganda: Putin is untouchable, a “Good Tsar” surrounded by evil advisors.

At the international level, the antagonists are frequently the same as in the “toxic vaccines” narrative: members of the “global elite,” like such as Bill Gates and George Soros. This elite is represented as collaborating with corrupt international corporations.

Some videos, filmed with mobile phones and subsequently posted in the “COVID Resistance” channel, show acts of public disobedience whereby people refuse to wear face masks in stores and on public transport, denouncing COVID-19 restrictions as unconstitutional and “fascist.” Although not necessarily articulating any explicit conspiracy narratives per se, these videos present the restrictions not as measures for protection against a deadly virus, but as an assault on the lives of ordinary people. Therefore, they support an “us versus the fascist elite” narrative, and an understanding of COVID-19 restrictions as being examples of fascistoid oppression, making it both a moral and patriotic duty to resist.

### **Narrative 3: Coronavirus as a Hoax**

A widespread global conspiracy theory holds that the COVID-19 pandemic scare was a bluff, employed by the authorities for various political and/or economic purposes. Another widespread theory is that the coronavirus was invented in a laboratory to serve as a bioweapon (Imhoff and Lamberty 2020). Although these plotlines seem contradictory – the former claiming that the virus does not exist, and the latter that it is artificially created – they share a distrust of official information on the nature of COVID-19, holding that the virus is not what the elites claim it to be. We have thus grouped these storylines together as subplots of the narrative of the virus being a hoax.

In Russia, such distrust of the political elites and the expert community has been nurtured by the many examples of manipulation of lockdown measures clearly based on political expediency. For example, prior to the first lockdown, Putin had announced the need to introduce several amendments to the Constitution, subject to a nationwide consultative referendum. The referendum was initially scheduled to take place in April 2020, but due to the pandemic, it had to be postponed until the end of June. As the new date approached, the Kremlin – despite high infection rates – decided to ease lockdown measures massively, only to reintroduce harsh policies again in the autumn (Moscow Times 2020). Such behavior triggered suspicions that lockdown policies were being applied with an eye to the current needs of the powers that be – not based on medical advice regarding how best to combat the virus.

In the first subplot of the “coronavirus as a hoax” narrative, the whole pandemic is a bluff (see Figure 3). According to



**Figure 3.** “The best vape in the world – it even protects against strains that do not yet exist! Sputnik V” (Screenshot of a “COVID Resistance” post).

a video posted in “COVID Resistance,” the virus did not exist, and “theories about these diseases are made up and pushed by non-humans (*neliudi*) who make people hooked on pharmaceuticals.” These “non-humans,” the antagonists in this narrative, include the WHO, the media, and Big Pharma, who collaborate in pushing fake news and scaring people into buying products alleged to protect them from getting infected by the “fake virus.” The driving force behind this plot is greed: The global elite networks spread fear and panic among people to make money.

According to such storylines, honest doctors – those who know the real truth that the evil cabal of global elites are attempting to conceal – have been threatened into silence. A comment posted in the Telegram channel notes:

A friend of mine is also a friend of one of the main virologists in the country. (...) [The virologist] admitted (privately) that the virus has not been identified, it simply does not exist! But to make this statement officially is dangerous.

In other words, medical professionals are coerced into not openly challenging the disinformation spread by the elites and Big Pharma; if they dare to “disobey,” they risk losing both their licenses and their jobs.

The other main subplot here, as mentioned, makes a rather different claim: The coronavirus does indeed exist, but is not a natural mutation: It has been artificially developed in a lab. Such accounts often hold that the virus is spread through the water supply or through the disinfectants used during the pandemic. The first alternative, that is, people being infected via the water supply, represents a classic conspiratorial plot, whereas the latter is a more COVID-19-specific invention. A video that has attracted over 27,100 views – “Hungary: While people are sleeping, the streets are generously covered by chemicals” – shows a vehicle driving through an empty street in the dark of night spreading some sort of fluid. The admin explains: “This is the chemical pneumonia which is claimed to be COVID-19 (...). Perhaps this is the reason why some countries have introduced curfews, to prevent people from seeing what is happening in the streets?” This and similar videos are used as proof of how unsuspecting, gullible people are being deceived – or, in this case, “poisoned.”<sup>14</sup>

Both plotlines portray the virus as an integral element in an elite conspiracy targeting ordinary people. When the

“coronavirus as a hoax” narrative addresses Russian domestic developments, it thus portrays the Russian authorities as knowingly deceiving their own population. A common theme is the questioning – or outright ridiculing – of the Russian expert community. The attacks on the Director of the Gamaleia Center, Aleksandr Gintsburg, also often contain anti-Semitic undertones – as a Jew, he may have other agendas, it is hinted (and not always subtly). Irrespective of the subplot, the message is nevertheless unmistakable: Do not trust official information and “scientific” expertise, as this is all part of an elaborate plot to undermine society from within.

To drive the message through, the channel adopts language meant to belittle and undermine the authority of the experts and Russian authorities alike. To emphasize the artificialness of the virus and “pandemic hype,” for example, the posts refer interchangeably to the coronavirus as the “Mickey virus,” “tele virus,” “*feiko virus*” (fake virus) or “*fuflomikron*” (bullshit Omicron). Overall, our data presents a large body of “evidence” supporting narratives which reinforce the conviction that the coronavirus is not a natural virus, but a hoax invented by evil elites to control, exploit, or kill ordinary people.

#### **Narrative 4: Besieged Nation**

The final topic identified in Table 2 represents Russia and the Russian nation as being “under attack” by external enemies. Hence, the “besieged nation” narrative is a very Russia-focused narrative, although similar national takes on the threat posed by the coronavirus are legion: The coronavirus has frequently been presented as a bioweapon, usually developed either by China or the United States (Jaworsky and Qiaoan 2021), and genetically modified to target specific populations (EU 2020).

Unlike in the narratives presented above, in which the antagonists are global elites conspiring against ordinary people irrespective of nationality, in the “besieged nation” narrative, *Russia* and the *Russian nation* are construed as the target of evil schemes. Although less prominent in our material than the three topics discussed above, the “besieged nation” narrative is the only example in our dataset that might align with the conspiracies promoted by the Russian authorities themselves (see Ostrovsky 2017; Yablokov 2018). Thus, this warrants closer examination of potential overlaps and contradictions between official and grassroots narratives.

Ever since Putin returned to the presidency in 2012, the Kremlin has actively promoted a narrative of Russia as being encircled by enemies (Lipman 2015). “The West” has supposedly not only been attempting to curb Russian influence in the former Soviet space by orchestrating “color revolutions,” but also seeks to undermine the nation from within by promoting “alien” values (Østbø 2017). This alleged multipronged attack is used by the Kremlin to call for a closing of the ranks in a values-based defense of Russian statehood and identity (Naterstad and Blakkisrud 2025).

In the “COVID Resistance” channel, the plotline in this narrative positions Russia as the target of conspiring foreign elites. The pandemic has been artificially conceived as part of a conspiracy of external “Others” who seek to weaken or destroy Russia and its people. However, there is also the

enemy *within*: traitors in the Russian government and in various state agencies such as Rospotrebnadzor; fifth columnists who collaborate in implementing evil global schemes in order to destroy the Russian civilization, depopulate Russia, and take over the Russian lands.

The conspiracies about the “besieged nation” have a military-patriotic framing and are spread by self-proclaimed “Russian patriots.” For example, one video features a man who introduces himself as one of the leaders of the organization Army of Defenders of the Fatherland. According to the website of this paramilitary structure, its main goal is to “protect the integrity of the state [and] preserve and multiply the People of Russia” (Armiia zashchitnikov otechestva 2023). In the video, this person urges the Russian people and the army to unite in a revolution to overthrow the government, with the battle cry “Fascism shall not pass, the Motherland calls.”<sup>15</sup> In another video, reposted from the YouTube channel Kanal Stalingrad, a representative of an organization called the National-Patriotic Forces of Russia accuses Anna Popova, the head of Rospotrebnadzor, of being an agent of the West, and then goes on to speculate whether Putin realizes that these corrupt elites are deceiving the public – and, if so, whether the president is knowingly playing a part in this great deception.

Hence, while on the face of it, the “COVID Resistance” channel replicates the conspiratorial narrative of the Kremlin, the understanding of the “enemy within” is very different. Whereas the Kremlin points to Western-oriented liberals as potential traitors (Yablokov 2018), the conspiracies circulated in our data feature the Russian authorities themselves as accomplices, feeding doubts about whether the Kremlin has the best interests of the Russian population at heart.

#### **Discussion**

What insights can this case study provide regarding the process of meaning-making in a time of crisis? A first observation is that there is *no unified grand narrative* at play. Quite the contrary: We have found an array of competing and conflicting messages, a conglomerate of conspiracy theories interspersed with “alternative facts.” Within the four main narratives that we have identified, we found numerous subplots and different political views that keep clashing throughout the pandemic. The stories shared in the channel thus display conflicting, and sometimes incompatible, agendas. This makes it difficult to locate the “COVID Resistance” community on a traditional ideological spectrum.

Instead, what unites the conspiracy narratives is, first and foremost, their *anti-elite, populist stance*: They promote a total distrust of the authorities, official experts, and the pharmaceutical industry. The Telegram channel was, according to the founder, originally set up in response to “all the lies” of the authorities about COVID-19, as well as the accompanying restrictions.<sup>16</sup> What comes across in all narratives is a plotline of “the elites” versus “the people”; stories about “Us versus Them” – the good, ordinary people (us), who are manipulated by evil, cynical, and self-serving elites (them). The admins, acting as the voice of the community, set out to expose the powers “responsible” for the grievances “ordinary people” experienced during the pandemic, and drew on conspiracy

theories as a universal interpretative frame to explain the complex and frustrating situation with which people were grappling.

In its resistance, the channel mobilized *global as well as more homespun conspiracy theories* – and global conspiracies with a local twist. As noted in Table 1, 74% of the posts in our dataset were coded as addressing “global” issues (see also Bodrunova and Nepiyuschikh 2022). This demonstrates how closely integrated Russian conspiracy culture is in global trends. In fact, a lot of the videos shared by “COVID-19 Resistance” were published in foreign languages (German, Italian, etc.) with Russian subtitles. These videos, as well as Russian-language summaries of international publications, are presented as “evidence,” adding credibility and weight to the conspiratorial stories about what was “really” going on during the pandemic. Throughout, there is a clear tendency to conceptualize the “Us versus Them” as a global struggle of ordinary people versus the elite, rather than in national terms of Russians versus the West, which would be the Kremlin’s favored framing of both the pandemic and international relations in general.

As for the domestically developed conspiracies, these generally featured plots similar to the global ones. In such stories, the Russian elite is no better than the “Rothschilds” or the “Bill Gateses” that the global conspiracy theories frame as the masterminds behind the pandemic. From the vantage point of “COVID Resistance,” the Russian elite is part and parcel of this global elite and has nothing in common with ordinary Russians and the hardships they experience. Thus, the Russia-related posts in our dataset display open antagonism toward the elites involved in formulating the lockdown policies and combating the pandemic. These elites are perceived as corrupt and greedy, willing to do whatever it takes to increase their power and/or profits, even at the cost of human lives.

There is, however, one important exception: criticism of Putin. Direct criticism of the president is apparently regarded as being beyond the pale. In our data there are only a few posts that mention Putin, and these describe his actions in fairly neutral terms. One possible explanation is that the Kremlin’s strategy for deflecting blame was effective: Throughout the pandemic, Putin sought to distance himself from the draconian official measures by transferring responsibility for responding to the pandemic to second-tier and regional leaders (Busygina and Klimovich 2022; Stanovaya 2020). Alternatively, the channel’s admins may have recognized that while they could criticize Putin’s lieutenants with relative impunity, targeting Putin himself would entail crossing a red line. Regardless, the otherwise omnipresent Putin is conspicuously absent here.

At the same time, we did not find many examples of the typical conspiracy narratives usually pushed by the Kremlin. As discussed in the analysis of the “besieged nation” narrative, what may at first glance seem like an overlap with one of the Kremlin’s most widespread conspiracy theories actually involves a different set of protagonists: “Western elites” are replaced by elites in general, with the nation being “besieged” by global and domestic elites alike. Similarly, the Kremlin’s “biolabs in Ukraine” conspiracy theory, which was being actively promoted around the time of our third data-

gathering point in March 2022, did not seem to catch on in the grassroots conspiracy community. While stories about Ukrainian biolabs flooded the Kremlin-loyal media (e.g., Lenta.ru 2022), we found no mention of Ukrainian biolabs in our dataset.<sup>17</sup>

## Conclusions

The findings of our study have to be contextualized within Russia’s broader information environment. In the years leading up to the pandemic, the Kremlin frequently employed conspiratorial framings and “alternative facts” in its state-controlled media (Skillen 2019). It is plausible that this normalization of conspiratorial rhetoric by the state may have inadvertently contributed to an environment where citizens are more receptive to such thinking, even when it is directed against the state’s own policies. When the pandemic struck, the declining trust in public institutions meant that a segment of the Russian population was already predisposed to seek out non-state channels to make sense of the unprecedented situation.

Although the reach of the “COVID Resistance” Telegram channel was limited in scope compared to that of state-controlled media, the content it (re)produced is nevertheless illustrative of the “epidemic of rumors” (Arkhipova et al. 2020) that struck in Russia in parallel with the pandemic. The channel was able to explain local developments in Russia through the lens of global conspiracy theories. As observed, this did not necessarily imply that the channel developed a consistent narrative; indeed, the plotlines would often contradict each other (cf. “the coronavirus as a hoax” versus “the coronavirus as manmade”). What mattered was that subscribers were able to find “explanations” for what was happening around them. In an extraordinary situation – in which the authorities implemented unprecedented measures that severely interfered with citizens’ private lives, and in which people faced a looming threat to personal health – the “COVID Resistance” channel could help people to navigate this uncharted and uncertain landscape by identifying culprits and providing advice on how to respond.

Indeed, the channel’s ambiguous and often contradictory ideology should not necessarily be viewed as a weakness but rather as a feature that allows it to serve as a “big tent” for various forms of anti-elite and anti-government sentiment. Understanding how these digital pockets of resistance operate is crucial for grasping the complex and often fragmented nature of state–society relations in contemporary Russia and beyond.

The channel’s engagement with global networks shows how conspiracy theories are not isolated phenomena, but part of transnational meaning-making practices that reinforce shared ideological frameworks across national borders. As seen, the admins of the channel were much more inclined to reproduce narratives from international co-conspiracists than from the Kremlin. Furthermore, our case study also illustrates how social media adapts to demands for information in an environment characterized by state-sponsored disinformation and institutional distrust: Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of



Ukraine in February 2022, public sentiments – and concerns – shifted, leading to a rapid decline in the follower base of “COVID Resistance.”

On a more general level, our case study demonstrates how misinformation can play an important role in the meaning-making process during times of social distress, providing explanations that anchor experiences and beliefs in an alternative “reality.” This may create a sense of order in an otherwise chaotic situation. However, in the context of a pandemic, the consequences of turning to conspiracy narratives for health guidance might nevertheless prove fatal.

## Notes

1. By May 2023, when the WHO officially declared that COVID-19 no longer constituted a public health emergency, Russia reported the fourth highest number of COVID-19-related deaths in the world, with nearly 400,000 deaths (Worldometer [n.d.](#)). Even more alarmingly, it had the second highest number of excess deaths globally during the same period, totaling over 1.3 million (The Economist [2023] 2021).
2. The term “disinformation” is often used interchangeably with “misinformation.” The latter can be defined as “constituting a claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings of verifiable facts,” while disinformation is defined as “a subset of misinformation that is deliberately propagated” (Guess and Lyons 2020, 10–11).
3. The fact that Telegram provided a safe haven for COVID-19 dissenters and the spread of misinformation led to numerous calls to ban the app (see, e.g., Holroyd and Khatsenkova 2022), but these were ultimately unsuccessful. However, in August 2024, Durov was arrested in France on a warrant related to the app and its insufficient moderation (BBC 2024).
4. Unpublished interview with the founder of the channel, March 2021, courtesy of Pauline Prokopenko.
5. Unpublished interview with the founder of the channel, March 2021, courtesy of Pauline Prokopenko.
6. In December 2021, at its peak of popularity, “COVID Resistance” boasted more than 126,000 subscribers (REN 2021). “Immune Response,” “NASTIKA,” and “The Independent Doctors Association” had, as of October 2022, 75,000, 60,000, and 37,000 subscribers, respectively.
7. All posts were either created by the admins or shared from other channels. However, we do not have information regarding the number of admins involved with the channel during the period under study.
8. In mid-March 2022, the Russian Ministry of Defense released information indicating that it had intercepted documents proving Ukraine’s involvement in a US-led conspiracy to develop biological weapons, including new strains of Ebola and African swine fever (Lenta.ru 2022).
9. For a quantitative study of partly overlapping data material from the same channel, a dataset of 82,000 posts and comments from January–July 2021, see Bodrunova and Nepiyushchikh (2022).
10. The admins would frequently share videos or posts in languages other than Russian, providing translations to connect Russian speakers with international conspiracy theory communities.
11. By the time we started our data-gathering, Telegram had already removed the March 2021 comments. Hence, we had to select posts based on views rather than on other types of user engagement.
12. We have anonymized all quotes containing personally identifiable information, except in cases in which the posts refer to Russian public officials or politicians. All quotes have been translated from Russian by the authors, and some have been paraphrased for reasons of anonymity. Ethical approval has been granted from

the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee (no. 054620).

13. The four posts coded under the category “other” include a video of a watermelon seller in Russia selling fruit without the necessary permissions; a video about a doctor refusing to treat a sick child who does not have COVID-19; an instructional video teaching viewers the international sign for “help me”; and a video on information warfare.
14. In a further twist to this plot, it was claimed that people were not only deliberately infected with the coronavirus but were also exposed to additional risks and other diseases by using face masks and undergoing PCR tests. The latter were said to facilitate the spread of “nanotech parasites” directly into people’s mouths and noses, potentially causing conditions such as Morgellons.
15. The first part of the slogan is borrowed from the Spanish Civil War, while the second part, in a Russian context, is inextricably connected to WWII (known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War).
16. Unpublished interview with the founder of the channel, March 2021, courtesy of Pauline Prokopenko.
17. We have also investigated the spread of this “biolab” conspiracy in other COVID-19 dissenter-focused Telegram channels and found similar results.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ORCID

Ilya Yablokov  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7766-8867>  
 Natalia Moen-Larsen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8985-9967>  
 Helge Blakkisrud  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7363-5766>

## References

- Arkhipova, A. S., D. A. Radchenko, I. V. Kozlova, B. S. Peigin, M. V. Gavrilova, and N. V. Petrov. 2020. “Puti rossiiskoi infodemii: ot WhatsApp do Sledstvennogo komiteta” [The Paths of the Russian Infodemic: From WhatsApp to the Investigative Committee]. *Monitoring Obshchestvennogo Mneniia* 6:231–265. <https://doi.org/10.14515/monitoring.2020.6.1778>.
- Armiia zashchitnikov otechestva. 2023. “Armiia zashchitnikov otechestva: narod i armiia ediny!” [Army of the Defenders of the Fatherland: The People and the Army Are United!]. <https://armyzo.org/>.
- Avramov, K., V. Gatov, and I. Yablokov. 2020. “Conspiracy Theories and Fake News.” In *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by M. Butter and P. Knight, 512–524. London: Routledge.
- Backlinko. 2025. “Most Popular Apps: Global Stats and Rankings.” <https://backlinko.com/most-popular-apps>.
- Bargain, O., and U. Aminjonov. 2020. “Trust and Compliance to Public Health Policies in Times of COVID-19.” *Journal of Public Economics* 192: 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2020.104316>.
- Barkun, M. 2003. *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bawa, A., U. Kursuncu, D. Achilov, and V. L. Shalin. 2024. “The Adaptive Strategies of Anti-Kremlin Digital Dissent in Telegram During the Russian Invasion of Ukraine.” *arXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2408.07135>.
- BBC. 2024. “Telegram Says Arrested CEO Durov Has ‘Nothing to Hide.’” August 26. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8ne8r1yy0o>.
- BBC Russkaia sluzhba. 2021. “‘Spasti zhizni’ ili ‘razdelit’ obshchestvo.’ Gosduma v pervom chtenii odobrila kovidnye QR-kody” [“Save Lives” or “Divide Society”: The State Duma Approved COVID QR Codes in the First Reading]. December 16. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-59684929>.



- Bertuzzi, N. 2021. "Conspiracy Theories and Social Movements Studies: A Research Agenda." *Sociology Compass* 15 (12): e12945. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12945>.
- Birchall, C., and P. Knight. 2022. "Do Your Own Research: Conspiracy Theories and the Internet." *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 89 (3): 579–605. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2022.0049>.
- Birchall, C., and P. Knight. 2023. *Conspiracy Theories in the Time of COVID-19*. London: Routledge.
- Blackburn, M., D. Hutcheson, B. Petersson, and E. Tsumarova. 2022. "COVID-19 and the Russian Regional Response: Blame Diffusion and Attitudes to Pandemic Governance." *Canadian Journal of European and Russian Studies* 16 (1): 29–54. <https://doi.org/10.22215/cjers.v16i1.3955>.
- Bodrunova, S. S., and D. Nepiyuschikh. 2022. "Dynamics of Distrust, Aggression, and Conspiracy Thinking in the Anti-Vaccination Discourse on Russian Telegram." In *Social Computing and Social Media: Design, User Experience and Impact*, edited by G. Meiselwitz, 468–484. Cham: Springer.
- Borenstein, E. 2019. *Plots Against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy After Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Bridgman, A., E. Merkley, P. J. Loewen, T. Owen, D. Ruths, L. Teichmann, and O. Zhilin. 2020. "The Causes and Consequences of COVID-19 Misperceptions: Understanding the Role of News and Social Media." *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (3): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-028>.
- Busygina, I., and S. Klimovich. 2022. "Pandemic Decentralization: COVID-19 and Principal-Agent Relations in Russia." *Problems of Post-Communism* 71 (1): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2022.2111313>.
- Butter, M., and P. Knight, eds. 2020. *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. London: Routledge.
- Chapman, H. S. 2025. "Shocks to the System: Electoral Manipulation, Protests and the Evolution of Political Trust in Russia." *Government and Opposition* 60 (2): 496–516. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.18>.
- Christensen, M., and A. Au. 2023. "The Great Reset and the Cultural Boundaries of Conspiracy Theory." *International Journal of Communication* 17:2348–2366. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/20128>.
- Curley, C., E. Siapera, and J. Carthy. 2022. "COVID-19 Protesters and the Far Right on Telegram: Co-Conspirators or Accidental Bedfellows?" *Social Media + Society* 8 (4): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221129187>.
- Douglas, K. M. 2021. "COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories." *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* 2 (2): 270–275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220982068>.
- Douglas, K. M., J. E. Uscinski, R. M. Sutton, A. Cichocka, T. Nefes, C. S. Ang, and F. Deravi. 2019. "Understanding Conspiracy Theories." *Political Psychology* 40 (1): 3–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12568>.
- Earnshaw, V. A., L. A. Eaton, S. C. Kalichman, N. B. Brousseau, E. C. Hill, and A. B. Fox. 2020. "COVID-19 Conspiracy Beliefs, Health Behaviors, and Policy Support." *Translational Behavioral Medicine* 10 (4): 850–856. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tbm/ibaa090>.
- The Economist. (2023) 2021. "Tracking COVID-19 Excess Deaths Across Countries." October 20. <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-tracker>.
- Einstein, K. L., and D. M. Glick. 2015. "Do I Think BLS Data Are BS? The Consequences of Conspiracy Theories." *Political Behavior* 37 (3): 679–701. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-014-9287-z>.
- Enders, A. M., J. E. Uscinski, C. Klostad, and J. Stoler. 2020. "The Different Forms of COVID-19 Misinformation and Their Consequences." *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (8): 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-48>.
- Enders, A. M., J. E. Uscinski, M. I. Seelig, C. A. Klostad, S. Wuchty, J. R. Funchion, M. N. Murthi, K. Premarathe, and J. Stoler. 2023. "The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation." *Political Behavior* 45 (2): 781–804. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6>.
- EU vs Disinfo. 2020. "Sputnik: Coronavirus Could Be Designed to Kill Elderly Italians." March 25. <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/sputnik-coronavirus-could-be-designed-to-kill-elderly-italians/>.
- Fenster, M. 2008. *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Frye, T. 2021. *Weak Strongman: The Limits of Power in Putin's Russia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Guess, A. M., and B. A. Lyons. 2020. "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Online Propaganda." In *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, edited by N. Persily and J. A. Tucker, 10–33. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Guriev, S., and D. Treisman. 2022. *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hanley, H. W. A., D. Kumar, and Z. Durumeric. 2023. "A Golden Age: Conspiracy Theories' Relationship with Misinformation Outlets, News Media, and the Wider Internet." *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 7 (CSCW2): 1–33. <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3610043>.
- Holroyd, M., and S. Khatsenkova. 2022. "Germany Considers Banning Telegram App, Accused of Facilitating Hate Speech." Euronews, January 26. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/01/26/germany-considers-banning-telegram-app-accused-of-facilitating-hate-speech>.
- Imhoff, R., and P. Lamberty. 2020. "A Bioweapon or a Hoax? The Link Between Distinct Conspiracy Beliefs About the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Outbreak and Pandemic Behavior." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11 (8): 1110–1118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550620934692>.
- Introne, J., A. Korsunskaya, L. Krsova, and Z. Zhang. 2020. "Mapping the Narrative Ecosystem of Conspiracy Theories in Online Anti-Vaccination Discussions." *SM Society '20: International Conference on Social Media and Society*, Toronto, July 22–24, 184–192. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3400806.3400828>.
- Jaworsky, B. N., and R. Qiaoan. 2021. "The Politics of Blaming: The Narrative Battle Between China and the US Over COVID-19." *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 26 (2): 295–315. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-020-09690-8>.
- Landay, J., H. Pamuk, and S. Lewis. 2022. "U.N. Says No Evidence to Back Russian Claim of Ukraine Biological Weapons Program." Reuters, March 11. <https://www.reuters.com/world/un-says-not-aware-any-biological-weapons-program-ukraine-2022-03-11/>.
- Lankina, T., K. Watanabe, and Y. Netesova. 2020. "How Russian Media Control, Manipulate, and Leverage Public Discontent: Framing Protest in Autocracies." In *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*, edited by K. J. Koesel, V. Bunce, and J. Weiss, 137–164. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Latov, Y. B. 2021. "Institutsional'noe doverie kak sotsial'nyi kapital v sovremennoi Rossii (po rezul'tatam monitoringa)" [Institutional Trust as Social Capital in Contemporary Russia (Based on Monitoring Results)]. *Polis* 5:161–175. <https://doi.org/10.17976/jpps/2021.05.11>.
- Lenta.ru. 2022. "Minoborony opublikovalo novye dannye o rabote biolaboratorii na Ukraine." [The Ministry of Defense Has Published New Data on the Work of Biological Laboratories in Ukraine]. July 22. <https://lenta.ru/news/2022/07/07/biolabss/>.
- Ling, J. 2022. "How U.S. Bioweapons in Ukraine Became Russia's New Big Lie." *Foreign Policy*, March 10. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/10/bioweapons-ukraine-russia-disinformation/>.
- Lipman, M. 2009. *Media Manipulation and Political Control in Russia*. Russia and Eurasia Programme: REP PP 09/01. London: Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/300109lipman.pdf>.
- Lipman, M. 2015. "Putin's 'Besieged Fortress' and Its Ideological Arms." In *The State of Russia: What Comes Next?*, edited by M. Lipman and N. Petrov, 110–136. London: Palgrave Pivot.
- Livers, K. A. 2020. *Conspiracy Culture: Post-Soviet Paranoia and the Russian Imagination*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Louw, E. 2001. *The Media and Cultural Production*. London: SAGE Publications.

- Makusheva, M., T. Nestik, E. Orlova, and A. Firsov. 2020. "Issledovanie sotsial'nykh effektov pandemii COVID-19" [Researching the Social Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic]. *Svodka* 12. <https://pltf.ru/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/svodka-12.pdf>.
- Marlière, P. 2021. "How Battling France's COVID Pass Led the Left to Embolden the Far Right." *Opendemocracy*, October 4. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/how-battling-frances-covid-pass-led-the-left-to-embolden-the-far-right/>.
- Meduza. 2022. "Vlasti vse chashche govoriat, chto glavnye vragi Rossii—eto 'anglosaksy'" [The Authorities Are Increasingly Saying That Russia's Main Enemies Are the "Anglo-Saxons"]. May 19. <https://meduza.io/feature/2022/05/19/vlasti-vse-chasche-govoryat-chto-glavnye-vragi-rossii-eto-anglosaksy-eto-zhe-tolko-ssha-i-velikobrita-niya-a-kak-zhe-kollektivnyy-zapad>.
- Miller, J. M. 2020. "Psychological, Political, and Situational Factors Combine to Boost COVID-19 Conspiracy Theory Beliefs." *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53 (2): 327–334. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000842392000058X>.
- Moen-Larsen, N. 2020. "'Suitcase—Shelling—Russia': Narratives About Refugees from Ukraine in Russian Media." *East European Politics* 36 (1): 124–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2019.1693367>.
- Moscow Times. 2021. "Russia Has Vaccinated 10% of Its Adult Population." April 26. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/26/russia-has-vaccinated-10-of-its-adult-population-a73740>.
- Naterstad, T. B., and H. Blakkisrud. 2025. "The Path to 'Healthy Conservatism': Tracing Drivers and Legitimation in the Development of Putin's New 'Ideology.'" In *Political Legitimacy and Traditional Values in Putin's Russia*, edited by H. Blakkisrud and P. Kolstø, 194–225. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Oates, S. 2016. "Russian Media in the Digital Age: Propaganda Rewired." *Russian Politics* 1 (4): 398–417. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451-8921-00104004>.
- Østbø, J. 2017. "Securitizing 'Spiritual-Moral Values' in Russia." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33 (3): 200–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2016.1251023>.
- Ostrovsky, A. 2017. *The Invention of Russia: The Rise of Putin and the Age of Fake News*. New York: Penguin.
- Park, C. L. 2010. "Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events." *Psychological Bulletin* 136 (2): 257–301. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018301>.
- Peeters, S., and T. Willaert. 2022. "Telegram and Digital Methods: Mapping Networked Conspiracy Theories Through Platform Affordances." *M/C Journal* 25 (1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2878>.
- Polletta, F., P. C. B. Chen, B. G. Gardner, and A. Motes. 2011. "The Sociology of Storytelling." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:109–130. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-081309-150106>.
- Pomerantsev, P. 2014. *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Pummerer, L., R. Böhm, L. Lilleholt, K. Winter, I. Zettler, and K. Sassenberg. 2022. "Conspiracy Theories and Their Societal Effects During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 13 (1): 49–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19485506211000217>.
- Radnitz, S. 2021. *Revealing Schemes: The Politics of Conspiracy in Russia and the Post-Soviet Region*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- REN TV. 2021. "Avtora Telegram-kanala uluchili v zarabotke millionov na feikakh o COVID" [Founder of the Telegram Channel Caught Making Millions on Fakes About COVID]. December 28. <https://ren.tv/news/v-rossii/920713-avtora-telegram-kanala-uluchili-v-zarabotke-millionov-na-feikakh-o-covid>.
- Reuters. 2020. "Putin Hails New Sputnik Moment as Russia Is First to Approve a COVID-19 Vaccine." August 12. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-vaccine-put-idUSKCN25712U>.
- Rogers, R. 2020. "Deplatforming: Following Extreme Internet Celebrities to Telegram and Alternative Social Media." *European Journal of Communication* 35 (3): 213–229. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120922066>.
- Skillen, D. 2019. "Post-Truth and Normalised Lies in Russia." In *Public Service Broadcasting and Media Systems in Troubled European Democracies*, edited by E. Polonska and C. Beckett, 359–382. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Squire, M., and C. Newton. 2024. "Digital Threat Report: Telegram's Toxic Recommendations Perpetuate Extremism." SPLC. December 16. <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/telegrams-toxic-recommendations-perpetuate-extremism/>.
- Stanovaya, T. 2020. "The Putin Regime Cracks." *Carnegie Moscow Center*. May 7. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2020/02/the-putin-regime-cracks?lang=en>.
- Stronski, P. 2021. "What Went Wrong with Russia's Sputnik V Vaccine Rollout?" *Carnegie Endowment*, November 15. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/11/15/what-went-wrong-with-russia-s-sputnik-v-vaccine-rollout-pub-85783>.
- TASS. 2021a. "Putin sdela privivku ot koronavirusa" [Putin Was Vaccinated Against Coronavirus]. March 23. <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/10977081>.
- TASS. 2021b. "Chto izvestno o zakonoproekte o vvedenii QR-kodov v obshchestvennykh mestakh" [What Is Known About the Bill on the Introduction of QR Codes in Public Places]. December 16. <https://tass.ru/info/13214585>.
- Uscinski, J. E., ed. 2019. *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Uscinski, J. E., D. DeWitt, and M. D. Atkinson. 2018. "A Web of Conspiracy? Internet and Conspiracy Theory." In *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, edited by A. Dyrendal, D. G. Robertson, and E. Asprem, 106–130. Leiden: Brill.
- Uscinski, J. E., A. M. Enders, C. A. Klostad, M. I. Seelig, J. R. Function, C. Everett, S. Wuchty, K. Premaratne, and M. N. Murthi. 2020. "Why Do People Believe COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories?" *The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* 1 (3): 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-015>.
- Walther, S., and A. McCoy. 2021. "US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 15 (2): 100–124.
- West, H. G., and T. Sanders, eds. 2003. *Transparency and Conspiracy: Ethnographies of Suspicion in the New World Order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- WHO. n.d. "Infodemic." [https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic#tab=tab_1).
- Wood, E. A. 2011. "Performing Memory: Vladimir Putin and the Celebration of WWII in Russia." *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38 (2): 172–200. <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633211X591175>.
- Wood, M. 2013. "Has the Internet Been Good for Conspiracy Theorising?" *PsyPAG Quarterly* 88 (3): 31–34. <https://doi.org/10.53841/bpspag.2013.1.88.31>.
- Wood, M. J., K. M. Douglas, and R. M. Sutton. 2012. "Dead and Alive: Beliefs in Contradictory Conspiracy Theories." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (6): 767–773. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611434786>.
- Worldometer. n.d.-a "Coronavirus—Russia." <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/russia/>.
- Yablokov, I. 2018. *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-Soviet World*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Yablokov, I. 2020. "Conspiracy Theories in Putin's Russia: The Case of the 'New World Order.'" In *Routledge Handbook of Yablokov Conspiracy Theories*, edited by M. Butter and P. Knight, 582–595. London: Routledge.