



RUSSIAN MALIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN CORONAVIRUS-HIT ITALY

Anton Shekhovtsov

An aerial photograph of Rome, Italy, showing the Colosseum and surrounding urban landscape. The image is partially covered by a green overlay on the left side. In the bottom right corner, there is a white icon of a signal tower with three curved lines representing signal waves.

COVID-19



ABOUT AUTHOR

Anton Shekhovtsov

Anton Shekhovtsov is a Senior Fellow at the Free Russia Foundation (USA), external lecturer at the University of Vienna (Austria), and expert at the European Platform for Democratic Elections (Germany).

INTRODUCTION

Pandemics always provided fertile soil for conspiracy theories, as facing global disasters often disempowers people and makes them susceptible to conspiratorial explanations of the sources of calamities. Global disasters are also often used by world powers to advance political objectives either domestically or vis-à-vis other nations.

In the 1980s, when AIDS started to spread across the globe and became the “the first postmodern pandemic,”¹ the Soviet Union ran a covert international campaign to convince the world that AIDS was a result of the Pentagon’s experiments aimed at creating new biological weapons.² At that time, while the Soviet leadership was convinced that the US was preparing a nuclear strike against the country, the Soviets realized that they could not compete with the West in the technological and military spheres. However, political warfare was a much cheaper means of competition with the West, and the Soviet Union became especially active in this particular area.

Today, observing the confrontation between Russia and the West, one can see similarities and dissimilarities with the Cold War, but one analogy with the later period of the Cold War is obvious: due to its economic weakness, Russia is unable to match Western technological advances and increasingly relies on various instruments

of political warfare in order to damage the West by subverting transatlantic relations, undermining trust in the EU and NATO, and sowing discord between Western nations.

As COVID-19 spread from China to the rest of the world and became a pandemic, Moscow used the disaster to intensify its political war against the West. Despite the fact that the pandemic hit Russia too, Vladimir Putin’s regime seems to have refused an opportunity to scale down political confrontation with the West by ending aggression against Ukraine and discontinuing attempts to destabilize Europe. On the contrary, the Kremlin decided to exploit the pandemic and target European countries that suffered the most from the deadly virus. Italy became one of these countries.

“FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE”

On March 21, 2020, Putin spoke with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte,³ and the same day Putin ordered the Russian Ministry of Defence to form “an air grouping for a prompt delivery to Italy of help for fighting Coronavirus.”⁴ The help, as the press release of the Ministry of Defence read, would consist of “eight mobile brigades of expert virologists and military medics, auto-

1 Lars O. Kallings, “The First Postmodern Pandemic: 25 Years of HIV/AIDS,” *Journal of Internal Medicine*, 263, no. 3 (2008): 218-243.

2 Thomas Boghardt, “Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Studies in Intelligence*, 53, no. 4 (2009): 1-24.

3 “Telephone Conversation with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte,” Events. President of Russia (website), March 21, 2020, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63048>.

4 “Minoborony Rossii sozdaet aviatsionnyu gruppировку dlya operativnoy dostavki pomoshchi Ital’yanskoy respiblike v bor’be s koronavirusom,” Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii (website), March 22, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12283218@egNews.

mobile systems for aerosol disinfection of transport and territories, as well as medical equipment.”⁵

At that time, there were over 42 thousand active cases of COVID-19 in Italy and almost 5 thousand people had died of the virus.⁶ Of all European states, Italy was hit the hardest, and, already on 10 March, Maurizio Massari, Italy’s permanent representative to the EU, made an appeal for help and European solidarity.⁷ According to Massari, in February Italy asked the European Commission to activate the EU Mechanism of Civil Protection “for the supply of medical equipment for individual protection”; the Commission forwarded the request to the EU Member States but by the time Massari wrote his article, no EU nation had responded to the Commission’s call.⁸

At the same time, China had responded bilaterally and on 12 March, a Chinese aircraft brought to Italy nine medical experts and unloaded “31 tons of medical supplies including intensive care unit equipment, medical protective equipment, and antiviral drugs”—they were sent by the Chinese Red Cross.⁹ For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had been accused by some Western experts, journalists and politicians, for mishan-

dling of the COVID-19 outbreak,¹⁰ the help to Italy was clearly an attempt to shift the international focus from blame to humanitarian response.

With Putin’s offer of help, the Kremlin apparently did not want to miss out on demonstrating its seeming goodwill against the background of the allegedly selfish EU countries. In the period between 23 and 25 March, fifteen Russian aircrafts landed on the Pratica di Mare military airbase delivering military experts and special equipment.¹¹ At the same time, Russian Defence Ministry “made an extraordinary effort to communicate the mission”: it sent 18 press releases on the subject between 21 and 24 March.¹² On 25 March, the Russian military formed a convoy consisting of 22 military vehicles—carrying stickers saying “From Russia with love” in Russian, English, and Italian—as well as buses with military experts.¹³ The convoy travelled 600 kilometers to the Orio al Serio airport in Bergamo, “where the joint Italian-Russian headquarters for the fight against coronavirus infection will be stationed.”¹⁴

For Russian state-controlled international media such as RT and Sputnik, Moscow’s help to Rome was the beginning of a long anti-EU campaign. With headlines saying “Italians praise Russia, deride EU after Vladimir Putin sends in coronavirus aid,”¹⁵ or “EU left Italy ‘practically alone’ to fight coronavirus, so Rome looked for help else-

5 “Minoborony Rossii sozdaet...”.

6 “Italy,” Worldometer (website), <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/italy/>

7 Maurizio Massari, “Italian Ambassador to the EU: Italy Needs Europe’s Help,” *Politico*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-italy-needs-europe-help/>.

8 Elisabeth Braw, “The EU is Abandoning Italy in its Hour of Need,” *Foreign Policy*, March 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/14/coronavirus-eu-abandoning-italy-china-aid/>. Following Massari’s criticism, Germany suspended the controversial decree that had prohibited the export of masks, protective suits, etc. abroad, and declared that it would supply one million masks to Italy, see Tonia Mastrobuoni, “Coronavirus, la Germania invierà un milione di mascherine all’Italia,” *La Repubblica*, March 13, 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/03/13/news/coronavirus_la_germania_invia_un_milione_di_mascherine_all_italia-251219227/. Later, Germany was joined by France in providing one million masks to Italy, see Michel Rose, “Europe Failing to Communicate Its Response to Coronavirus Crisis, France Says,” *Reuters*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-europe-france/europe-failing-to-communicate-its-response-to-coronavirus-crisis-france-says-idUSKBN21C3DT>. On the European solidarity in action see Coronavirus: “European Solidarity in Action,” *European Commission*, https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/coronavirus-european-solidarity-action_en.

9 Braw, “EU is Abandoning Italy”; “Coronavirus, Di Maio: ‘Se sei solidale, ricevi solidarietà,’” *ANSA*, March 13, 2020, https://www.ansa.it/lazio/notizie/2020/03/12/coronavirus-arrivati-gli-aiuti-dalla-cina-anche-9-medici-specializzati_1a56ddbc-7bae-4f5a-8353-f0d15ba3a465.html.

10 Paul D. Miller, “Yes, Blame China for the Virus,” *Foreign Policy*, March 25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/25/blame-china-and-xi-jinping-for-coronavirus-pandemic/>; David Gitter, Sandy Lu, and Brock Erdahl, “China Will Do Anything to Deflect Coronavirus Blame,” *Foreign Policy*, March 30, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/30/beijing-coronavirus-response-see-what-sticks-propaganda-blame-ccp-xi-jinping/>.

11 “Pyatnadsaty il-76 VKS RF dostavil v Italiyu sredstva dlya bor’by s koronavirusom,” *Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (website), March 25, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12283692@egNews.

12 “Coronavirus – Russische Hilfsoperation in Italien bisher vor allem PR,” *Austria Presse Agentur*, March 24, 2020.

13 “Spetsialisty Minoborony Rossii pristupili k soversheniyu marsha s aviabazy VVS Italii v g. Bergamo dlya okazaniya pomoshchi v bor’be s rasprostraneniem koronavirusnoy infektsii,” *Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (website), March 25, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12283714@egNews.

14 “Voennye spetsialisty Minoborony Rossii pribyli na aerodrom Orioal’-Serio v gorode Bergamo,” *Ministerstvo oborony Rossiyskoy Federatsii* (website), March 26, 2020, https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12283835@egNews.

15 “Watch: Italians Praise Russia, Deride EU After Vladimir Putin Sends in Coronavirus Aid,” *Sputnik*, March 24, 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202003241078693863-watch-italians-praise-russia-deride-eu-after-vladimir-putin-sends-in-coronavirus-aid/>.

where, incl Russia,"¹⁶ "With united Europe MIA in its Covid-19 response, worst-hit nations turn to 'evil' Russia & China for help,"¹⁷ the message was clear: the EU showed no solidarity with Italy, while Putin's Russia demonstrated its goodwill despite the fact that Italy—along with the other EU nations—imposed economic and political sanctions on Russia. In the eyes of the Western audience, videos and pictures showing Russian military vehicles flying Russian flags and driving through Italy apparently had to project an image of Russia as a self-avowed savior of Italy and a mighty military force rushing to the rescue where NATO was feeble. And there were other Russian specialists who were in charge of promoting such an image: Russian journalists from the Zvezda TV network run by the Russian Defence Ministry who arrived in Italy together with the Russian military.¹⁸

The entire operation appeared to be a successful publicity coup for the Kremlin. Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio personally welcomed the Russian aid at the Pratica di Mare airbase. Italian Chief of the Defence Staff General Enzo Vecciarelli was present at the airbase too and "thanked the Russian people for lending a helping hand."¹⁹ Former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi sent a letter to his personal friend Vladimir Putin saying that the Russian aid was "a real sacrifice made for friendship and love for Italy and the Italians," adding that Italians would "not forget it."²⁰

The visuals were important too. Russia's Ministry of Defence published a photo, which was later republished by dozens of media outlets across the world, in which Russian General Sergey Kikot, who led the Italian operation, showed something on the map of Italy to the representatives of the Italian military thus creating an impression that Russia had command power in a NATO member

state.²¹ Russian media resources also talked about ordinary Italians replacing EU flags with Russian ones and showed a video of an Italian engineer who did this while showing a piece of paper thanking Putin and Russia.²²

However, soon after the arrival of the Russian aid, details started to emerge suggesting that the operation "From Russia with love" had much more to do with political theatrics rather than with Moscow's philanthropy.

THE DARKER SIDE OF RUSSIAN GIFTS

The logistics of the delivery of the Russian aid alone pointed to a hidden agenda of the operation: why had the aid been delivered first to the Pratica di Mare airbase and then driven 600 kilometers to the Orio al Serio airport if the Russian airplanes could have delivered the aid directly to any of the four airports around Bergamo capable of receiving Russian military cargo airplanes? There are two possible explanations for this. First, the Russian military wanted to impress the public and the media with a long convoy of over 20 military vehicles symbolically conquering a NATO member state. Moscow would not have achieved such an effect had the aid been delivered straight to the destination point. Alexander Sladkov, a Russian military journalist working for the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, called the operation "'a humanitarian axe' run into NATO's chest."²³ He also likened the Russian operation in Italy with the forced march of Russian forces to the Pristina International Airport in the aftermath of the Kosovo War in June 1999: the Russian military arrived in the airport ahead of the NATO forces and occupied it.²⁴ Yet another possible explanation for the apparently unreasonable 600 kilometer drive from the Pratica di Mare airbase to Bergamo is that the Russian mission to Italy was "a front for intelligence gathering," so the trip could, indeed, be used by the Russian military to collect intelligence "at

16 "EU left Italy 'practically alone' to fight coronavirus, so Rome looked for help elsewhere, incl Russia – ex-FM Frattini to RT," RT, March 24, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/news/483897-italy-eu-coronavirus-solidarity-russia/>.

17 Damian Wilson, "With United Europe MIA in Its Covid-19 Response, Worst-hit Nations Turn to 'Evil' Russia & China for Help," RT, March 23, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/483865-europe-coronavirus-russia-china/>.

18 Konstantin Khudoleyev, "Iz Rossii s lyubov'yu: kak okhvachennaya koronavirusom Italiya vstretila rossiyskikh spetsialistov," Zvezda, March 23, 2020, https://tvzvezda.ru/news/vstrane_i_mire/content/20203231327-JqrfK.html.

19 "Russian Military Planes with Medics & Supplies Land in Coronavirus-hit Italy," RT (VIDEO), March 22, 2020, <https://www.rt.com/russia/483796-russian-military-coronavirus-aid-italy/>.

20 Giorgia Baroncini, "Coronavirus, Putin invia aiuti all'Italia. Il Cav: 'Non lo dimenticheremo,'" *Il Giornale*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/coronavirus-putin-invia-aiuti-allitalia-cav-non-1845152.html>.

21 "The Use of Russian Military Specialists in the Fight against the Coronavirus Pandemic Was Discussed in Rome," Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation (website), March 24, 2020, https://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12283590@egNews.

22 It later turned out that the person was "personally fond of Russia and of President Putin" and had "done some business with Russian companies," see "Coronavirus: What Does 'from Russia with Love' Really Mean?" BBC, April 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52137908>.

23 Alexander Sladkov, "Kuzhugetych Zhzhet!" Sladkov + (Telegram channel), March 22, 2020, https://t.me/Sladkov_plus/1916.

24 Sladkov, "Kuzhugetych Zhzhet!"

the heart of NATO.”²⁵ Of course, one can argue that it was cheaper for the Russian military to deliver the aid to the Pratica di Mare airbase than all the way to the Orio al Serio airport. However, the distance between the two airports is insignificant in comparison to the distance between Russia and Italy, and, furthermore, the Russian military anyway charged the Italians for the fuel and the flights of their cargo airplanes.²⁶

Furthermore, Italian expert Massimiliano Di Pasquale argued—with a reference to Italian specialists—that “there was no need at all in the disinfection of the streets” in Bergamo.²⁷ Andrea Armario, a former spokesperson for Italy’s Defence Ministry, also “questioned the need for Russian military medics to disinfect areas when there were already nuclear, biological and chemical military teams in Italy capable of doing the job.”²⁸

According to the investigation by Italian investigative journalist Jacopo Iacoboni, high-level political sources told *La Stampa* that 80% of the Russian aid was either useless or of little use to Italy, as the Russian delivery mostly consisted of disinfection and sterilization equipment. The same sources argued that Putin was pursuing “geopolitical and diplomatic” interests, while Conte had to play along as he needed any help in the situation of the severe crisis.²⁹

Moscow immediately and angrily responded to Iacoboni’s article. Russia’s Ambassador to Italy Sergey Razov called the Russian aid “a selfless desire to help a friendly people in trouble” and slammed the assertions made in the article as “the product of a perverse mind.”³⁰

25 Natalia Antelava and Jacopo Iacoboni, “The Influence Operation behind Russia’s Coronavirus Aid to Italy,” *Coda*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/soft-power/russia-coronavirus-aid-italy/>.

26 Jacopo Iacoboni and Paolo Mastrolilli, “Nella spedizione dei russi in Italia il generale che negò i gas in Siria,” *La Stampa*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/04/16/news/nella-spedizione-dei-russi-in-italia-il-generale-che-nego-i-gas-in-siria-1.38722110>.

27 Natal’ya Kudrik, “Ital’yanskiy obozrevatel’: rossiyskaya ‘pomoshch’ – eto operatsiya propagandy,” *Krym.Realii*, April 4, 2020, <https://ru.krymr.com/a/italianskiy-obozrevtel-rossiyskaya-pomoshch-operatsiya-propagandy/30529765.html>.

28 Angela Giuffrida and Andrew Roth, “Moscow’s Motives Questioned over Coronavirus Aid Shipment to Italy,” *Guardian* (US edition), April 27, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/27/moscow-motives-questioned-over-coronavirus-aid-shipment-to-italy>.

29 Jacopo Iacoboni, “Coronavirus, la telefonata Conte-Putin agita il governo: ‘Più che aiuti arrivano militari russi in Italia,’” *La Stampa*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/primo-piano/2020/03/25/news/coronavirus-la-telefonata-conte-putin-agita-il-governo-piu-che-aiuti-arrivano-militari-russi-in-italia-1.38633327>.

30 “Posol v Italii otsenil soobshcheniya o ‘vystavlenii scheta’ za pomoshch,’” *RIA Novosti*, March 25, 2020, <https://ria.ru/20200325/1569157787.html>.

The Russian Defence Ministry joined the campaign too. Its spokesman Major General Igor Konashenkov called Iacoboni’s article in *La Stampa* an attempt “to discredit the Russian mission” and added, in awkward English:

Hiding behind the ideals of freedom of speech and pluralism of opinions, *La Stampa* manipulates in its materials the most low-grade Russophobic fakes of the Cold War, referring to so called certain “opinions” of anonymous “high-ranking sources. At the same time, ‘*La Stampa*’ does not disdain to use literally everything that the authors manage to invent on the basis of recommendations from apparently not decayed textbooks on anti-Soviet propaganda. [...] As for the attitude to the real customers of the Russophobic media campaign in *La Stampa*, which we know—we recommend that you learn the ancient wisdom—*Qui fodit foveam, incidet in eam* (He that diggeth a pit, shall fall into it). And to make it clearer: Bad penny always comes back.³¹

Reacting to Konashenkov’s “ancient wisdom,” Iacoboni said: “It is a threatening and intimidating phrase [...] not only towards me but also towards my newspaper. In Italy we do not let ourselves be intimidated; freedom of criticism exists here. We are not Chechnya.”³² In their turn, the editorial board of *La Stampa* expressed its “outrage upon the serious attack” of the Russian Defence Ministry on the newspaper and Iacoboni.³³

What Moscow did not realize was that its vicious attacks against Italian journalism ruined much of the positive effect of the Russian mission in Italy. In their joint notice, Italy’s Defence Ministry and Foreign Ministry declared that Italy was grateful for the Russian aid, but, at the same time, they could not “help but blame the inappropriate tone of certain expressions used by the spokesman of the Ministry of Russian Defence against some articles published the Italian press. Freedom of speech and the right to criticize are fundamental values for Italy, as well as the right to reply, both characterised by formality and substantial fairness. In this moment of global emer-

31 “Statement by the Spokesman of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation Major General Igor Konashenkov,” Facebook, April 2 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/mod.mil.rus/posts/2608652339377506>.

32 Monica Rubino and Concetto Vecchio, “Russia contro il giornalista de ‘*La Stampa*’ Jacopo Iacoboni. Esteri e Difesa: ‘Grazie per aiuti ma rispettare libertà di stampa,’” *La Repubblica*, April 3, 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/03/news/iacoboni_la_stampa_russia-253020378/.

33 “Le accuse di Mosca e la nostra risposta,” *La Stampa*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.lastampa.it/lettere/2020/04/03/news/le-accuse-di-mosca-e-la-nostra-risposta-1.38672825>.

gency, the control and analysis task of the free press is more essential than ever.”³⁴ Mayor of Bergamo Giorgio Gori tweeted: “Solidarity with @jacopo_iacoboni and La Stampa subjected to the intimidation from a Russian defence spokesman. We are grateful to have Russian doctors and nurses in #Bergamo who help us treat our patients, but no threat to free information is acceptable.”³⁵ Many other politicians and journalists expressed their solidarity with Iacoboni too.³⁶

However, Russian officials and state-controlled international media continued their attack on *La Stampa* and Iacoboni.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova declared that a company registered in London was behind Iacoboni’s article in *La Stampa*. She did not provide either the name of the company or any other details, but vaguely noted: “When we began to study it [the article], it turned out that this is a purely commercial operation that some foreign structures attempted to stage using non-transparent methods.”³⁷ While it is unclear what British “commercial operation” Zakharova had in mind, a fringe Russian-language website, Foundation for Strategic Culture, ran a story that claimed that “Anglo-Saxons” were behind *La Stampa*’s “provocative attack” referring to the incorrect information that the newspaper was owned by Chrysler whose chairman John Elkann was from New York and CEO Michael Manley was from Britain.³⁸

The Italian edition of *Sputnik* published an article written by now late Giulietto Chiesa, a long-time pro-Kremlin activist and associate of Russian fascist Alexan-

der Dugin,³⁹ who claimed that *La Stampa* was a “notoriously Russophobic newspaper” (ironically, Chiesa wrote for *La Stampa* in 1991-2000), while Iacoboni allegedly “specialized in spreading the germs of an apparently very infectious disease of Russophobia.”⁴⁰

Chiesa was not the only Italian “friend of Russia” who was directly or indirectly mobilised by the Russian state and non-state actors in Moscow’s attempts to generate “hype” around the Russian aid to Italy. On April 14, 2020, the Russian Defence Ministry issued a press release stating that Professor Maria Chiara Pesenti from the University of Bergamo sent a letter of appreciation to the Russian military. Pesenti, due to her specialization in Russian language and literature, is a frequent visitor of Russia, and, in November 2019, Putin awarded her with a Medal of Pushkin.⁴¹ And already in March 2020, Italian far-right activist Gian Luigi Ferretti, who was part of the politically biased election observation mission⁴² at the Russian 2018 presidential election,⁴³ uploaded a video on YouTube on which a recording of the Russian anthem was played from the headquarters of the Italian fascist organization CasaPound.⁴⁴ (Uninitiated viewers would, however, hardly recognize the headquarters of CasaPound and just see Italian flags and hear the Russian anthem).

Furthermore, Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* reported that Russian citizens were sending requests to their Italian friends and acquaintances offering €200 (approximately \$217) for thank-you videos on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter. The requests allegedly came from the Russian media, but no name was given. In order to earn money, Italians were supposed “to say something

34 “Nota congiunta del Ministero della Difesa e del Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale,” Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (website), April 3, 2020, https://www.esteri.it/mae/it/sala_stamp/archivionotizie/comunicati/nota-congiunta-del-ministero-della-difesa-e-del-ministero-degli-affari-esteri-e-della-cooperazione-internazionale.html.

35 Giorgio Gori, “Solidarietà a @jacopo_iacoboni e alla Stampa per le intimidazioni ricevute da portavoce della Difesa russo,” Twitter, April 3, 2020, https://twitter.com/giorgio_gori/status/1246008841755668480.

36 Rubino and Vecchio, “Russia contro il giornalista de ‘La Stampa’ Jacopo Iacoboni.”

37 “UK Company behind La Stampa’s Article Claiming Russian Aid to Italy Useless – Diplomat,” TASS, April 2, 2020, <https://tass.com/politics/1139323>.

38 Vladimir Malyshev, “Uchebniki po antisovetskoy propagande eshche ne sgnili,” *Fond strategicheskoy kul’tury*, April 9, 2020, <https://www.fondsk.ru/news/2020/04/09/uchebniki-po-antisovetskoy-propagande-eshe-ne-sgnili-50575.html>.

39 Andreas Umland, “Aleksandr Dugin’s Transformation from a Lunatic Fringe Figure into a Mainstream Political Publicist, 1980–1998: A Case Study in the Rise of Late and Post-Soviet Russian Fascism,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 1, no. 2 (2010): 144-152.

40 Giulietto Chiesa, “Quelli che sparano sulla Croce Rossa,” *Sputnik*, April 7, 2020, <https://it.sputniknews.com/opinioni/202004078943748-quelli-che-sparano-sulla-croce-rossa/>.

41 “Putin v Den’ narodnogo edinstva vruchil nagrody v Kremle,” RIA Novosti, November 4, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20191104/1560560522.html>.

42 Politically biased international election observation is a form of political activity performed by international actors with the aim of advancing interests of certain politicians and political forces by imitating credible election monitoring during electoral processes.

43 See Anton Shekhovtsov, “Politically Biased International Election Observation at the 2018 Regional Elections in Russia,” *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, October 5, 2018, <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-international-election-observation-at-the-2018-regional-elections-in-russia.html>.

44 Gian Luigi Ferretti, “25 marzo 2020: Inno russo da CasaPound a Roma,” *YouTube*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1OK4gQKtxc>.

good” about the Russian aid offered to Italy: “better videos or texts with photos, but for videos they pay 200 euros, for text they give less.”⁴⁵ However, *La Repubblica* was cautious about linking these practices to the activities of the Russian state actors.

FAR-RIGHT FREELOADING

The Russian aid to Italy offered an opportunity to a number of pro-Kremlin actors to pursue their own political and personal interests. On 23 March, Alexey Pushkov, a Russian senator who is prone to self-promotion through provocative tweets related to foreign policy, tweeted that Poland had “not let Russian aircraft carrying aid to Italy pass through its airspace.”⁴⁶ Pushkov is also one of the most cited politicians in the Russian media space, and several Russian media outlets—including various editions of *Sputnik*—quickly picked up Pushkov’s message that generally fed into the Kremlin’s animosity towards Poland.⁴⁷ However, Poland’s Foreign Ministry promptly refuted Pushkov’s claim, and *Sputnik* had to amend its reports on the issue,⁴⁸ while Pushkov deleted his tweet. Nevertheless, his claim permeated into the milieu of Italian conspiracy theorists and anti-EU activists.⁴⁹

While Pushkov’s tweet was hardly underpinned by any other reason apart from the Russian senator’s proclivity for provocative political utterances, some other developments around the Russian aid to Italy had complex agendas behind them.

On 20 March, Ulrich Oehme, a member of the German parliament from the far-right party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), sent letters to two Russian contacts. One letter was addressed to the

Chairman of the State Duma Committee on International Affairs Leonid Slutsky and the other—to a member of the Moscow City Duma, Roman Babayan. The letters seem to be practically identical and, in particular, read: “Today, Mr. Paolo Grimaldi, a member of the Council of Europe from the Northern League (Lombardy), turned to us with a desperate cry for help via the WhatsApp group of European Conservatives. The situation with the hospitals in Lombardy is extremely critical. They urgently need doctors. For this reason, I ask you to see whether the Russian Federation can help people of Lombardy with doctors and ventilators. I have just talked with Mr. Grimaldi on the phone and he is excited about my idea to talk to you about help.”⁵⁰ When the media reported about Putin’s decision to provide aid to Italy, the AfD claimed that “the Russian leadership responded to a request from the Bundestag member Ulrich Oehme concerning Northern Italy severely affected by the coronavirus.”⁵¹

The background of the above-mentioned figures suggests that Oehme’s letters were most likely part of an elaborate influence operation.

The AfD’s foreign policy positions very often coincide with those of the Kremlin, and this far-right party is extremely critical of the EU’s sanctions imposed on Putin’s Russia. The AfD’s members often pay visits to Moscow to meet Russian officials, and, in February 2017, the AfD’s leadership discussed cross-party cooperation with a number of Russian politicians including Leonid Slutsky—one of the two Russian politicians to whom Oehme addressed his letters. Oehme himself was involved in pro-Kremlin activities. In March 2018, he illegally visited Russia-annexed Crimea where he “observed” the illegitimate Russian presidential election.⁵² Furthermore, he tried to promote the interests of the Russia-controlled “Donetsk People’s Republic” and “Lugansk People’s Republic” in the Council of Europe in 2019.⁵³

45 Fabio Tonacci, “‘200 euro se ringrazi la Russia per gli aiuti’: quello strano arruolamento su WhatsApp,” *La Repubblica*, April 12, 2020, https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2020/04/12/news/russia_propaganda_a_pagamento-253794264/.

46 Alexey Pushkov, “Pol’sha ne propustila rossiyskie samolety s pomoshch’yu dlya Italii cherez svoe vozdushnoe prostranstvo,” Twitter, March 23, 2020, <http://archive.is/fdk6R>.

47 See, for example, “Russian Planes Carrying Aid to Italy Blocked from Using Poland Airspace – Russian Lawmaker,” *Sputnik*, March 23, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200324003727/https://sputniknews.com/world/202003231078687190-russian-planes-carrying-aid-to-italy-blocked-from-using-poland-airspace---russian-lawmaker/>.

48 See “Poland Says Its Airspace Open for Russian Planes Carrying Aid to Italy,” *Sputnik*, March 23, 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/world/202003231078687190-russian-planes-carrying-aid-to-italy-blocked-from-using-poland-airspace---russian-lawmaker/>.

49 “Russia Exploits Italian Coronavirus Outbreak to Expand Its Influence,” *Medium*, March 30, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russia-exploits-italian-coronavirus-outbreak-to-expand-its-influence-6453090d3a98>.

50 “Oehme: Europaratsmitglieder bilden Phalanx zur Bewältigung der Corona-Krise in Italien,” *Fraktion der AfD im Deutschen Bundestag*, March 23, 2020, <https://www.afdbundestag.de/mdb-ulrich-oehme-europaratsmitglieder-bilden-phalanx-zur-bewaeltigung-der-corona-krise-in-italien/>; “Deputat Bundestaga obratilsya k Rossii za pomoshch’yu okhvachennoy koronavirusom Italii,” *Govorit Moskva*, March 21, 2020, <https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/228659/>.

51 “Oehme: Europaratsmitglieder bilden Phalanx zur Bewältigung der Corona-Krise in Italien.”

52 See Anton Shekhovtsov, “Foreign Observation of the Illegitimate Presidential Election in Crimea in March 2018,” *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.epde.org/en/news/details/foreign-observation-of-the-illegitimate-presidential-election-in-crimea-in-march-2018-1375.html>.

53 “Predstaviteli ORDLO vstretilis’ v Minske s deputatom PASE,” *Naviny*, December 16, 2019, <https://naviny.by/new/20191216/1576476063-predstaviteli-ordlo-vstretilis-v-minske-s-deputatom-pase>.



Everything is gonna be fine, Bologna, Italy, 2020. Photo: Pietro Luca Cassarino, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/184568471@N07/49689932383/>

Paolo Grimoldi's party Northern League (*Lega Nord*, LN) is known for its pro-Kremlin foreign policy positions too, and signed, in March 2017, a coordination and cooperation agreement with the ruling United Russia party. Grimoldi himself contributed to the development of the relations between his party and Russian state and non-state actors. In October 2014, he announced the creation of the cross-party group, Friends of Putin, in the Italian parliament.⁵⁴ Although there is no evidence that this group eventually took off or was successful in promoting rapprochement between Italy and Russia, the Russian media widely reported on this initiative attempting to show—against the backdrop of the Western sanctions against Putin's Russia—the alleged growth of pro-Kremlin sentiments in the West.

In his turn, Slutsky—as chairman of the parliamentary committee on international affairs—coordinated several important contacts between the European far right and Russian state actors. For example, it was Slutsky who officially invited Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far-right National Front (later renamed into National Rally) to meet Putin in March 2017, a month before the first round of the French presidential election.⁵⁵ Slutsky also supervised several politically biased international elec-

tion observation missions that included many European far-right politicians.⁵⁶

According to the German media outlet *Bild*, in parallel to Oehme's efforts, the LN essentially forced a difficult choice on Conte: either accept aid from Moscow and grant Russia a publicity stunt, or reject it and suffer an outrage from the suffering Italian population.⁵⁷ From this perspective, Oehme's letters to Russian politicians seem to be not only an attempt to advance political interests of the AfD and LN, but also an endeavour to put additional pressure on Conte.

Like Slutsky, Grimoldi and Oehme are members of the Council of Europe, and—given this fact, as well as Grimoldi's engagement with the pro-Kremlin activities—he did not really need Oehme to be an intermediary between him and Slutsky. The involvement of Oehme can be simply explained by his desire to secure Russian favors not only for the LN, but also for the AfD—by displaying servility before Russia. Slutsky was an obvious choice as the first addressee of the letter coordinated by Grimoldi

54 Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 185-186.

55 "France's Le Pen, on Russia Visit, Heads to Kremlin for Exhibition," Reuters, March 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-france-lepen-idUSKBN16V12E>.

56 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Politically Biased Foreign Electoral Observation at the Russian 2018 Presidential Election," *European Platform for Democratic Elections*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/politically-biased-foreign-electoral-observation-at-the-russian-2018-presidential-election-1423.html>.

57 Julian Röpcke, "Wie die AfD Putins Militär in Italien einschleuste," *Bild*, March 26, 2020, <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/politik-ausland/corona-krise-wie-die-afd-putins-militaer-in-italien-einschleuste-69638656.bild.html>.

and Oehme, due to his membership in the Council of Europe and coordination of the relations between European politicians and Russian state actors. Unlike Slutsky, however, Roman Babayan has little in common with European politicians or Russian malign influence operations in Europe, but he seemed to be a good choice as a second addressee of the letter because of his connections with the Russian media. Babayan is a chief editor of the *Govorit Moskva* radio station and cooperates with the functionally state-controlled NTV television channel, so his task was to spread the word about Italy's "cry for Russian help" in the media, and so he did.⁵⁸ The outcome of the operation was obvious: Oehme and Grimoldi strengthened pro-Kremlin foreign policy positions of their parties in order to seek further favors from Moscow, while contributing to the domestic pressure on Conte and consolidating the international image of Putin's Russia as the true friend of Italian people.

CONCLUSION

It would be wrong to argue that the Russian aid delivered to Italy was completely useless. However, it would be equally wrong to assume that this aid was primarily driven by humanitarian considerations, because the main objective of the "From Russia with love" operation was to demonstrate to the Italian people that it was Russia, rather than the EU or NATO, that was the true friend of Italy.

The relevance of such an operation could only become possible due to the initial confusion in European capitals in the face of the unfolding crisis. As President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said in the middle of April 2020, "too many were not there on time when Italy needed a helping hand at the very beginning."⁵⁹ Von der Leyen offered "a heartfelt apology" for the lack of European solidarity with Italy at the start of the crisis,⁶⁰ but neither her apology nor the fact that EU states eventually rendered much greater assistance to Italy than China or Russia could undo what had been done: the erosion of Italians' trust towards the EU.

The Kremlin readily helped to erode this trust as It-

aly was "perceived by Moscow as the weak link in the EU."⁶¹ By launching its malign influence operation, Putin's regime hoped that—by undermining Italy's trust in the EU—the Kremlin contributed to strengthening Italy's opposition to the EU's sanctions policy on Russia. At the end of April 2020, Moscow decided to covertly test the efficiency of its tactics in Italy. On 27 April, Russian Ambassador Sergey Razov forwarded to Vito Rosario Petrocelli, chairman of the Italian Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee, an appeal by Slutsky, and asked his addressee to inform Italian senators of its contents.⁶² In his appeal, Slutsky called upon the international community—without singling out any particular nation—to support Russia's resolution at the United Nations that would make it easier to lift sanctions imposed on Russia.⁶³ Razov forwarded Slutsky's appeal in two versions: an original Russian version and a translation into Italian. Curiously, Razov specified in his cover letter that the Italian version was an unofficial translation which implies that his efforts took place behind closed doors and was yet another malign influence operation.

Russia was not the only beneficiary of its influence operations in Italy: representatives of German and Italian far-right parties, known for their pro-Kremlin foreign policy attitudes, had an opportunity to showcase their allegiance to Russia by reinforcing its self-imposed image of a well-meaning global power, and, therefore, seek support from Moscow in the future.

58 "Deputat Bundestaga obratilsya k Rossii za pomoshch'yu okhvachennoy koronavirusom Italii."

59 "Speech by President Von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the EU Coordinated Action to Combat the Coronavirus Pandemic and Its Consequences," *European Commission*, April 16, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_675.

60 "Speech by President Von der Leyen."

61 Luigi Sergio Germani, "The Coronavirus Pandemic and Russian Information Warfare Activities in Italy," *Centre for Democratic Integrity*, April 28, 2020, <https://democratic-integrity.eu/the-coronavirus-pandemic-and-russian-information-warfare-activities-in-italy/>.

62 Razov's cover letter and Slutsky's appeal can be found here: <https://www.linkiesta.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Lettera-nr.1072-del-27.04.2020.pdf>.

63 The appeal appeared on several websites of Russian diplomatic institutions, see, for example: Leonid Slutsky, "An Appeal by Mr L. Slutsky, MP, to Abandon the Sanction Policy in the Face of COVID-19 Pandemia," *The Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of India*, April 24, 2020, https://india.mid.ru/en/press-office/news/an_appeal_by_mr_slutsky/.