RUSSIAN MALIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS IN CORONAVIRUS-HIT ITALY

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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 “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 in 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-

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

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. 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. 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.

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. For the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which had been accused by some Western experts, journalists and politicians, for mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak, 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. 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. 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. 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.”

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,” or “EU left Italy ‘practically alone’ to fight coronavirus, so Rome looked for help else-

5 “Minoborony Rossii sozdaet...”.
9 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-2512192277/.
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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 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 Veggiarelli was present at the airbase too and “thanked the Russian people for lending a helping hand.”

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.

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.”

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. 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
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 foemae, incidet in eam (He that diggeth a pit, shall fall into it). And to make it clearer: Bad penny always comes back.

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,”

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-

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ergency, 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 Alexander 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

36 Rubinio 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.
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.
guarded” 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 FREELADING

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 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. Paola Grimoldi, 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. Grimoldi 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

51 “Oehme: Europaratsmitglieder bilden Phalanx zur Bewältigung der Corona-Krise in Italien.”
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. 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. Slutsky also supervised several politically biased international election observation missions that included many European far-right politicians.

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. 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.

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54 Anton Shekhovtsov, Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 185-186.
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.\(^\text{58}\) 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.”\(^\text{59}\) Von der Leyen offered “a heartfelt apology” for the lack of European solidarity with Italy at the start of the crisis,\(^\text{60}\) 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 Italy was “perceived by Moscow as the weak link in the EU.”\(^\text{61}\) 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.\(^\text{62}\) 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.\(^\text{63}\) 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.

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58 “Deputat Bundestaga obratilsya k Rossii za pomoshch’yu okhvachennoy koronavirusom Itali.”
60 “Speech by President Von der Leyen.”