



AN ANALYSIS OF  
COVID-19  
INFORMATION  
OPERATIONS

VIRAL  
OVERLOAD

*Digital responses to the  
COVID-19 pandemic from  
China, Iran, NATO, Russia,  
Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and  
the United States*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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PREFACE.....	3
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA.....	6
ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN.....	12
NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION...17	
RUSSIAN FEDERATION.....	21
KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA.....	26
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.....	30
BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF VENEZUELA.....	36
ABOUT US.....	40

## ■ INTRODUCTION

The media “has become a component of the armed forces” according to Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu, reflecting a widespread belief among autocrats that the manipulation of information flows can achieve geopolitical goals once only attainable through force. With recommendation engines that promise to “deliver the right content to the right people at the right time”, an autocratic regime reaching sympathetic audiences in democratic countries has never been easier.

At Omelas, we aim to shed light on how political actors, state and nonstate, are conducting influence operations online to those ends. While many of our partners have focused on the important task of exposing covert actions online, overt accounts and channels—those that make no secret of their ownership—hold positions of soaring influence and power online, often commanding the top spots among news channels or content creators of any kind. They work in tandem with internal entities and external actors to then distribute this content through both overt and covert means, including but not limited to botnets, sockpuppets, and more.

Since COVID-19 first broke out in December, we have been collecting a breathtaking amount of content in order to understand the influence operation strategies

of key actors in context with their geopolitical objectives and how their strategies have changed, if any. We surveyed China, Iran, NATO, Russia, Saudi Arabia, the US, and Venezuela from the date each recorded its 100th confirmed case of COVID-19 until May 12, 2020, the date of publication.

While we provide data on the performance of state-funded media in democratic states for comparison, we encourage users to be mindful of the differing relationships between the state and state media and differing levels of editorial independence in open societies versus censored ones. Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders provide useful guides for press freedoms generally by country, which serves as a strong proxy for freedom of state media as well.

We document how overt information operations support the foreign policy of key political actors. Just as in the short story, *The Ones That Walk Away from Omelas*, by Ursula Le Guin, in which the citizens are told the truth about the source of their happiness, we want to do the same: being fully transparent about the top influence operation content and strategies deployed by the primary actors.

The Omelas Team

## ■ G L O S S A R Y

### ACTOR

A political entity capable of changing the geopolitical landscape, e.g. states, parties, intergovernmental bodies, militias, and foreign terrorist organizations

### ACCOUNT

A unique id within a platform that exists at a distinct url and which publishes posts.

### BRAND

Brand is the external facing image of a given account, i.e what the account calls itself without normalization across platforms.

### CAMPAIGN

One level up in the ontology from narratives, campaigns are the content strategies that an actor has based on their geopolitical objectives. While there might be hundreds of narratives per month, usually, there are only 5-10 campaigns per month. These themes are repeated and used in content generation down the ontology.

### ENGAGEMENT

Any active action taken by a user in response to a post and recorded by the platform. Examples include likes, comments, upvotes, retweets, and shares.

### NARRATIVE

A narrative is a group of posts whose linked articles have been aggregated according to our story aggregator, i.e. stories are aggregated by linked articles in content and not the content itself. Narratives describe temporally limited events from one or more actors. Each narrative contains multiple posts, but no post can be associated with more than one story.

### ONLINE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

The digital attributes that act upon and impact knowledge, understanding, beliefs, world views, and, ultimately, actions of an individual, group, system, community, or organization.

### PLATFORM

A platform is a social media service or messaging app on which content is published. Platforms available in Open Wolf Totem are Twitter, RSS, YouTube, Telegram, Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, Reddit, Soroush, Aparat, and Instagram. A note on RSS: it is a collection of relevant news feeds, blogs, etc.

### PORTFOLIO

Portfolios are the ultimate owner of an account. For government functions, portfolio describes the remit of the portfolio type, e.g. The Ministry of Defense or the



# P R E F A C E

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Ground Forces of the Military, and umbrella brands for media houses, e.g. RT and Voice of America.

## POST

A post refers to specific, distinct online content with an associated unique url. Posts with the exact same text, posted by the same accounts, but posted duplicatively and thus with multiple urls are multiple pieces of content. Post is the lowest level in our ontology.

## SENTIMENT

Sentiment summarizes on a -1.0 to +1.0 scale how positive or negative is an article, or how negative or positive is an article's portrayal of a given person, place, country, or concept.



PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF  
**CHINA**



## ■ SUMMARY

In the first phase of the COVID-19 crisis, China's influence operations were primarily centered on the theme that the Chinese Communist Party had effectively controlled the pandemic, winning international praise. A parallel campaign began three weeks later, on March 24th, framing China as the savior from the pandemic, sharing best practices and sending humanitarian aid around the world. The campaign peaked at

around 100 posts a day in mid-April. China has taken advantage of American struggles with containment, portraying Beijing as a better protector of the American people than is Washington.

### QUICK FACTS

82,919  
CASES

4,633  
DEATHS

79,463  
COVID-RELATED  
PIECES

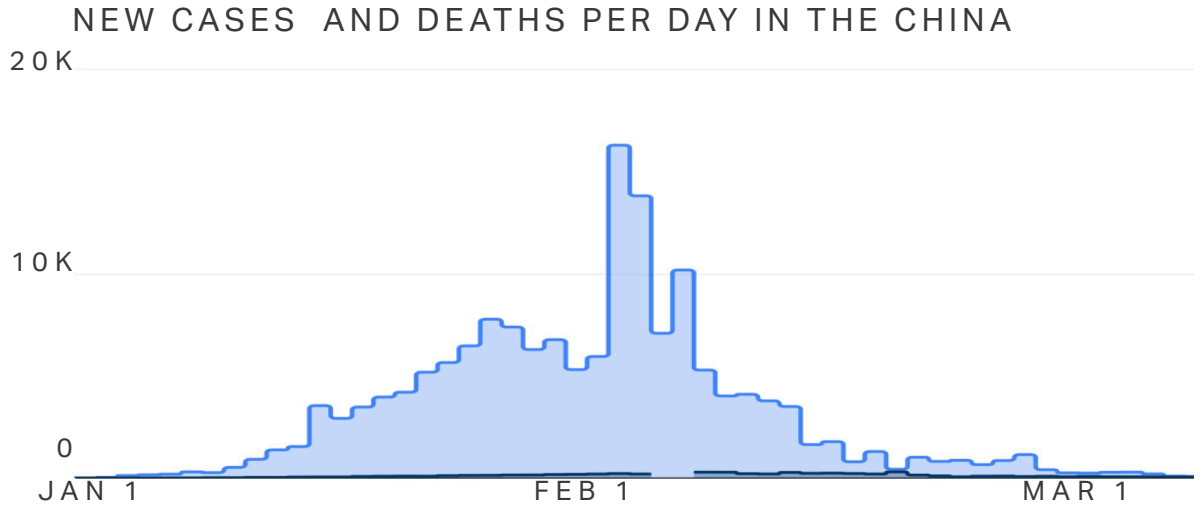
38%  
SHARE OF ALL  
POSTS

66%  
SHARE IN  
ENGLISH



# CHINA

## TIMELINE



The first confirmed COVID-19 case was detected in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in late December. It rapidly spread to other parts of China and internationally before a government-imposed lockdown of the province started on January 23. Wuhan lifted the lockdown on April 8. Flight restrictions in and out of China have continued to the present as the government fears a resurgent wave of the virus through imported cases from abroad and/or other parts of China. The official Chinese government statistics show that there are 83,974 confirmed cases and 4,374 deaths. However, these numbers are highly controversial and disputed by Western governments, international organizations, and ac-

tivist groups. Estimates of the real death rate is 20-50x the official number, according to *The Economist*, which cites various figures given by US think tanks and China experts. Once the domestic pandemic was under control, starting March 19th, China began sending doctors by the hundreds and medical assistance by the ton to more than 90 countries around the world, including some of the hardest hit countries, such as Italy, Spain, and Brazil.

# CHINA



## SELF- PORTRAYAL

China's influence operations on the COVID-19 pandemic center on four major themes in the past four months:

- The Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) ability and capacity to handle the pandemic, which has won applause from the international community
- China continues to be a positive economic partner despite the global downturn and is eager to get back to business as usual
- China is a humanitarian hero sending doctors and humanitarian aid around the world to

both developed and developing countries

- The West, led by the US, is obstructing China's noble efforts with fabrications and slander

While the two formermost Chinese IO campaigns are part of longstanding efforts to demonstrate the strength of the state at home and cultivate economic ties abroad, the lattermost are novel and display notable sophistication, reach, and complexity. *Xinhua News* and *Global Times* were the first to amplify the message of the value and warm reception of Chinese humanitarian aid. As tracked by the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins, much of the aid amounted to concessionary loans that the recipient countries would have to pay back in two to three years. The omission of this key detail serves China's strategic interest of establishing Beijing as a global leader. *Xinhua News's* reporting on humanitarian aid was ambiguous and sparse. In calculating totals, state media grouped together as "Essential medical equipment" both inexpensive and easily produced items like face masks with urgently needed, expensive equipment like ventilators. State media released many of these articles before official announcements from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and







# CHINA



the recipient countries. This demonstrates the CCP's use of influence operations to anticipate a formal foreign policy. In short, IO came before the foreign policy, rather than foreign policy before IO.

China's campaign responding to American accusations has seen exceptional coordination while trafficking in its own conspiracies. Several CCP-owned publications published pieces claiming COVID-19 is in fact a US Army bioweapon brought to China in August for the Military Games, a conspiracy further spread by Chinese diplomats—many of whom created Twitter accounts just to spread the theory. American origins of COVID-19 has been a regular refrain among Chinese allies and Chinese aligned actors such as Iran and Venezuela. While Chinese media is generally staid, this campaign has seen exceptional vitriol, reflecting China's besieged position on the international stage and increasing tensions with the US.

## PORTRAYAL OF RIVALS

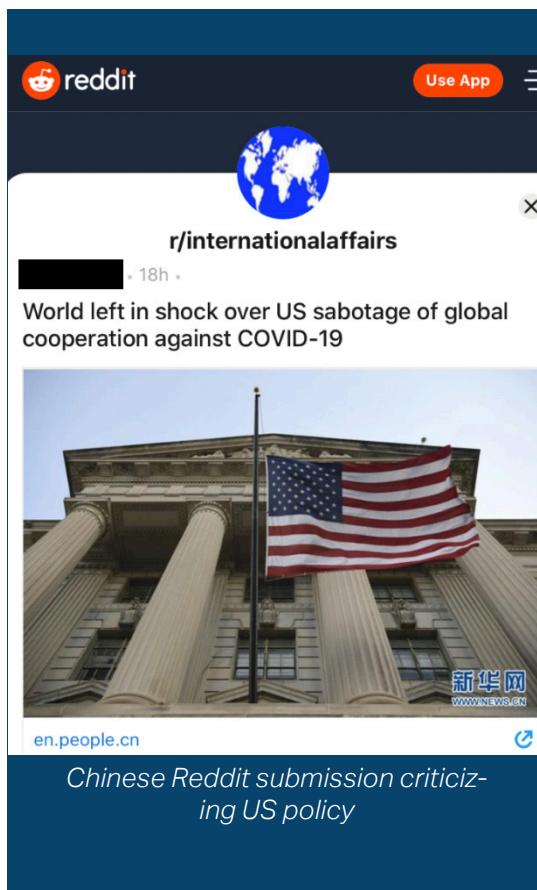
The disorganized and isolationist American response has afforded China an opportunity to denounce Washington. China has published over 6,000 pieces in the previous two months on American handling of COVID-19, focusing on the failures of the federal response. State media and officials took a significant interest in the dismissal of Captain Brett Crozier, the commanding officer of the USS Roosevelt, with 42 posts in 10 languages in the first twenty-four hours after news broke. The firing played into a larger narrative of COVID-19 diminish the American military, highlighted by several op-eds positing the pandemic represented the end of American military supremacy. China has reported extensively on how the American government is failing the American people, for instance reposting several times an article in *The Atlantic* calling the United States a failed state, followed two days later by an op-ed in *Global Times* and a piece from *Chinese Radio International Turkish* saying the same. China contrasts Washington's failures with its own support for the American people, for instance posting a story on a thank you note the governor of Pennsylvania sent to his coun-

# CHINA



terpart in Fujian for a donation of masks. The post was attached to the hashtag #FightTogether which Chinese media deploys to highlight Beijing's cooperative approach to battling the pandemic. In Beijing's narrative, this stands in stark contrast to the American response, summarized by a piece from the People's Daily titled "World left in shock over US sabotage of global cooperation against COVID-19". Excluding pieces on Weibo, 69% of Chinese official and media posts regarding COVID-19 were in English.

While China's global rival the United States has become the leading epicenter of the pandemic, China's regional rival Taiwan has been among the most effective in containing COVID-19. Chinese officials and media have had little to say about the Taiwanese response, though since Beijing considers Taiwan a province the island's totals are included in regular updates on infection counts by province. Beijing's narrative on Taiwan has been far more defensive instead, rebutting Taiwanese claims of a poor Mainland response and slamming Taiwan's ruling party for "attempting to use COVID-19 to agitate for independence". Despite most actors portraying Taiwan in a positive light, Chinese pieces on Taiwan expressed an exceptionally negative sentiment of -0.27.



## GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Through the end of 2019, China's rapidly growing economy, increasing influence in international bodies, and expanding diplomatic corps supported an image of China as a rising superpower, buttressed by tens of thousands of pieces from Chinese media to that end. When COVID-19 began to spread



# CHINA

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throughout Hubei province, Chinese officials and media focused on a local message of the strength of and order brought by the state. As the virus grew into a pandemic and dozens of smaller nations passed China's infection count, China deployed its media to portray Beijing's response as prescient and to amplify the impact of global humanitarian aid. China has missed no opportunity to contrast its response—unified, collaborative, effective—to the scattershot, isolationist, and ineffective response by the United States. While the pandemic has proven a major boon for China's global prestige, closer to home Beijing's response has fallen short of Taiwan and South Korea's with little explanation coming from state media and officials.



ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF

# IRAN



## SUMMARY

Iran was an early epicenter of COVID-19 and struggled to mount an effective response. Likewise Iranian information operations around COVID-19 have been scattershot, alternating from denying the problem's existence to viewing the disease's virulence as a tool with which to humiliate the United States. Iranian media

and leadership have wholeheartedly embraced conspiracies around COVID-19's origins, while even domestic focused media has offered little in the way of information or support for Iranians.

## QUICK FACTS

106,498  
CASES

6,340  
DEATHS

20,284  
COVID-RELATED  
POSTS

27%

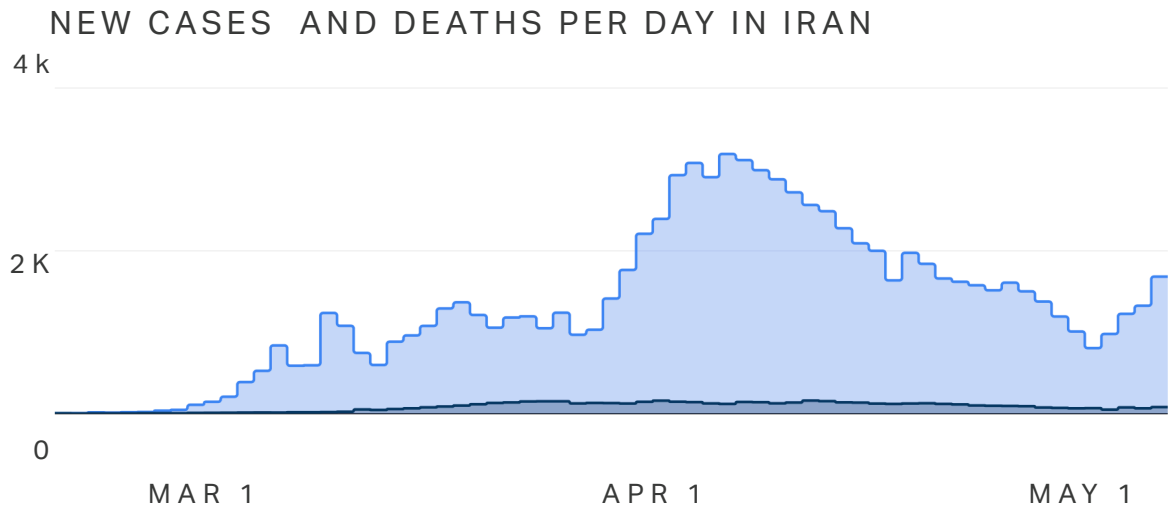
SHARE OF ALL  
POSTS

11%

SHARE IN  
ENGLISH



## TIMELINE



While the Ministry of Health confirmed the first cases of SARS-CoV-19 on February 19, the infected succumbed to the disease a few days later, suggesting the first infection had originated days or weeks earlier. The official count surpassed 100 within a week, with the epicenter at the holy city of Qom. The same week, the custodian of the city's main shrine encouraged pilgrims to visit "to get cured from mental and physical diseases." The government in Tehran claimed that the United States had exaggerated the dangers of COVID-19 to suppress turnout in an upcoming election and threatened to "punish anyone spreading rumors about a serious epidemic."

But later the same week, the government deployed 300,000 troops to fight the virus and began to cancel events. As Iranian New Year, the most important national holiday approached, the official count surpassed 15,000 and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei canceled his annual address, normally held before a massive crowd. The government began to ban large gatherings over the following week but showed little ability or will to enforce the order, epitomized by a mass funeral procession for an IRGC leader who had died of COVID-19.

The WHO in mid-March estimated the true infection count in

Iran to be five times the official number, while *The Economist* quoted anonymous government sources as estimating the true number at the same time to be closer to 200,000. Iranian MPs have claimed that the first cases occurred as early as late January.

## SELF- PORTRAYAL

Iran's portrayal of its response as militant, aggressive, but hampered by American malfeasance falls in line with longstanding goals of the regime. Messaging has especially highlighted the importance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and especially its paramilitary wing, the Basij, to civic wellbeing. This narrative has been tempered by attempts to minimize the extent and scope of the virus.

About 5% of all posts relating to COVID-19 detail the Herculean efforts of the IRGC who "did not have an inherent duty in the face of this disease, but felt responsible for protecting people's lives" according to the speaker of Iran's upper legislative body. "The IRGC's brilliant strategies have given hope to the people," claimed another post. In all, Iran has referenced IRGC activity with a positive sentiment



of +0.18, inducing an identically positive response in audiences.

But those efforts, according to the Iranian narrative, have been undermined by American duplicity, with the top story from the previous two months decrying American sanctions. The sentiment towards the United States in all Iranian COVID-19 related posts was an extreme -0.34 compared to -0.16 and -0.12 in Chinese and Venezuelan media, respectively. Part of this messaging is the accusation that COVID-19 is an American biological weapon. General Salami, commander of the IRGC, first floated the suggestion on March 1, and in the following weeks state press published claims that an unnamed former CIA agent had confirmed the vi-



# IRAN



rus's American provenance and that unnamed Russian scientists had confirmed its artificial origins. On March 12, Khamenei joined in, suggesting the virus could be a biological weapon.

In his annual Iranian New Years address, delivered remotely, Khamenei amplified the message floated by his state's media services for the past several weeks. Rather than focus on the damage the virus has wrought, Khamenei berated American "liars, charlatans, and terrorists" for the country's woes. Audiences responded enthusiastically, with comments on posts about the address expressing a positive sentiment of +0.18. Even when targeting a domestic audience, on Iranian social media services Aparat and Soroush, the message focused squarely on the United States, with as many posts discussing coronavirus as a biological weapon as telling the audience to stay at home.

## PORTRAYAL OF RIVALS

The United States' troubled response to its own COVID-19 outbreak and refusal to participate in global efforts to curb the pandemic have helped support longstanding objectives of

Iranian information operations. Saudi Arabia has responded to the pandemic more successfully and collaboratively, leading Iran to resort to conspiracies to discredit their regional rival.

A full tenth of all COVID-19 related posts from Iran have referenced the United States, relishing in America's spot as "leader in Coronavirus deaths", which several articles claim is a result of "structural defects of the US health system". Iranian media has amplified messaging from military leadership claiming that COVID-19 has critically wounded the American security services, and that China will replace the United States as the global superpower in the post-pandemic world. Six different Iranian new outlets have reported on mass graves in New York, floating a conspiracy that the graves were dug with forced prison labor. HispanTV, Iran's Spanish-language news site, accused the US of acting as a "fifth column" for SARS-CoV-2 while president Rouhani and Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro issued a statement calling "American imperialism more dangerous than the virus". This all supports Iran's geopolitical goal of weakening American influence, on behalf of which they launched the campaign "The US Is An Untrustworthy and Shameful Actor" in January of this year,



garnering over 100,000 engagements in six weeks.

Within the Middle East, Iran’s criticism of the handling of COVID-19 has focused on Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia had relatively few cases for its population, 6,700 as of 2020-04-15, Iran has focused on the damage to the global community of the kingdom’s actions. Iran has amplified concerns from the UN that “Saudi deportation of Ethiopian migrants [will] fuel #coronavirus spread” as well as claims from Houthi leadership that “Saudi Arabia sends people with corona to Yemen” and that “Saudi coalition fighters have targeted quarantine centers

around Yemen”. The Houthis, for their part, have published 42 pieces claiming the Saudis aim to spread COVID-19 in Yemen.

## GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Iran has subsumed its COVID-19 narratives into a grander narrative about the nobility of the IRGC and perfidy of the Americans. In the Iranian telling, the United States began 2020 with the murder of General Solemeini in revenge for his destruction of ISIS, an American creation. When America saw that Solemeini’s death had only stiffened the resolve of the Iranian people, the Americans released COVID-19 in revenge. That explains America’s interference in the rest of the world’s attempts to mount an effective response. But the brilliance of the IRGC and the devotion of the Iranian people overcame the biological attack, and now America’s plan is backfiring. As US troops evacuate the Middle East out of COVID concerns, the steadfastness and courage of the Iranian people and the IRGC realized the Ayatollah’s guarantees that Iran would respond to Soleimeini’s martyrdom by ejecting America from the region.



# NORTH ATLANTIC

TREATY ORGANIZATION



## SUMMARY

Prior to March 8th, NATO averaged less than 1 post per day on COVID-19, despite member nations reporting exponential growth in confirmed cases and staff at NATO HQ in Brussels testing positive. Efforts at coordination began in full on March 22nd, and NATO posted about its response strategy and its efforts to aid

member nations. NATO still publishes little on COVID, averaging 13 pieces per day, compared to around 2,000 per day from Russia.

## QUICK FACTS

2,220

COVID-RELATED  
PIECES

22%

SHARE OF ALL  
POSTS

94%

SHARE IN  
ENGLISH



## TIMELINE

On March 9th, 2020, NATO HQ in Brussels announced that one of its staff had tested positive for COVID-19. Since then, five additional staff members and three contractors have tested positive, while a member of the NATO-led Kosovo Force also tested positive. Internally, task forces have started to monitor the pandemic with daily briefings to determine standard operational procedures within the NATO apparatus.

In response to the pandemic, NATO activated the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre. Ukraine was the first country to request international assistance from NATO on March 23rd, followed swiftly by ten other countries. NATO, which does not have its own stockpiles of ventilators or protective gear, has become the coordinator among its member and partner nations to help those hardest hit, starting with Italy and Spain:

- March 29th: Czech aid to Spain
- March 30th: Czech aid to Italy
- April 1st: Turkish aid to Spain and Italy
- April 10th: Czech aid to North Macedonia
- April 10th: US aid to Albania

On April 2nd, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg discussed the implications and NATO's response to COVID-19 for the first time publicly during the Foreign Defence Ministerial. Subsequent taskforces and coordination efforts among all the nation states have been set up to address the medium- and long-term implications of COVID-19 on the resilience and readiness of NATO troops.





## PORTRAYAL

NATO has traditionally been sparse with public communications, both in volume and in active engagement rates. COVID-19 has not changed communications strategies. From the first mention on January 30th until March 8, NATO only mentioned the virus 18 times. Since then, NATO has only averaged 8 COVID-19 posts per day. Out of the top 10 narratives detected, 6 were not COVID-19 related. The top narrative about COVID-19 is Czech medical aid arriving in Italy, followed by Allied airlifts into Czechia, and a broad narrative on NATO's response to COVID-19. The narratives are all short, with blunt facts and little context.

Although NATO members and partners speak over two dozen languages, with English and French as co-official, 94% of NATO posts on COVID-19 are in English. Most of the nations that have requested aid are from the former Soviet Union, and yet besides Latvian, there were only 7 posts in native languages of the region. In an attempt to dispel Russian disinformation that NATO is behind the virus's origins and spread, NATO pub-



lished a piece and accompanying blog post, titled "Responding to Russia's Top Myths about NATO and COVID-19". The post is only available in English and French, precluding the content from reaching speakers of Russian or the languages of other member states. Reflecting the focus on humanitarian efforts, NATO's pieces on the pandemic express a +0.11 sentiment compared to an average by all actors of -0.02.

NATO has published few pieces on its adversaries' handling of the pandemic, coming closest when attempting to dispel myths spread by adversary



media. NATO has published 74 pieces on Russia and COVID-19, but the wide majority of these are reposts of Western newspapers or think tanks discussing Russian media's broadcast of COVID-19 conspiracies. Likewise NATO has published only 24 posts regarding China's containment of the pandemic with a focus almost entirely on Chinese disinformation and censorship efforts.

## GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

NATO has deployed few resources to affect narratives concerning the pandemic. Despite real world success in coordinating relief campaigns among member states, NATO has done little to generate publicity around or celebrate its efforts. As Russia especially aims to sow distrust among NATO members, NATO has offered little response in the online information environment by volume, linguistic diversity, or engaging content.

# RUSSIAN

FEDERATION



## SUMMARY

The full extent of COVID-19 hit Russia far later than other major countries, with a two month lag between the first case and the first 1,000 cases on March 27th. Infections rose from 1,000 to 10,000 in under two weeks, then from 10,000 to 100,000 in just three weeks. As other nations grappled with the disease and Russia seemed

unaffected, state media boasted of Russia's position as a global leader while blasting American interference with the global response and dabbling in conspiracy. In the previous three weeks, state media has grown more staid and struggled to coalesce around a unified message.

## QUICK FACTS

252,245  
CASES

2,305  
DEATHS

317,931  
COVID-RELATED  
PIECES

22%

SHARE OF ALL  
POSTS

10%

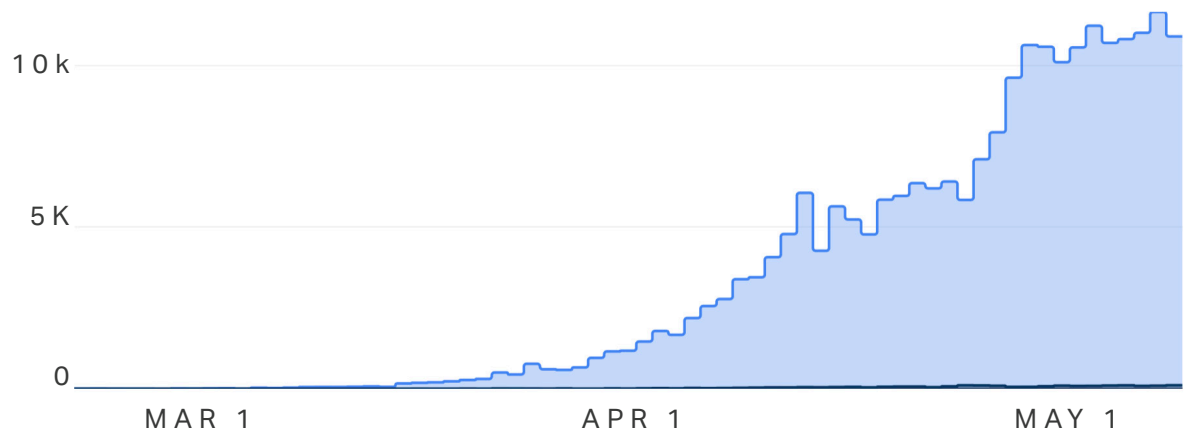
SHARE IN  
ENGLISH

# RUSSIA



## TIMELINE

NEW CASES AND DEATHS PER DAY IN RUSSIA



The earliest infections in Russia were both confirmed on January 31, both infecting Chinese nationals, one in Chita near the Chinese border and one in Tyumen near the Kazakh border. On February 5, Russia evacuated 144 nationals from Wuhan, quarantining them outside Tyumen. The first case infecting a Russian national was not confirmed until February 23. On March 1, a Russian infected with Coronavirus escaped a hospital in occupied Crimea and fled to Rostov-on-Don, a major city in Southern Russia. The next day, the first case was confirmed in Moscow, on March 5 the first case was confirmed in St. Petersburg, and by March 16, over 100 cases had been confirmed. Russia passed the 1,000 case mark on March 27

and 10,000 case mark on April 9.

The Russian government began limiting crossborder travel with China on January 23 and on January 31 restricted entry by Chinese nationals to a single airport. The Russian government adopted extensive testing measures at the end of January, reaching 165,000 tests by March 23, when infections had yet to top 500, and reaching 1,000,000 tests by April 9. Social distancing measures began in mid-March.

The WHO representative in Russia has lauded the Kremlin's early adoption of travel restrictions, social distancing, and mass testing. The Doctors' Alliance, a medical nonprofit, however,

# RUSSIA



contends that the low numbers are in part due to willfully classifying cases of COVID-19 as pneumonia and unreliability of testing.

By late April, the Alliance's concerns seemed prescient. On April 9, Russia passed the 10,000 mark. By April 21, Russia confirmed 50,000 cases. By April 30, 100,000. That same day, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin confirmed he had contracted COVID-19. Russia crossed 200,000 cases on May 9.

## SELF- PORTRAYAL

Russia's initial portrayal of its response as capable, collaborative, and comprehensive has supported the state's primary constructive geopolitical goals. Internationally, Russia's messaging has supported an image of Russia as a global leader and, domestically, reinforced the image of the state as a bulwark of strength and order.

In the three months leading up to the outbreak, Russian digital state media had published 25,000 pieces as part of our AI-identified campaign "Russia Is The Ideal Diplomatic Leader In A World Dominated By A Tactless West". To emphasize Russia's capacity to rise to global

challenges, the Kremlin has published nearly 5,000 pieces about the deployment of Russian doctors to Italy to combat the virus in the hardest hit regions. Audiences have responded positively to the stories, with an average sentiment of +0.10. An additional 477 posts describe the million dollar aid package Russia delivered to the WHO to fight the Coronavirus and the state's shipment of 100,000 testing kits to allies globally.

Domestically, Kremlin-controlled media has focused on the strength of the state in maintaining order and effecting a strong response. Over 10,000 Russian-language posts have referenced the Ministries of Health, of Internal Affairs, and of Consumer Protection—the three agencies charged with containing the virus—with an average sentiment of +0.19, compared to 2,513 the 30 days before and an average sentiment of +0.02. Vladimir Putin has played a central role in early narratives around the Russian response, appearing in 4,789 Russian-language posts with an audience sentiment of +0.18. Putin has promised to use all the resources of the state, including the military to aid in combating the virus's spread. "The State Brings Order And Prosperity To Ordinary Russians" is one of Russia's longest lasting cam-

# RUSSIA



paigns, beginning in November and ongoing with 4,053 pieces published to date.

As early efforts proved ineffective and Russia saw exponential growth in infections, the Kremlin struggled to coalesce around a single message. In the week of May 2 - 9, total cases rose from 124,000 to 200,000 but pieces about the upcoming Victory Day (7,212 in total) outpaced pieces about COVID domestically (6,989). After flirting with conspiracies itself, publishing 50 pieces suggesting the U.S. may be behind the virus in March and April, the Russian prosecutor general instructed YouTube to remove videos espousing artificial origins for the virus. Several pieces have called to rally around Putin and to reestablish trust in the state, but a coherent narrative of the Kremlin's response to the recent surge has yet to emerge.

## PORTRAYAL OF RIVALS

Russian rivals, both regionally and globally, have been among the hardest hit by COVID-19, offering fertile ground for the Kremlin to highlight failings and tie those failings to larger institutional or structural problems. Russia has been the most or second-most prolific voice in the

conversation around COVID-19 in the United States, Ukraine, and Georgia.

The United States' flatfooted response to COVID, and that the nation is now the global epicenter of the disease, has offered Russian media an opportunity to sow distrust in American institutions. Russia published 11,067 posts on the American response to COVID-19, almost a third of all posts in English on the subject, with a sentiment score of -0.18. Of particular interest was the firing of Captain Crozier of the USS Theodore Roosevelt over COVID-19 concerns, with 291 posts in six days. The posts came on the heels of early reporting claiming that "COVID-19 destroys US military power". Russia denounced "high-profile accusations by the American leadership against WHO", which in turn supports Russia's longstanding campaign "Russia Brings Order Where The US Sows Chaos." In the 24 hours following the US decision to withdraw funding from the WHO, Russian state accounts published over 100 pieces on the subject, compared to 60 for American equivalents.

In addition to highlighting the very real American struggles with COVID-19, Russia has flirted with the conspiracy theory that CoV-SARS-2 is an American





bioweapon. An ultranationalist MP made the accusation on a popular late night talk show on January 27, garnering over 750,000 views on YouTube. While no members of the administration have made the same claim, 14 different state-owned media outlets have. For instance, Pravda.ru (unrelated to the Pravda of the Soviet era) has claimed that CoV-SARS-2 is “the first use of biological weapons of mass destruction in the history of mankind.”

The pandemic has also provided an opportunity to criticize rivals in Russia’s “near abroad”. Russia has claimed mortality rates in Ukraine are “on par with Congo”. A short documentary on state broadcaster NTV portrayed Ukraine on the brink of collapse with few medical supplies, residents unable to heat their homes, and police brutally enforcing quarantine orders. “If you get sick, it’s over,” according to the program. Russia has published 1,838 posts on Ukraine’s handling of COVID-19, excluding 233 by Russian-backed separatists in Donbass, compared to 2,032 from Ukraine.

Russia has also outpaced the Georgian state in the conversation around the virus in Georgia, with 454 posts in the past month compared to 411 from Tbilisi. Russian client South Os-

setia posted an additional 19 times. Russia has blasted NATO for continuing military exercises with Georgia and amplified South Ossetia’s claim that Georgia will use coronavirus to violate the breakaway republic’s sovereignty.

## GEOPOLITICAL

# CONTEXT

Russia’s initial response to the pandemic supported the nation’s long held goal of establishing itself as a superpower and counterbalance to the self-serving West. With humanitarian relief missions, extensive testing, and few cases, Russia seemed at the forefront of the global response. As infections have skyrocketed, Russia has struggled in unusual fashion to mount a meaningful messaging response. Putin is largely out of sight while Press Minister Dmitry Peskov, an architect of the current digital propaganda machine, has contracted COVID-19 himself. According to the Levada Center, Putin’s approval hit a record low on 2020-05-06 while Victory Day, a chance to rally the nation on 2020-05-09 was canceled. The flatfooted response places the Putin administration on its most perilous ground since its earliest days.

KINGDOM OF

# SAUDI ARABIA



## SUMMARY

Saudi Arabia has experienced relatively few cases of COVID-19, and an equally low number of associated deaths. State media organizations have focused on touting the government's response to the pandemic both domestically and abroad, while simultaneously criticizing Iran's response and

casting blame on Iran for the spread of the COVID-19 in Saudi Arabia.

## QUICK FACTS

41,014  
CASES

255  
DEATHS

20,299  
COVID-RELATED  
PIECES

22%

SHARE OF ALL  
POSTS

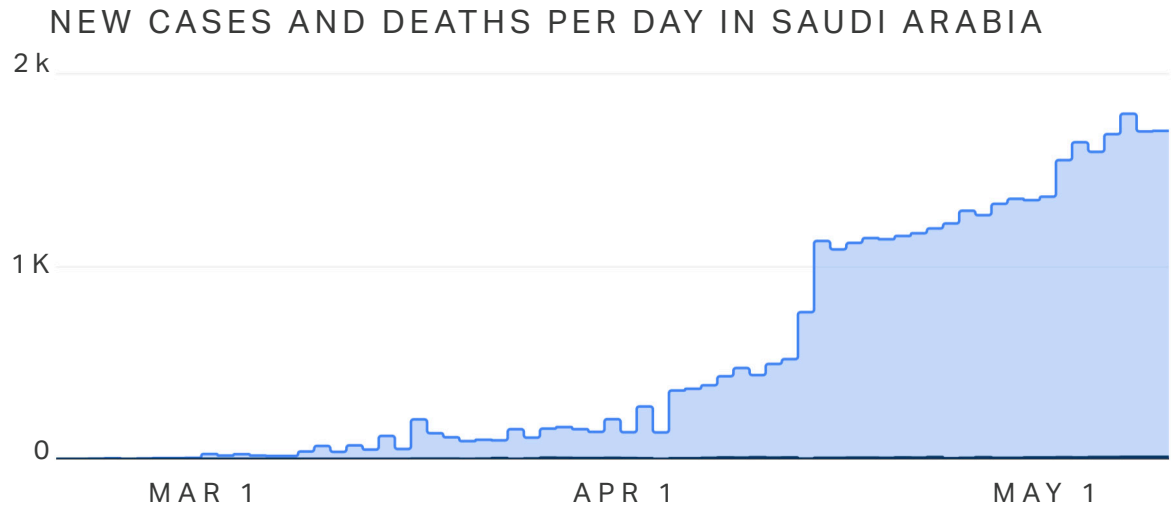
41%

SHARE IN  
ENGLISH

# SAUDI ARABIA



## TIMELINE



Saudi Arabia recorded its first COVID-19 infection on March 2, a Saudi national returning from Iran via Bahrain. By March 8, Saudi Arabia had 11 cases of COVID-19, all from individuals who had recently traveled to Iran. Throughout March, cases increased until passing 1,500 on March 30, and recently passed 44,000 with infections concentrated in Riyadh, Qatif, and Mecca.

The government began their response to the pandemic in late February by suspending the entry of foreign pilgrims. These restrictions were increased and broadened by March 19 to include closures of holy sites and mosques around the country. As Qatif emerged as the epi-

center, Saudi officials limited transport in and out of the city to prevent the spread to adjacent governorates. The Ministry of Education announced a closure of schools and universities nationwide on March 8, with restaurants and high foot-traffic districts following suit on March 15. On March 24, a nationwide curfew was implemented, and a more stringent curfew on specific cities followed on April 6.

Media outlets reported on April 8 that up to 150 members of the royal family had been diagnosed with COVID-19 and one had experienced significant complications.

# SAUDI ARABIA



## SELF- PORTRAYAL

Our AI identified the dual campaigns “Saudi Arabia Develops Robust Economic and Cultural Development Domestically and Abroad” and “Saudi Arabia is the Ideal International Partner for Economic and Diplomatic Engagement”. Together, these campaigns comprised 1,100 posts emphasizing the Kingdom’s international relations and highly-regarded position. Similar to Russia, the two campaigns have expanded to encompass COVID-19 relief efforts which reinforce Saudi Arabia’s geopo-

litical interests. As the pandemic’s effect on the global economy worsened, content emerged praising Saudi leadership’s decisive action at the G20 summit. Audiences responded favorably to these stories with an average sentiment of +0.10.

Domestically, state media has focused on touting the government’s handling of the crisis and highlighted key figures in leading the response. King Salman, the oft-peripheral leader of the country, announced on March 29 free medical care for COVID-19 treatment to permanent and temporary residents. These stories were received positively by audiences with a sentiment score of +0.06.



## PORTRAYAL OF RIVALS

State media has been outspoken in portraying its chief rival Iran as incompetent and wholly unsuited to handle the health crisis. Prior to the first 100 cases, content criticized Iran for ignoring customary travel protocol for Saudi citizens who entered Iran and returned home. These posts served to shift blame to Iran for COVID-19 cases in Saudi Arabia and contributed to further vilification of the

# SAUDI ARABIA



Islamic Republic. The majority of content concerning Iran is focused on the surge of infections and deaths in the country. Audiences have responded with the same negative sentiment as the articles themselves, with an average score of -0.44. Importantly, the lack of content posted in Farsi suggests the intended audience is almost exclusively in Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries speaking Arabic and English.

While Saudi Arabia's immediate neighbors are not explicit rivals, multiple stories have called attention to the dramatic increase of cases on its borders. With intensely negative sentiment scores of -0.23 on average, the assumed purpose of this content is to demonstrate Saudi Arabia's competency. There were 173 posts describing the increase of cases and deaths in nearby countries such as Lebanon, UAE, Jordan, Kuwait, and Qatar. Singling out these countries facilitates a juxtaposition between Saudi Arabia and its neighbors, reflecting the Kingdom as particularly capable and successful in mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. Saudi media posts outpace all of its neighbors by tens of thousands with the exception of Qatar which closes the relative gap with a total of 21,000 posts referencing COVID-19.

## GEOPOLITICAL

## CONTEXT

Saudi Arabia's content on COVID-19 has served to juxtapose its model of success and international generosity against its chief regional rival Iran. For Saudi Arabia, it was hit with the same crisis as many other countries, and as a result of strong leadership, the Kingdom has blunted the social and economic damage. Saudi Arabia prevented thousands of additional infections unlike Iran which has nearly three times as many, and was responsible for spreading the coronavirus to the Kingdom.

Saudi Arabia has not only saved and supported its domestic population, but taken a leading role by sending humanitarian aid to international organizations and countries struggling to respond adequately. The Kingdom made generous donations to the World Health Organization, and through the G20 sent millions of dollars toward relief efforts. Saudi leadership and magnanimity demonstrates its vast resources and unparalleled resolve to address issues in the Middle East and beyond.

# UNITED STATES

OF AMERICA



## SUMMARY

Outlets of the US government, dominated by editorially independent publishers like Voice of America and Radio Liberty, have continued to distribute pieces touting democratic principles, humanitarian partnerships, and protector status of global security and stability. This has not changed for

COVID-19, despite the more aggressive campaigns coming from adversaries. Some official accounts, such as those belonging to the Secretary of State and a few ambassadors, have directly attacked China, but have had minimal reach and impact.

## QUICK FACTS

1,338,717  
CASES

83,170  
DEATHS

103,912  
COVID-RELATED  
PIECES

30%

SHARE OF ALL  
POSTS

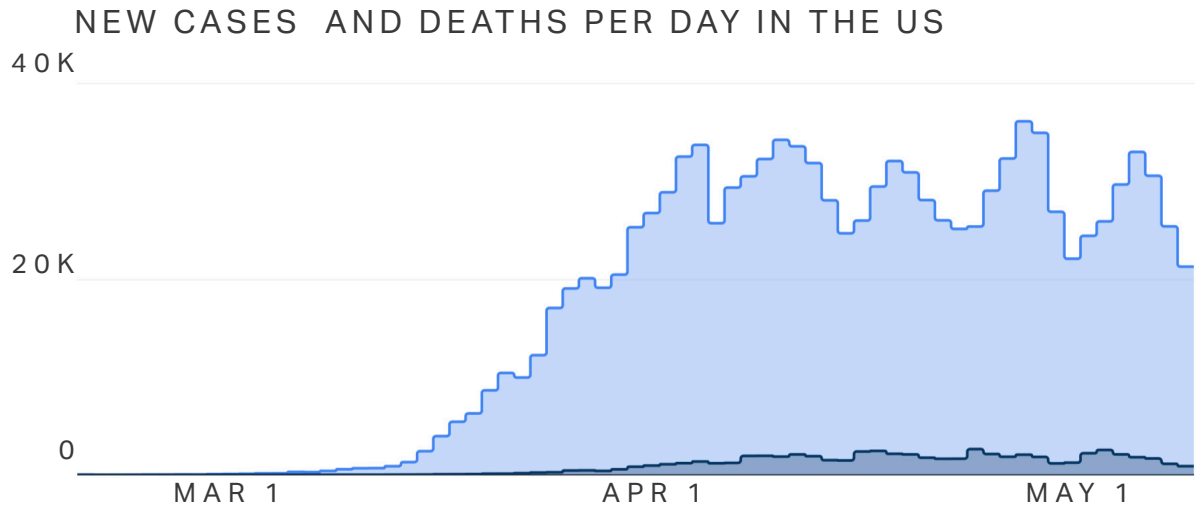
33%

SHARE IN  
ENGLISH

# UNITED STATES



## TIMELINE



The first case of COVID-19 was detected in the US in Washington state on January 24. The virus spread slowly at first to other states, reaching 100 positive cases by March 4. The number of cases from there grew exponentially: over 1,000 by the 11th, 10,000 on the 19th, 100,000 a week later, and the 1,000,000 mark on April 8th. Governor Jay Inslee of Washington responded by prohibiting gatherings of more than 250 people on March 11. The state of California followed suit with a legally binding lockdown a week later. By the end of the month, more than half of US states had stay-at-home orders. Non-essential businesses, including restaurants, bars, and gyms, were closed. All the lockdowns and other regula-

tions, such as mandatory wearing of masks and no more than 6 people gathering at a time, are state and/or local orders. While the White House has published guidelines to stay at home except for essential purposes, it has not declared a national lockdown.

When the pandemic broke out in the US, the federal government stockpile did not have sufficient necessary medical equipment and testing kits in its strategic stockpile. Neither was it effective in coordinating a response among all the states, District of Columbia, and its territories. Despite the enactment of the Defense Production Act, the supply chain is still lacking and states have been largely left to



fend for themselves. All these factors have contributed to an exponential rise in COVID-19 cases across the nation.

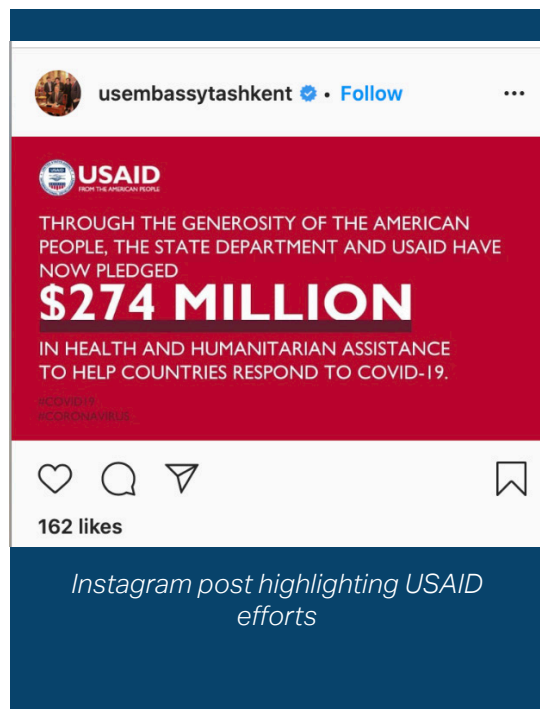
## SELF- PORTRAYAL

The United States owns more than 764 brands, ranging from US Navy accounts to Voice of America pages in multiple languages, that have published pieces about COVID-19. The earliest content appeared on January 2, more than three weeks before the first case in the US was confirmed. Since Voice of America and Radio Free Europe,

responsible for the lion's share of posts, are forbidden by Congress was targeting an American audience, most posts reference American efforts to fight COVID-19 abroad.

Posts related to COVID-19 have furthered America's three most prolific IO campaigns. The top by post count centered on the US maintaining mutually beneficial partnerships to support resilient democratic societies, with 5,753 posts since January 2, 2020. Starting March 20, the campaign began to include narrative threads on the difference in COVID-19 response between democratic and autocratic societies, singling out Chinese and Iranian steel-fisted approaches to the pandemic, such as the silencing of dissenters and doctors who had initially raised the alarm about a potential virus. The largest content provider was the US Asia Pacific Media Hub.

The second most prolific campaign is centered on the international partnerships the US builds to promote humanitarian principles. The campaign kicked off before the COVID-19 pandemic and spiked for a week in mid-February before another small bump at the end of March. China's campaign portraying the CCP as the foremost promoter of humanitarian principles has surpassed the American equiv-







alent in post count every day for nearly two months. The lack of content from USAID, the US government agency charged with distributing humanitarian aid, and the US Government in general reflects the gap between provision of medical aid by China and the same by the US.

The third most prolific American campaign concerns the extent of US efforts to halt the spread of COVID-19. Debuted on March 19, the campaign is primarily pushed by US embassy and State Department accounts rather than editorially-independent news outlets run by the US Agency for Global Media (US-AGM).

Though America's top campaign has almost twice the post count as China's top campaign, American campaigns have attracted few engagements, a standard measure of social media success. Adversarial campaigns run by Russia and Iran with 1/6 of the post count have more than twice the engagements count of the top American campaign. Out of the 20 campaigns the US has run in 2020, only one campaign, "the oppressive Iranian regime threatens world peace and stability", has won as many engagements per post as the top campaigns from adversaries.

## PORTRAYAL OF RIVALS

American state media and official accounts have varied widely in their portrayal of adversaries' handling of the pandemic. US-AGM outlets as well as the majority of official accounts have taken a staid and journalistic approach, occasionally highlighting reports from others about adversaries' failings. Accounts associated with the Secretary of State, as well as a number of accounts of embassies led by political appointees, have adopted a combative approach, especially towards China and Iran.

American accounts have published over 6,800 posts regarding China's COVID-19 response, 80% of which have come from state media outlets. Coverage from these outlets has been mixed, expressing an average sentiment of -0.05, balancing criticism of China's slow initial reaction with praise of its quick containment. Posts from the Secretary of State and a few allied diplomats at first praised China's cooperation with the United States in February, expression an average sentiment of +0.14, before the United States became the global epicenter in late March. From that point onward, these accounts have blamed China for the virus and



portrayed the CCP's handling as deceitful and deadly. From April 1 onward, sentiment expressed dropped to -0.07 and these accounts blamed China wholly for the pandemic. Many accounts contrived to remind the audience of the virus's Chinese origins. While American accounts as a whole displayed a wide linguistic diversity in reporting on COVID-19 in China—English 15%, Russian 11%, Arabic 9%, Spanish 9%, Chinese 9%—posts from Secretary of State-aligned accounts were 70% in English. American pieces on Iran followed a similar, though overall more negative, pattern. State media accounts, led by Radio

Farda, among the most prolific Persian-language brands of any actor, reported negatively on Iran's handling of the virus, highlighting accusations from analysts, intergovernmental bodies, and anonymous Iranian officials that virus counts were artificially low and that government action was far too late. Of the over 4,500 pieces published by American state media, half were in Persian and another 15% in Arabic, Kurdish, and Azeri, each semi-official in parts of Iran. Secretary of State-aligned accounts published largely in English (68%) and accused the regime in Tehran of "lying, stealing", "fomenting terror", and not caring about its people. The average sentiment expressed by these accounts towards Iran's handling of COVID-19 was -0.24

The image shows a screenshot of a tweet from the US Embassy in Podgorica (@USEmbassyMNE). The tweet text reads: "Around the world people are concerned about the novel #coronavirus that started in Wuhan, China. Don't panic! Follow these tips from the U.S. CDC to help you stay healthy!". Below the text is an infographic titled "2019 NOVEL CORONAVIRUS: TIPS TO AVOID GETTING SICK". The infographic lists four tips: 1. Wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, or use a 60%-alcohol-based hand sanitizer. 2. Avoid close contact with sick people. 3. Do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands. 4. Clean and disinfect objects and surfaces you touch to kill germs that may linger. The infographic also includes a source: "Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention". Below the infographic, there is a caption: "Tips to avoid getting sick [infographic] | ShareAmerica. Around the world people are concerned about the new coronavirus that started in Wuhan, China. Here are some tips to help you stay healthy. @share.america.gov". At the bottom of the screenshot, there is a dark blue box with white text: "US Embassy in Montenegro with nonsequitur reference to COVID-19's origins".

## GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

America's role as the global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic presents multiple threats to its position of superpower and, as discussed throughout this document, has provided fertile ground for criticism from adversaries. America possesses a uniquely broad and deep roster of state media houses whose editorial independence ensures

# UNITED STATES

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impartial reporting in native languages of some of the world's most censored countries. Official accounts have failed to coalesce around a single message, with some taking a combative stance towards China, though only after initial praise, and Iran, while others report more impartially. Linguistic breakdown suggest that the more combative narratives are intended for a domestic audience, leaving non-English speakers with little information from the American government on efforts to lead a global response.

BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF

# VENEZUELA



## SUMMARY

Venezuela, like much of South America, has encountered relatively few cases of COVID-19 despite its increased vulnerability stemming from the ongoing socioeconomic and political crisis. State media organizations have focused information messaging on promoting the government's response, appealing to Chi-

nese humanitarian support, and criticizing US sanctions against the Maduro regime.

## QUICK FACTS

414  
CASES

10  
DEATHS

28,466  
COVID-RELATED  
PIECES

12%  
SHARE OF ALL  
POSTS

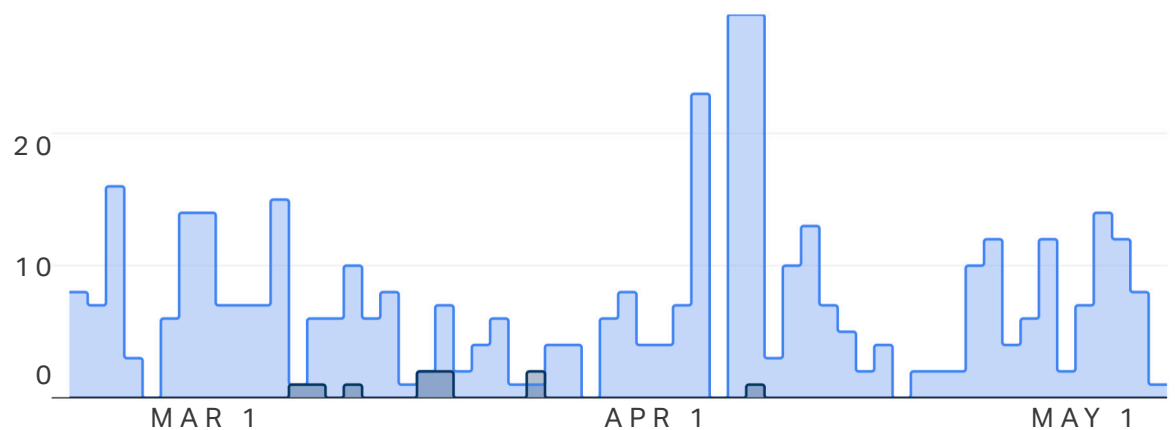
6.7%  
SHARE IN  
ENGLISH

# VENEZUELA



## TIMELINE

NEW CASES AND DEATHS PER DAY IN VENEZUELA



Venezuela recorded its first two cases of coronavirus on March 13 in the northern state of Miranda following public reports of a suspicious medical case days earlier. Over the next few days, more cases were identified in neighboring states, leading to a nationwide quarantine on March 15. While the majority of cases are isolated to the state of Miranda, all but three states of Venezuela's 23 have confirmed cases of COVID-19. Venezuela has experienced shortages of health professionals, food and basic necessities, and medical equipment. On March 16, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro requested \$5 billion from the IMF to fight the coronavirus, which was subsequently denied due to the disputed legitimacy

of his regime.

In the following days Maduro announced that China had provided 4,000 diagnosis kits and another 10,000 were delivered by Russia. The Russian ambassador to Venezuela also relayed that a larger and more comprehensive humanitarian aid package would be provided in the coming weeks. Venezuela has grown more reliant on these donations from China and Russia, a trend clearly demonstrated in its media coverage. Other sources of humanitarian aid include the Pan American Health Organization, the WHO, United Nations Development Programme, and neighboring countries including Colombia and Trinidad.



## SELF- PORTRAYAL

Venezuela has portrayed itself as assailed by two distinct threats: COVID-19 and US sanctions which hamper its ability to respond more effectively. The bulk of content provided by state media organizations list and describe the different patrons supporting Venezuela's pandemic response. Of these, China and Russia appear frequently, with secondary supporters such as the WHO and Colombia featured more sparingly. There have been 371 posts referring to Russia and China's aid donations since the first identified infections in Venezuela. While the average sentiment score of this content is negative, roughly -0.02, it is much higher than the sentiment of content regarding the United States at -0.14.

The US sanctions on Venezuela have taken their toll on the country and have been the primary vehicle of criticism against the U.S. The US sanctions on Venezuela are comprehensive but have key exemptions for food and medicine. Despite this, state media overwhelmingly demands an unconditional lifting of sanctions and cites them as the main obstacle in Venezuela's fight against COVID-19.



CancilleriaVE



Presidente Maduro: El coronavirus es una posible arma biológica contra China y los pueblos del mundo  
<http://mppre.gob.ve/2020/02/28/coronavirus-posible-arma-biologica-contra-china-pueblos-mundo/>

Ministerio del Poder Popular para Relaciones Exteriores



Presidente Maduro: El coronavirus es una posible arma biológica contra China y los pueblos del mundo • Ministerio del Poder Popular...

"Hay análisis en el mundo que demuestran que el coronavirus puede ser una cepa creada para la guerra biológica contra China, ya son muchos los elementos

[t.me/CancilleriaVE/12824](https://t.me/CancilleriaVE/12824)

82 Feb 28 at 17:07

*Venezuelan Telegram message on Maduro's claim that SARS-CoV-2 is a bioweapon*

Since identification of its first cases of coronavirus, there have been 2,268 posts referring to US sanctions, with an average sentiment score of -0.11. Media content has also adopted a common hashtag "#Sanction-skill" to accompany many posts referring to US sanctions.

## PORTRAYAL OF RIVALS

State media has also taken to criticizing the US pandemic response within the United States, and secondary policies related to it. In late March, multiple sto-

# VENEZUELA



ries emerged to denounce the US' implementation of a blockade against Cuba and Venezuela and included demands to end the embargo. Other stories referred to Venezuela's attempts to repatriate Venezuelan nationals in the U.S. to save them from worsening conditions in the latter country. The number of posts for these stories is below 50, but they coalesce to promote a linear message on the negative effects the U.S. has wrought on Venezuela.

## GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

Venezuela's approach to the COVID-19 narrative bears many of the same concepts as Iran, mainly the vilification of the U.S. From Venezuela's perspective, despite Western attempts to overthrow the government, Maduro's administration is keeping its people safe from the pandemic. With hardly more than a few hundred cases, the government has stymied the spread of the coronavirus and will emerge victorious.

This success was not accomplished alone and great thanks is given to the World Health Organization, Russia, and China all of which have donated large

amounts of foreign aid. While the U.S. imposes inhumane sanctions on Venezuela, the latter's true friends have helped keep the country safe. The global pandemic has demonstrated that the US lacks the willingness and capability to solve international issues, a role better suited to other countries.



# ABOUT OMELAS

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## OUR WORK

Omelas maps the online information environment. We provide precise data and unique analysis on how geopolitical actors manipulate the web to achieve their goals. The results of our research have been featured in over a dozen global publications while we've presented our findings before congressmen, cabinet-level officials, and C-suite executives at leading social media giants.

Omelas boasts integrations with a dozen social media and messaging apps from around the world, in addition to over 1,200 RSS feeds. We process over a 1.5 million pieces of propaganda each month in 104 languages and apply sentiment analysis, named entity recognition, story aggregation, and campaign detection on each.

For more information on our work, visit [omelas.io](https://omelas.io) or contact us at [pr@omelas.io](mailto:pr@omelas.io)

The Omelas Team