

Editors' Forum Covid-19

# They Sow the Wind and Reap the Whirlwind (Covid Doubt in St. Petersburg)

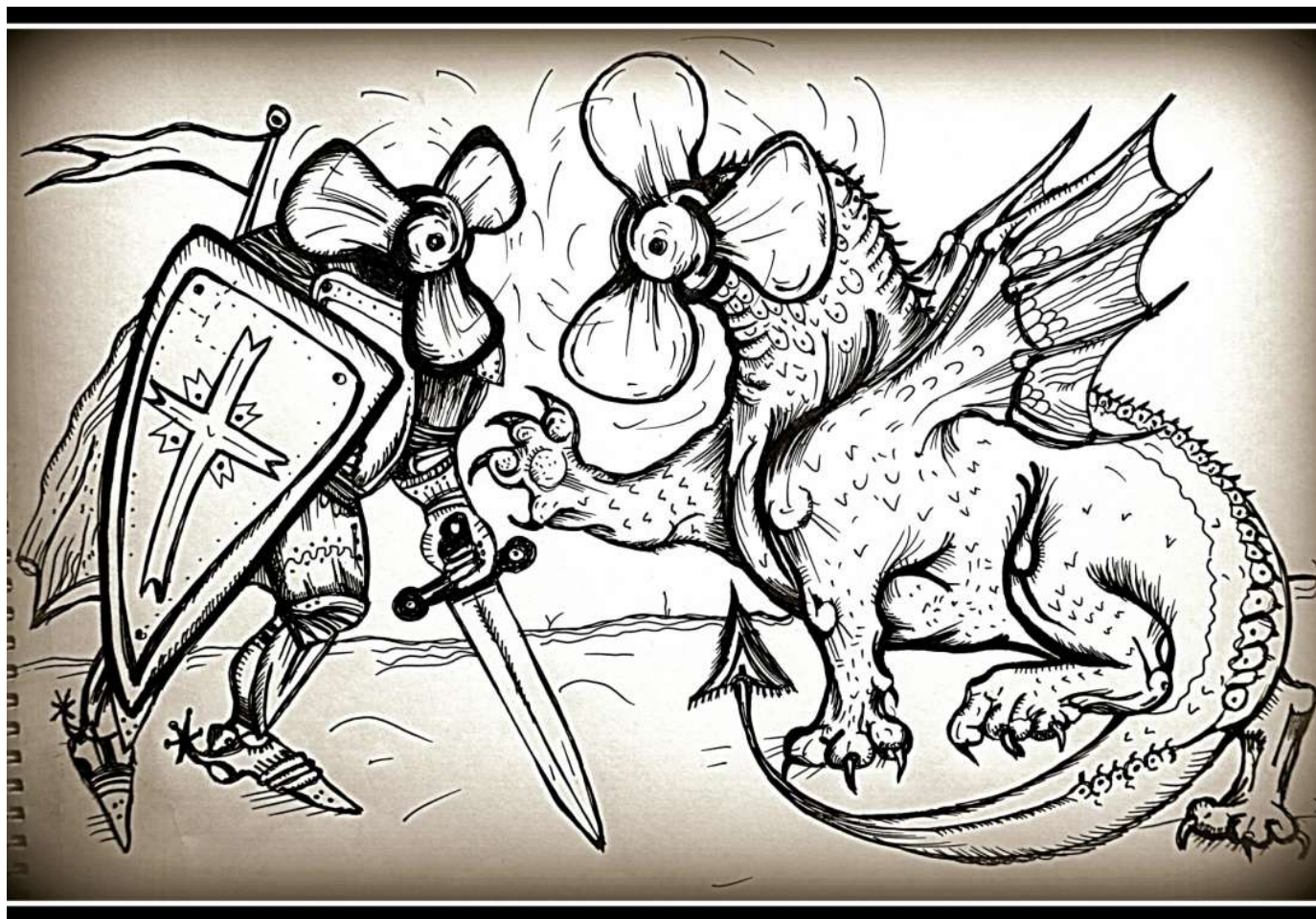


Photo by the artist, illustration by Elena Tipikina.

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I'm in Russia, vacationing like everyone else: on March 25, 2020, President Putin gave most people [a week off work, and then another three weeks](#). It's sort of like lock-down—citizens are encouraged to “self-isolate” at home; parks and nonessential businesses are closed—but it explicitly is not a quarantine. People speculate that it isn't a quarantine because, if it were, the state would be legally obligated to provide for its citizens' survival and welfare.

Speculating about compelled worklessness and voluntary isolation, some of my friends insist that this whole Covid thing is a load of baloney. Some are religious, and they're in good company: for the past several weeks, the rightwing but reputable spokesmen of the Russian Orthodox Church have argued that Covid-19 is not a pandemic but a test of faith. “My dear brothers and sisters, [do not fear any coronaviruses!](#)” urged Protodeacon Vladimir Vasilik, Professor of History at St. Petersburg State University. He added: “I am still not sure that this coronavirus even exists. It's quite likely an informational boogeyman, made to control the obedient masses. But even if it exists, do not hesitate to attend church and partake of the Holy Sacrament. Remember that in God's Church, next to Christ's Holy Chalice—which is rightfully called the ‘medicine of immortality’—you have nothing to fear from coronaviruses or any other disease.” In mid-March, the St. Petersburg Metropolitanate invited people to visit the city's Kazan Cathedral and [kiss the relics of St. John the Baptist](#). Two weeks later, it [refused to close church services](#) per city ordinance.

Other friends of mine doubt Covid-19 for wholly secular reasons. “Sure, it's an unpleasant infection,” a molecular chemist told me, “but it's not the plague, not cholera, not smallpox. Some people have died, but not a whole lot, and it's not even totally clear what killed them.” It's a bad flu. Some people will die. Is it worth crashing the world economy over? Isn't it an excuse to clamp down on personal freedom? Is it really that serious? “Look at the statistics!” a retired mycologist told me, “the death rate in Italy this month is the same as it was last April. It's fake, dear, it's fake news.”

I'm sure you've heard similar doubts. If you haven't yet heard them, a quick scroll through websites like "[STOP COVID-19 propaganda](#)" will bring you up to speed. The site is in Russian, but it has [English analogs](#), as do the doubts that it raises: some Americans have also claimed that SARS-CoV-2 is a "[virus that tried to kill the Constitution](#)." Among them is Ammon Bundy, famous for leading the 2016 armed standoff in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge over grazing rights. Bundy, like my friend the molecular chemist, doesn't doubt that the virus exists: he doubts that its existence justifies suspending citizens' right of assembly. The chemist and Bundy are surely in good company too. Giorgio Agamben has also suggested that the Covid-19 crisis has been fanned into a collective panic to suspend the rule of law, that "what is once again manifest here is the growing tendency to use the [state of exception as a normal governing paradigm](#)."

The Russian press calls those firm in their doubt "Covid-dissidents." The term alludes to Soviet dissidents, but it indexes another social structure of doubt. Soviet dissidents had one main source of information to turn away from: as in Anna Frants's 2018 installation (fig. 1), where a large desk fan turns many smaller fans with its airstream—except for one dissident fan, pointed away. But today's social media platforms spin powerful desk fans in all different directions. And doubt is contagious. I joined an academia.edu session called "What lies behind the coronavirus hoax and why is Russia participating in it?" and then I hesitated, wondering what consequences my joint attention would have. On this aggressive platform that tracks and publicizes its users' movements, where would the discussion spread through my joining? Whose certainty could it shake with its doubt? Would it change anything? Should I care?

Lacking state-imposed quarantines, we've been abandoned to personal choices. Advising us to save ourselves and our neighbors by staying home, our governments struggle to [keep the wrong doubts from going viral](#). The Russian state, in particular, has announced crackdowns on fake news: citing the danger of Covid-19, new laws harshly penalize the "[spread of false information](#)." But accusations of falsity are as bottomless as the hoaxes they try to contain. States accuse each other of spreading disinformation,

and scholars show that these accusations are themselves often false, that “[an EU-funded body set up to fight disinformation ends up producing it.](#)” The falsity of such accusations of falsity gives fodder for new accusations. And thus the battle against an infectious pandemic becomes overshadowed by the battle for faith, against doubt. In this “[infodemic](#),” America’s Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) urges citizens to do these “[three easy things](#): Don’t believe the rumors; Don’t pass them along; Go to trusted sources of information to get the facts about the federal (COVID-19) response.”

Can a state agency order citizens (not) to believe?

“This is informational dominance,” a newspaper quotes an [anonymous source in the Kremlin](#): “we need to push an agenda with positive tones, in counterweight to the real negatives and the fakes.” From where I stand, all such battling airflows seem much less important than the question of state distribution. Diligently isolated together in our apartment, my friend and I discuss facts and theories. We bought a knock-off 3M respirator from a shady online dealer, some masks from a pedicure salon the day before it closed. We’d like to know what’s going on with this pandemic and who should be blamed. But much more so, we’d like to know who has the keys to the factories that can make medical ventilators and the warehouses where protective gear has been stockpiled. We’d like to know whether the task of government will ever wake up from its slumber under the drone of the desk fans.

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