

# How the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine is influencing COVID-19 Misinformation in Ten Humanitarian Contexts

## Five Data Trends



# INTRODUCTION



Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a global pandemic information response program countering the unprecedented scale and speed of the spread of rumors and misinformation related to COVID-19 in Lebanon, Mali, Colombia, Sudan, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Zimbabwe (see the [website](#)). Within Internews we define rumors as an unverified qualitative piece of information documented from a first-hand source within the community. Our rumor tracking methodology allows us to analyze community feedback to understand and respond to the hopes, fears, questions and concerns that often propel the spread of misinformation.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, beginning on February 24th, received substantial media coverage which some could argue partly shifted global public attention away from the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the geographic distance between Ukraine and RiT's countries of focus, we have documented a noteworthy influence of the Ukrainian invasion on the COVID-19 rumor data that we are collecting. Between late February and late May 2022, we collected social media posts and comments consisting of COVID-19 related rumors with a direct mention of the Russian invasion in Ukraine throughout our countries of focus. In response to the collected data, some of our teams have identified and highlighted this new intersection of war and pandemic related rumors (See community bulletins from [Lebanon](#), [Iraq](#), and [Sudan](#)).

The purpose of this piece is to present an analysis of the ways in which the Russian invasion of Ukraine has influenced COVID-19 misinformation in several humanitarian contexts based on the data we collected. Though, the data is not meant to be representative of all online conversations or sentiments, rumors can tell us a lot about community concerns, questions, perceptions, and information voids. For this purpose, we analyzed the posts and identified five rumor trends about the intersection of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. The trends collected argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that:

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- 1 COVID-19 has disappeared or is no longer a priority
- 2 COVID-19 is, and always was a hoax
- 3 there is a strategy to divert attention involving COVID-19
- 4 there are US biological weapons labs in Ukraine
- 5 there are inconsistencies with the state of COVID-19 infections in Ukraine

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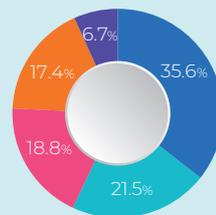
These findings are meant to be useful for organizations working on health-related topics with vulnerable communities in humanitarian contexts. The findings give light to community concerns, which organizations can use to create responsive programming and fill information gaps. Additionally, the findings can also contribute to the field of “infodemic” management by setting the stage for future research looking at the implications of current events on a misinformation ecosystem.

A common and recurrent sentiment across all of the trends identified was a concern over the sudden shift in media coverage from COVID-19 to the Russian invasion of Ukraine which sparked debate within our communities and raised accusations of double standards and disproportionate media coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in comparison with other conflicts or issues, particularly in non-western settings (See pieces by [Aljazeera](#) and [NPR](#)). In many instances, this was accompanied by recurrent critiques of the role of the West, and particularly the United States, in the global pandemic response.

We also identified two particularities of this subset of rumors. The first is that most of the rumors about the Ukraine invasion came from Twitter (51.2%), Facebook (39.5%), and Telegram (3.7%). Whereas, when analyzing the full collection of rumors (including those related and unrelated to Ukraine) during the same period, most rumors came from Facebook (51.1%), Twitter (34%) and YouTube (2.9%). The second is that despite our regular social media and face to face rumor collection we only found cases of rumors about the invasion of Ukraine within our social media data. For more details about the data you can visit our [google data studio](#).

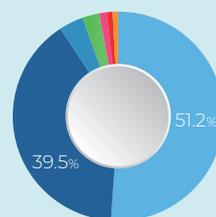
In this report, we will not identify the origins of the rumors or single out cases of disinformation. However, it is important to mention that there is growing evidence about COVID-19 conspiracy theorists readily adopting pro-Russian disinformation about the invasion (See piece by [European Digital Media Observatory](#) and [NDTV](#)). The remainder of this report goes into a detailed analysis of each of the aforementioned five major trends identified.

Trends Identified



- Disappeared/ Ended (35.6%)
- Hoax (21.5%)
- Laboratories in Ukraine (18.8%)
- Divert attention (17.4%)
- COVID-19 in Ukraine (6.7%)

Platforms



- Twitter (51.2%)
- Facebook (39.5%)
- Telegram (3.7%)
- WhatsApp (2.5%)
- Mediaoutlet (1.2%)
- Youtube (0.6%)
- Kwai (0.6%)

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## COVID-19 has disappeared, come to an end, or is no longer a priority



This was the most prevalent rumor trend within our data. It is based on the idea that the Russian invasion of Ukraine means that COVID-19 has disappeared, come to end, or that it is no longer a priority. These rumors have likely gained traction since the invasion of Ukraine has coincided with a progressive drop in average global reported deaths of COVID-19. Misattributing the invasion of Ukraine as the cause, rather than a correlation to this statistic has contributed to this belief. However, according to our data the main driver behind this rumor is the perception that the abrupt and predominant media focus on the invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by a decrease in conversation and coverage about the pandemic. Some of the rumors collected question directly this shift in media coverage, particularly western media. For example:

### Mali – Facebook:



*“Let us tell the truth, it is Putin who put an end to Covid-19. Since the war started in Ukraine, have you heard the Westerners talking about Covid? In the newspapers they were saying that the number of cases went up here and down there, but now you hear it? From the beginning of the war to the present day, they don't give any information about Covid.”*

16-04-2022

### Sudan – Twitter:



*“Is there justice in the media coverage of events around the world? Was the Ukraine war an opportunity for tyrants to pass their crimes in a blackout? Did the events of Ukraine cover the rest of the world's tragedies? Why did the Corona news disappear? #Democracy #media”*

13-03-2022

The implications and potential risks of these rumors are plentiful, particularly because the widespread belief that COVID-19 has disappeared, jeopardizes the effectiveness of pandemic response and the adoption of vaccines. There are some instances of this rumor that are framed as assertions that COVID-19 has indeed disappeared. In some cases, these assertions are accompanied with requests or demands that can hinder pandemic response, as demonstrated by the example of children's vaccination presented below.

### Zimbabwe – Facebook:



*“Stop vaccinating our children with your vaccine, they should be vaccinated when they choose what they want not forced. Covid is over we're now focusing on Ukraine and Russia”*

21-03-2022

Some of the rumors under this trend question the priority given to COVID-19 over other health issues that they feel are more important than COVID-19 for their country. The example from Sudan below, was a Facebook comment from a COVID-19 statistics update on the Ministry of Health Facebook page. Here the user is questioning the continued focus on COVID-19, while they argue that the outbreak of Kalazar (Visceral leishmaniasis) is a bigger concern. They raise a legitimate concern over the current state of the Sudanese health care system and question why there is a continued focus on COVID-19 if cases and deaths have supposedly stagnated since the invasion of Ukrainian war.

### Sudan – Facebook:



*“Corona ended around the world, let your minisrty do something else, find a solution to the outbreak of kalazar in Gedarif. You're only seeing your reports but nothing else.. Less posting and more doing. There are no medical staff in Khartoum or other states, hospitals are poorly set up. There is no medicine and no specialists or consultants. The ministry itself is weak and the people are tired. I dare you to find me one report from the WHO since the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war until tonight, they haven't issued a weekly or monthly report on cases of infection and no deaths with the Omicron or the Corona virus”*

22-03-2022

## COVID-19 is, and always has been a Hoax



The particularity of this trend, in comparison to the previous one, is that rumors here question the existence of COVID-19. The idea that COVID is not real is a rumor that we have monitored throughout the pandemic, and this shift to reference the invasion of Ukraine as further evidence of this is an interesting development.

### Mali – Twitter:



*“An observation... The war in Ukraine made us forget COVID. Was the world laughing at us from the beginning?”*

13-03-2022

Many of the hoax related rumors were also accompanied by strong anti-Western and anti-American sentiments. These sentiments have frequented our data throughout the pandemic. The concept of the ‘plandemic’ is rooted on the belief that the West or America created the virus as part of a conspiracy plan to somehow control, benefit, or profit from others. They are also regularly associated with concepts such as the New World Order. Understandably, in some contexts, they are also rooted in strong post-colonial tensions. In relation to the invasion of Ukraine, we also recorded instances in which the involvement of western countries in the war has exacerbated this belief and contributed to pro-Russian sentiments, as illustrated in the example from Zimbabwe and Lebanon below.

### Lebanon – Twitter:



*“Where is Corona? After someone has no doubts that Corona is the biggest lie of the century. How it disappeared. It is reasonable that the biological factories told me that the Russians in Ukraine were the reason. The American hoax of the century.”*

26-03-2022

### Zimbabwe – Twitter:



*“Covid was suppose to push the New World Order. Unfortunately, Putin was having none of it so he disturbed their plan by threatening to push it the Russian way. That is why you are seeing every western country is angered by mother Russia.”*

13-03-2022

Another common argument across some of the rumors on this theme is that COVID-19 and the Invasion of Ukraine are part of an orchestrated plan, usually by the West, with a common malignant objective. The series of events is also sometimes mentioned alongside other ones, such as the defeat of trump or climate change.

### Brazil – Twitter:



*“I don't know who thinks like that, but today I'm sure that this whole situation the world is living in, was orchestrated, planned to happen like this, pandemic, economic chaos, weakening of the USA, defeat of Trump, and the rise of Russia and China.”*

25-02-2022

Finally, although less numerous, we also identified a subset of hoax related rumors that spoke about the food security implications for African countries derived from the invasion of Ukraine. The invasion of Ukraine has resulted in disruptions in commodity markets and trade flows which have increased food prices in many contexts. Some have warned of the negative implications for food security in many African countries resulting from the volatility in food prices (See article by [Human Rights Watch](#)). We captured some rumors that are most likely fueled by coverage of this phenomena. The rumors criticize that despite warnings of the severe effects that COVID-19 would have on the African continent, the number of reported deaths has been relatively low ([probably due to under reporting](#)). They use this argument to suggest that warnings about potential famine due to the invasion of Ukraine are also false.

### Mali – Twitter:



*“COVID was supposed to decimate Africa, now it is the War in Ukraine that will create famine in Africa... and these people are supposed to be credible?”*

25-03-2022

### Mali – Twitter:



*“The Africa of tomorrow is uncertain. When the Westerners sent the COVID-19, they said that #Africans would die by thousands. For the war in Ukraine, it was France that feared a famine would befall Africa. But why do these Westerners wish us so much misfortune?”*

23-03-2022



## There is a strategy to divert attention involving COVID-19



This set of rumors mention the invasion of Ukraine in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic as part of a strategy to divert attention from a context-specific topic. While all these rumors suggest that there is a strategic diversion of attention, there is a wide variation in the topics that the attention is being supposedly diverted from. In this regard we identify four subsets of rumors.

The first subset refers to a creative chaos in which it is argued that both COVID-19 and the invasion of Ukraine are being used to divert attention or cover up the blame of some other reality.

### Lebanon – Twitter:



“There is something called creative chaos or (manipulative chaos) created for political and personal goals and its goal is to divert attention from the real goals. Corona, Russia and Ukraine war, Bankruptcy of Lebanon. The US Federal Reserve raised interest rates, which led to a decline in currencies, including the Egyptian pound which is responsible and the beneficiary behind all this!! ?”

09-04-2022

The second subset consists of rumors that argue that the invasion of Ukraine is distracting us from supposed evidence that proves one of the COVID-19 conspiracies. The examples below mention things such as the enormous death rate of vaccinated citizens or the planned origin of the virus by pharmaceutical companies.

### Brazil – Telegraph:



“While you are distracted by Russia and Ukraine, the UK government has released a report confirming that those vaccinated now account for 9 out of 10 Covid-19 deaths in England (among the countries that have vaccinated their population the most) ...and the triple-vaccinated accounted for 4 out of 5 of them...”

01-03-2022

### Mali – Twitter:



“While you were distracted by the crisis in Ukraine, documents were published confirming that Moderna created the COVID 19 virus..”

15-03-2022

A third subset of rumors argue that invasion of Ukraine is distracting us from a new surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths.

### Zim – Twitter:



“All indications point towards a grim winter. For a few months now the world has been tickling the tail of the dragon. Russia & Ukraine diverted attention from Covid19. China is battling its worst surge since the pandemic. This is the proverbial calm before the storm.”

30-03-2022

A final and fourth subset has a completely opposite take as it argues that the attention of a new surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths is distracting us from what is happening with the invasion of Ukraine.

### Mali – Twitter:



“AS IF BY CHANCE, THE COVID EPIDEMIC STARTS AGAIN TO DIVERT THE EYES FROM WHAT IS REALLY HAPPENING IN UKRAINE! UNFORTUNATELY FOR THEM, WE ARE NO LONGER DUPPE!! SHARE!! SPREAD THE WORD! INFORM!!!”

19-03-2022



## There are US biological warfare labs in Ukraine



We captured a relatively large number of rumors that speak about a particular controversy which claims that the U.S. has biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. These rumors probably originated as a response to the multiple occasions in which the Russian Ambassador to the United Nations has claimed that Russia has overwhelming evidence that the U.S. is developing biological weapons in laboratories in Ukraine (See [NPR interview](#), and article by [Newsweek](#)). The [United States Department of State](#) has called the claims “intentionally spreading outright lies” and the [United Nation’s Security Council](#) said they are unaware of biological weapons and programs in Ukraine and do not have the mandate or capacity to investigate the information. The controversy has also been factchecked by multiple sources (See the [BBC](#) and [AFP](#)). The BBC explains that the U.S. does have a Biological Threat Reduction Program, which has been running since 1990, in which they finance the modernization and equipment of labs in Ukraine and various other countries. However, the labs are locally operated, and their objective is to reduce the threat of biological weapon proliferation – not to research and produce biological weapons. Despite the rebuttals and fact-checking, the controversy has gained traction. In our data, we captured multiple rumors that entangle the biological weapons laboratory rumor with the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a subset of these rumors suggests that the U.S. biological weapons laboratory in Ukraine explains the origin of the COVID-19 virus, a rumor that mimics recurrent claims that COVID-19 originated from a biological leak in China. Some of these rumors, as evidenced in the example from Mali below, stretch the blame beyond just the West or America in general, and directly implicate American public figures and the pharmaceutical companies involved in the manufacturing of the COVID-19 vaccine. Interestingly, the rumor from Brazil was captured on Kwai, a Chinese competitor of TikTok, which is gaining popularity and is available in over a dozen countries.

### Brazil – Kwai:



*“It seems that the discovery of the origin of the coronavirus is close... The dozens of US laboratories that Russia found in Ukraine... The answers are starting to appear”*

06-04-2022

### Mali – Twitter:



*“Russia accuses Biden Obama, Clinton and Soros of being the masterminds of the biological weapons network in Ukraine. They were helped by 12 Nato countries. Pfizer and Moderna are also accused. Chinese military intelligence confirms these accusations. Blackout in the media.”*

13-05-2022

Another subset of biological weapon rumors is more focused on the idea that, in addition to the virus that causes COVID disease, the U.S. is involved in the production of multiple other viruses in secret laboratories in Ukraine. Some instances of these rumors directly mention that the objective is to spread the viruses. The rumor from Iraq presented below shows a common practice amongst COVID-19 misinformation in which the word is misspelled to avoid censorship.

### Iraq – Twitter:



*“Putin revealed the secret of America’s bacterial weapons laboratories in Ukraine, which makes viruses and deadly diseases, and then the Korona lie ended.”*

29-03-2022

### Iraq – Facebook:



*“The Pentagon is developing biological laboratories on the territory of Ukraine, to spread biological weapons in the territory of Russia using birds and bats”*

14-03-2022



## Inconsistencies with the state of COVID-19 in Ukraine



This final set of rumors, which directly references the invasion of Ukraine, speaks about the state of the pandemic in Ukraine or Russia. Some of the rumors in this trend talk about COVID-19 protective measures both in Ukraine and for the refugees migrating to neighboring countries. For example, some assert the influx of refugee migration will contribute to the spread of the virus because supposedly most of them are unvaccinated. Others question if the next surge of the pandemic will come from the region as they see that masks are no longer being used.

### DRC – Facebook:



*"I am surprised that Ukrainian refugees are welcomed in all host countries without the requirements of barrier measures"*

12-03-2022

### Sudan – Twitter:



*"Corona did not disappear, on the contrary. After the Ukrainians fled their country, most of them were not vaccinated, so they carried the virus with them."*

14-03-2022

### Zimbabwe – Facebook:



*"If there is a new coronavirus we must hear about it from Russia, Ukraine, Poland or any European country because they are no longer wearing masks and no social distance."*

22-03-2022

Another set of rumors suggest that vaccines should be sent to Ukraine or Russia instead of to their own country. As seen in the example of Sudan there is a belief embedded within this rumor that COVID-19 is no longer active in this country.

### Sudan – Facebook:



*"Ask the authorities who delivered the vaccine to be transferred to Russia. We don't have corona here..."*

03-05-2022

Finally, some of the rumors that we identified under this trend have a praise for Putin and for Russia. For example, the rumor from Sudan presented below suggests that some people are calling for Putin to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine.

### Sudan – Facebook:



*"Social media pioneers are calling for Russian President Putin to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine, because he expects a long-term plan to cross into Ukraine."*

28-02-2022

# CONCLUSION - IMPLICATIONS

In an increasingly interconnected world, seemingly distant topics such as the invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic in global south countries, can end up influencing the information flows of one another.



## We discuss two overarching implications and reflections around our findings:

1. Based on the rumors we collected, the invasion of Ukraine appears to have intensified mistrust around the COVID-19 pandemic and about many key stakeholders, such as the WHO and the pharmaceutical companies behind the vaccine. A healthy level of skepticism, when driven by critical thinking, can be a core characteristic of a resilient information ecosystem. However, in its most severe manifestations it can affect the effectiveness of pandemic response, especially if it discourages communities and individuals to follow protective measures. Throughout our analysis, we captured a varying degree of mistrust, from rumors that completely disregard the existence of the pandemic and its origins to others that question the shift in attention and the prioritization of COVID-19. The potential risks associated with these rumors can vary widely. While some might be promoting healthy critical thinking, others might be breaking down trust relations and discouraging productive pandemic responses. The line between the two is thin and most importantly driven by context. As part of our approach, it is imperative that local teams drive the analysis of context-specific risks derived from the rumors and that their response engages a diverse set of actors about possible avenues for mitigating those risks.
2. While rumors can be associated with risks, they are not necessarily bad. Rumors can tell us a lot about where a community stands, what their concerns are, and what they need. It is important that communities have spaces where they feel comfortable voicing their concerns and questions without judgment. For example, within this report we have identified a salient and frequent concern regarding the shift in media coverage and attention from COVID-19 to the invasion of Ukraine, especially by western media. The concern over the sudden shift in conversation is accompanied by many legitimate questions amongst communities about: What motivated the perceived shift in attention? Why is so much attention focused on this conflict and not others that are closer to their local realities? What does this mean about the current state and existence of the pandemic? These types of questions lay at the root of many rumors that we have presented in this report. Understanding how the media shifts in attention influence trust relations and misinformation also requires a look at the historic grievances in many global south contexts. Historic tension between dominant, many times Western, media structures and information ecosystems in the global south appear to be embedded into the reactions we captured within our data. The striking rumor from Iraq presented below elucidates this phenomena. This suggests, that beyond the availability of facts, misinformation is also influenced by media practices such as who, when, and for how long certain topics are reported. These are preliminary observations based on the findings disseminated in this report, however this analysis could really benefit from future research exploring such phenomena further.

### Iraq – Facebook:



*“World directed media determines what we talk about at our home and what life will be. After Corona, they have made Ukraine talk the first topic of our bread. Ukraine is behind the world's biggest companies and media channels, the biggest powers are ready with their most advanced weapons. Me and you Kurdzuban Muslims, what is the use of giving our day and night to the news of Ukraine?! We Muslims should keep an eye on #Aqsa\_mosque where many Muslims are martyred daily and prepared for pollution, destruction and mass wars. [...] Any news that the world media makes it the first news, leave it and go to the news of those who don't have news, they hide their voice, color and pain. They made us so busy with Corona and now with Ukraine we have no space to raise our heads to the sky, stars, moon and heavens. There is no time left to question our situation by the two bloody, corrupt and breadfruit mafia [...]”*

14-04-2022