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“Plague in Siberia”: Another Kremlin Communications Failure

Deleted reports, quarantines and a diagnosis of pneumonia

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Table of contents

Executive Summary 6

Timeline and Propaganda Coverage 10

Russian Authorities' Response and International Reactions 12

Z-Community: "Fact One – Plague Exists in the United States" 16

Sources 19

The Kremlin attributes an Irkutsk laboratory worker's death to pneumonia, but deleted news reports, quarantines, and emergency visits by federal officials cast doubt on that account.

Its familiar strategy of denial, seen during the spring foot-and-mouth disease outbreak, is eroding trust at home and abroad. Key topics:

1. Timeline and Propaganda Coverage
2. Russian Authorities' Response and International Reactions
3. Z-Community: "Fact One – Plague Exists in the United States"

Executive Summary

The events following initial news reports that a laboratory worker in Irkutsk had died of "pneumonic plague" on the night of October 1–2 once again expose a crisis in Russian authorities' public communications. The Kremlin's initial silence, followed by persistent denials and the dismissal of all reports as "fake," has deepened distrust among Russian citizens and foreign governments alike.

> Although a death from plague has not been publicly confirmed, the suppression and deletion of news reports, together with subsequent personnel and public health measures, point to a much more serious situation than the official account suggests.

Events earlier this year have only reinforced suspicions that the Kremlin is concealing a death from plague. In February and March 2026, the authorities forcibly culled livestock on a large scale in Siberia and the Volga region while denying a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak and claiming it was pasteurellosis instead.[1] Even China later officially acknowledged that a new strain of foot-and-mouth disease had entered through its northwestern border, part of which it shares with Russia.[2]

Darya Shipilova, a 28-year-old laboratory technician at the Irkutsk Anti-Plague Institute, was admitted to a hospital in Shelekhov in critical condition on September 29 and died on the night of October 1–2. On October 2, the independent outlet People of Baikal was among the first to identify pneumonic plague as the cause of death.

> Over the following days, the authorities focused on removing information rather than explaining what had happened.

A report that 189 people had been hospitalized disappeared from the REN TV Telegram channel, along with four other posts on the subject. Articles by nationwide outlets Izvestia, Argumenty i Fakty, Moskovsky Komsomolets, and Kommersant were deleted, as was a notice from the Baikalsk city administration asking residents not to travel to Shelekhov. A statement by the governor of Buryatia, the first official to publicly acknowledge plague, was subsequently amended to include the word "possibly."

The official account emerged only on October 4, when Rospotrebnadzor, Russia's watchdog responsible for hygiene standards and disease control, gave the diagnosis as "pneumonia of undetermined etiology." The next day, Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed reports of plague as "rumors and speculation." The Russian News Agency (TASS) added its own reference to "idle gossip," while national television was almost entirely silent on the subject.

The scale of the authorities' response is difficult to reconcile with the pneumonia diagnosis. Shelekhov District Hospital has been under quarantine since October 1. On October 2, Rospotrebnadzor chief Anna Popova flew to Irkutsk on an emergency visit. Irkutsk region governor Igor Kobzev explicitly linked her arrival to a suspected case of a "particularly dangerous infection."

The next day, Alla Samoilova, head of Roszdravnadzor, a separate watchdog responsible for oversight of the health care system, also arrived in the region. Classes at a civil aviation university branch in Irkutsk were canceled, masks were made mandatory at an aluminum smelter, and a citywide volunteer cleanup and events for pregnant women were postponed.

According to People of Baikal, several hospitals were placed under a three-week quarantine, patients received a "Checklist for suspected cases of the particularly dangerous infection 'plague,'" and people who had been in contact with Shipilova were transported by ambulance under escort from Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB).

Nezygar, a Telegram channel close to the Presidential Administration (PA), has continued to describe the illness as pneumonic plague, departing from the Kremlin's broader communications policy and drawing parallels with Wuhan. It claims that the Moscow city government has been instructed to prepare for emergency public health restrictions and that the PA is already discussing replacing the president's envoy and regional governors in Siberia.

The international response shows that Moscow's statements are also distrusted abroad. Between October 3 and 5, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan tightened health checks at their borders. Tajikistan, Mongolia, Indonesia, and Armenia also increased screening. On October 6, Russia told the World Health Organization (WHO) that there were no plague cases in Irkutsk.

The following day, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus requested additional information about the pathogen that had prompted the public health measures and reports of a second employee with pneumonia of unknown cause. Donald Trump offered assistance, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio urged Russia to be transparent. On October 7, CNN reported that the United States had delivered a formal diplomatic démarche. Peskov responded by saying that the "overwhelming majority" of media reports were false.

The pro-war Z community, usually sensitive to official efforts to conceal incidents, has largely repeated the official line. This suggests that the ban on negative coverage also extends to the pro-war segment. The official War on Fakes channel publishes daily rebuttals and links American media interest in the story to the Republicans' electoral difficulties.

Television propagandist Artyom Sheinin compares the coverage to the Skripal case. After telling Rubio that "Russia owes no one anything and has no obligations to anyone," Z-blogger Yulia Vityazeva published a post following Presidential Administration talking points, including the claim that "plague exists in the United States." Sergei Kolyasnikov, who runs the ZERGULIO channel,

had to explain his silence to subscribers. An anonymous Wagner Group veteran behind the Condottiero channel quipped that

> “there will be no plague, because half the patients have already been discharged as healthy.”

On October 7, war correspondent Roman Alekhin, designated a “foreign agent” for criticizing the authorities from a pro-war position, expressed hope that the lessons of Chernobyl had not been forgotten and urged Russians to be cautious. His home was searched the following morning in connection with a 2025 case involving a false report of a terrorist attack. Alekhin called it a “coincidence.”

Timeline and Propaganda Coverage

Darya Shipilova, a 28-year-old laboratory technician at the Irkutsk Research Anti-Plague Institute of Siberia and the Far East, died in a hospital in Shelekhov, seven kilometers from Irkutsk in Siberia, on the night of October 1–2.[3] She had been admitted in critical condition on September 29.[4] Initial reports published on October 2 by the independent regional outlet People of Baikal identified the cause of death as "pneumonic plague."[5]

After the first reports of Shipilova's death, competing versions of events began circulating in the media and on social media. These included claims that she had recently flown back from Thailand, as People of Baikal initially reported;[6] that she had returned from a work trip to the neighboring republic of Buryatia, where plague had been detected near the Mongolian border;[7] and that she had contracted plague after breaking a test tube containing the pathogen in the laboratory.[8]

On October 2, the national television channel REN TV reported on its Telegram channel that 189 people had been hospitalized in the Irkutsk region: "Some have developed symptoms, but plague infection has not been confirmed." The post was later deleted.[9] Over the following days, reports by many Kremlin-controlled Russian media outlets and statements by regional authorities were also deleted.

People of Baikal counted five deleted REN TV posts, along with articles by Izvestia, Argumenty i Fakty, and Moskovsky Komsomolets.[10] An article by the national newspaper Kommersant also disappeared, as did a notice from the Baikalsk authorities asking residents not to travel to Shelekhov and neighboring settlements because of "unofficial information that a case of plague has been detected in a person."

> Some statements remained publicly available but were edited. For example, the governor of Buryatia's October 2 statement, the first public acknowledgment of plague by an official, was subsequently amended by inserting "possibly" before "died of plague."[11]

A response from senior federal officials came only two days after the initial reports. On October 4, Rospotrebnadzor, Russia's watchdog responsible for hygiene standards and disease control, gave the official diagnosis as "pneumonia of undetermined etiology."[12] The Kremlin began issuing official denials on October 5.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov dismissed reports of plague as "various rumors and speculation" and said the public should rely on "Rospotrebnadzor's official statements."[13] The Russian News Agency (TASS), which serves as a propaganda outlet, published Peskov's comments alongside its own reference to "idle gossip and tall tales," describing the coverage as "the planting of rumors about alleged plague infections."[14]

> Television propaganda channels ignored the subject, confirming that a political decision had been made to suppress any mention of plague.

The national broadcaster Channel One published just one item on its website, reproducing Rospotrebnadzor's statement about pneumonia.[15] Another major broadcaster, Russia 1, aired a single 30-second segment in its regional Irkutsk broadcast on October 2, reporting a "meeting of the Baikal region government over the quarantine at Shelekhov District Hospital."[16] It subsequently quoted Rospotrebnadzor's statement to reassure viewers.[17]

Russian Authorities' Response and International Reactions

The authorities' emergency measures immediately showed that they regarded the situation as extremely serious. On October 2, Shelekhov district mayor Maksim Modin announced that Shelekhov District Hospital had been under quarantine since October 1.[18] The same day, Rospotrebnadzor chief and Russia's chief sanitary officer Anna Popova flew to Irkutsk for an emergency meeting of the regional public health and epidemic control commission.

Irkutsk region governor Igor Kobzev explicitly said that the emergency meeting had been prompted by "a suspected case of a particularly dangerous infection in a resident of the region."[19] On October 3, Kobzev announced that another senior federal health official had arrived in Irkutsk: Alla Samoilova, head of Roszdravnadzor, the watchdog responsible for oversight of the health care system.[20] On October 4, Rospotrebnadzor said that "a comprehensive set of epidemic control measures has been organized and carried out in full" in the region.[21]

As officials arrived from Moscow, quarantines and special restrictions spread to other institutions and workplaces. Classes at the Irkutsk branch of Moscow State Technical University of Civil Aviation were canceled from October 3.[22] The same day, masks were made mandatory at the Irkutsk Aluminum Smelter in Shelekhov.[23]

On October 4, People of Baikal reported that several hospitals in Irkutsk had been placed under a three-week quarantine: City Clinical Hospitals No. 1, 3, and 10, and Ivano-Matreninskaya Children's Clinical Hospital. According to the outlet, doctors in Irkutsk were "already speaking openly about plague."[24]

In a longer report on October 6, People of Baikal said that special restrictions had also been introduced at Irkutsk Regional Clinical

Hospital, the Irkutsk Psychoneurological Dispensary, and the Irkutsk Perinatal Center. At the perinatal center, medical staff gave patients two health questionnaires, one titled "Checklist for suspected cases of the particularly dangerous infection 'plague.'"[25]

> Regional authorities and propaganda outlets subsequently denied that quarantines and special restrictions had been imposed,[26] dismissing the reports as fake.[27] Their other actions, however, contradicted those denials.

A citywide volunteer cleanup scheduled for October 3 in Irkutsk was postponed because of an "unfavorable epidemiological situation."[28] Two other events were also postponed: an open house at the city's perinatal center scheduled for October 7[29] and an event for pregnant women at the House of Youth scheduled for October 10.[30] People of Baikal also reported that people who had been in contact with the index patient were "transported in ambulances under escort from the Federal Security Service (FSB)."[31]

Nezygar, a Telegram channel known for insider reporting and close to the Presidential Administration, has explicitly referred to plague in all its coverage of the incident. Its Sunday roundup of the week's main events on October 4 stated:

> "A case of pneumonic plague has been recorded in an employee of an anti-plague research institute in the Irkutsk region, but the authorities are calling the diagnosis 'pneumonia.'"[32]

The channel has stressed parallels between Shelekhov and Wuhan, claiming that "all large public events in Irkutsk are being canceled"[33] and that the Moscow city government has been instructed to "prepare for emergency public health restrictions."[34]

On October 7, five days after the first reports from Shelekhov, Nezygar was still calling the incident "the pneumonic plague story,"

departing from the official terminology. It also claimed that the Presidential Administration had begun discussing personnel changes in Siberia, including replacing the Presidential Plenipotentiary Envoy to the Siberian Federal District and regional governors. According to the channel, Siberia has been "a source of negative news" for more than a year, with "mounting environmental and infrastructure problems, growing discontent, and spontaneous protests."[35]

Subsequent actions by other countries also reflect the seriousness of the situation. Uzbekistan tightened health checks at its borders on October 3, followed by Kyrgyzstan on October 4 and Kazakhstan on October 5.[36] Screening has also been stepped up in Tajikistan,[37] Mongolia,[38] Indonesia,[39] and Armenia.[40]

On October 6, Russia officially told the World Health Organization (WHO) that it "has no cases of plague in the city of Irkutsk in Siberia."[41] On October 7, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said:

> "WHO has requested further information to clarify the cause of the severe pneumonia, the pathogen that prompted the public health measures, and media reports of a second employee with pneumonia of undetermined cause."[42]

Moscow again responded with denials. On October 7, Dmitry Peskov reiterated that "WHO has been duly informed in accordance with established practice" and described "the overwhelming majority of what the media are reporting" as "false information."[43]

Meanwhile, the United States began applying diplomatic pressure on the Kremlin to disclose more information about the incident. On October 5, Donald Trump offered assistance. He said: "they call it pneumonia. The microbes and the germs have gotten

stronger disproportionally, but we'll help them."[44] On October 6, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said:

> "I think it's incumbent upon Russia to obviously share more information with the world. That's what they should do. [...] We encourage Russia to be transparent and share more information with the world so that all of us could react accordingly and appropriately."[45]

Pressure intensified on October 7. According to CNN,[46] the United States delivered a formal diplomatic démarche requesting further information about the incident. The previous day, the United States Embassy in Russia had warned American citizens of the threat of plague and again urged them to leave the country immediately. Russia remained subject to a Level 4 travel advisory, "Do Not Travel."[47]

Rospotrebnadzor responded by shifting from denial to trolling. On October 6, the agency said that "the Russian Federation is ready to assist the United States in combating outbreaks of infectious diseases," citing measles and typhoid fever.[48] On October 8, it also dismissed reports of a second case as "fake."[49]

Z-Community: "Fact One – Plague Exists in the United States"

EK Stratcom's monitoring of pro-war Z channels confirms that the Kremlin's ban on negative coverage and mentions of plague extends to the Z community. Most posts by Z commentators follow the official propaganda line. The official War on Fakes channel publishes daily rebuttals of reports about plague,[50,51] claiming that

> "the 'authorities are hiding it' narrative is a favorite tactic of provocateurs, who use it to conceal their lies and attention-seeking while smearing our country and inflaming the situation."[52]

It alleges that foreign outlets,[53] "foreign agents,"[54] and anti-Russian social media pages are fueling[55] the "hysteria." It also claims that "the emergence of the 'there is plague in Russia' claim in the American media is linked to the Republicans' poor ratings ahead of the extremely difficult elections they will soon face."[56]

Other Z propagandists repeat the same line without adapting it to their pro-war audiences. Sergei Karnaukhov writes that "there is no official confirmation of the infection."[57] Artyom Sheinin argues: "This is already a sure sign of some new set of 'talking points.' Whose? Well, whose were the ones about the Skripals? About 'chemical attacks in Syria' and 'lines at the Georgian border'?"[58] Alexei Zhivov insists that "there is effectively no evidence that some terrible epidemic is being concealed."[59]

Some channels have adapted these narratives more directly to the Z audience. MIG Rossii, a channel linked to Russia's security services, said that "it looks like the prank got out of hand."[60] It highlighted the Shelekhov district deputy head's rejection

of Trump's offer of assistance with the approving comment "That's how we do it!"[61]

The Z channel Release the KrakenZ! blamed the West for the hysteria: "Another reminder of how the Western propaganda machine works and the role its (un)useful idiots play."[62] It had earlier indirectly acknowledged the gravity of the situation: "The West in all its 'glory.' Well, we'll laugh when something like this happens to you."[63] Dmitry Steshin, a Komsomolskaya Pravda war correspondent who runs the Z channel Russian Tarantass, issued threats against Ukraine:

> "The Banderites now have three allies. Two old ones, 'If' and 'They give us [aid],' and a new one, 'Plague.' They're celebrating for now... It's frightening to imagine what dirty trick 'Taran's Theorem' will spring on the khokhols [a slur for Ukrainians]."[64]

Yulia Vityazeva, a particularly hard-line Z propagandist, stood out: "I'm reading planted stories from khokhols, foreign agents, and other enemy reports about an alleged plague outbreak. [...] They won't succeed in plunging the country into hysteria. They're wasting their time."[65]

She later responded to Rubio's call for greater disclosure by saying that "Russia owes no one anything and has no obligations to anyone."[66] She also complained: "Apparently, you can't just call and wish Putin a happy birthday. You have to invent a pretext. Plague, for example, which doesn't exist."[67] She subsequently helped amplify the subject herself, publishing a propaganda post clearly based on PA talking points. In an attempt to reassure her audience, she offered arguments against the plague reports:

> "Fact one: plague exists in the United States. [...] Fact two: humanity cannot simply eradicate plague."[68]

Criticism of the Russian authorities was rare, even though official cover-ups of crises and incidents are usually popular topics

in the Z community. This provides further indirect evidence of the ban on negative coverage. Sergei Kolyasnikov, who runs the ZERGULIO channel, began explicitly defending his silence to subscribers:

> "'Sergei, why aren't you writing about plague in Irkutsk? You've been told not to!' I'm not writing about it because, first, I have no information beyond the official account. Second, I don't want to get in the way of the people working there without sleep or rest."[69]

The anonymous Wagner Group veteran behind Condottiero took a sarcastic approach, alluding to the authorities' familiar methods of concealing information: "There will be no plague. Half the patients have been discharged from quarantine as healthy."[70] He also asked, "Isn't this how epidemic movies start?"[71]

War correspondent Roman Alekhin, designated a "foreign agent" for criticizing the authorities from a pro-war position, expressed particular concern. On October 7, he wrote: "The problem is that in today's world of hybrid warfare, this information could either confirm a real threat or be another information attack. Russian citizens can only hope that the lessons of Chernobyl have not been forgotten. Friends, be careful and take care of yourselves."[72]

The following day, reports emerged that investigators had arrived to search his home at 6 a.m. on October 8.[73] The search was conducted in connection with a criminal case opened in 2025 over a false report of a terrorist attack sent by email to a Russian court. Alekhin himself called it a "coincidence."[74]

EK Stratcom has previously reported in detail on the wave of political repression targeting the most prominent members of the Z community who continue to criticize the authorities.[75]

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