

Vendetta reporting

How a Russian state news agency invented a story about Boris Johnson needing a ventilator

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Last week, *RIA Novosti* was the only major media outlet in the world to report that British Prime Minister Boris Johnson required mechanical ventilation while he was hospitalized for COVID-19. The story turned out to be false. *Meduza* has learned how a Russian state news agency cooked it up in the first place.

On the evening of April 5, newsrooms around the world received terminal alerts about a breaking story: UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson was being hospitalized because of his “persistent symptoms for coronavirus.” In a [public statement](#), Downing Street called it “a precautionary step,” saying that Johnson was getting additional testing. Ten days earlier, the prime minister himself [announced on Twitter](#) that he’d contracted COVID-19.

Not all outlets believed the official reports, however. Hours later, the state news agency *RIA Novosti* (a subsidiary of the “Rossiya Segodnya” media holding) reported that Johnson’s hospitalization was actually an emergency. Citing an unnamed source “close to the leadership of England’s NHS,” the agency’s London bureau ran a [story](#) claiming that Johnson “would be provided mechanical lung ventilation.” The report appeared in the agency’s subscriber-only news terminal, on the agency’s website, and on its social media accounts. Some time later, the text was [modified](#) (though the original version is archived and still [available](#) online). The direct quote from the

anonymous source about Johnson's emergency hospitalization was now gone, but the quote about him needing a ventilator remained.

Downing Street reacted immediately, calling *RIA Novosti's* report "[disinformation](#)." The prime minister was subsequently placed in an intensive care unit, but he did not require mechanical ventilation, government spokespeople [stated](#). Johnson soon recovered and was discharged on April 12 without ever needing a ventilator.

Meduza has learned the unusual origins of *RIA Novosti's* unsubstantiated report about Johnson's medical adventures. Sources at "Rossiya Segodnya" say the initiative to release a story about the UK prime minister needing a ventilator came from the agency's management in Moscow, and *RIA Novosti's* London bureau wasn't even informed about the report. "The story was signed as if it were written in London, but it wasn't. The London bureau had nothing to do with it and only found out after the fact," a source told *Meduza*. The management in question was editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan (who also supervises the television network *RT*, which did not report the ventilator story), a second source close to *Rossiya Segodnya's* executives confirmed to *Meduza*. A person with knowledge about the story told *Meduza* that the news report itself was written by one of *Rossiya Segodnya's* managers in Moscow who claimed to have received the information from a reliable source. Other staff at the agency never found out who this source was.

Late on April 6, commenting on her Telegram channel about Johnson being transferred to the ICU, Simonyan [reposted](#) the following message: "Scheduled tests, nothing to see here. I don't wish Johnson any misfortune or suffering, even though he's an Englishman. I wish him good health and a speedy return to active political work. That being said, *you* are the fake news." Simonyan herself [added](#), "Q.E.D. [I rest my case], unfortunately."

Even after Downing Street officially denied *RIA Novosti's* report, the agency's management ordered correspondents to mention in all subsequent news stories about the prime minister's health that he had allegedly required a ventilator, a source at the agency told *Meduza*. Before Johnson's recovery, this unsubstantiated claim did in fact appear in virtually every *RIA Novosti* report about the British prime minister, whether it was a [story](#) about Vladimir Putin wishing Johnson a speedy recovery or [analysis](#) from an expert at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations about the UK's political future.

RIA Novosti covered Johnson's hospitalization in extraordinary detail. A source told *Meduza* that the news agency's management seized on the story because it supposedly attracted a large audience. In fact, with the exception of the first report about the prime minister needing a ventilator (which by the time of this writing had more than 400,000 views on *RIA Novosti's* website), the agency's [subsequent coverage](#) went mostly ignored by readers, attracting only a few thousand or just a few hundred views. Nevertheless, even after Johnson was discharged from the hospital, *RIA Novosti* published an entire "[timeline](#)" of the prime minister's illness on its Telegram channel, once again including information about mechanical ventilation, writing, "*RIA Novosti's* source reported that Johnson could be connected to a ventilator. His condition was serious, though Downing Street denied everything and insisted that he was only undergoing testing."

A source told *Meduza* that the news agency has a tendency to write a lot about how Western countries are struggling against the coronavirus epidemic. On a daily basis, for instance, newswire editors apparently ask correspondents to verify information from dubious sources about "how bad everything is abroad," supposedly motivated by the idea that these stories generate significant traffic. These reports often turn out to be fake, says *Meduza's* source.

The situation is slightly more personal with Boris Johnson and Britain, however, where Margarita Simonyan and her TV network *RT* have been at loggerheads for years. Back in 2017, when he was still foreign minister, Johnson criticized lawmakers from the Labor Party for appearing on *RT*. “If you study the output of *Russia Today*, and if you consider the state of the press in Russia at present, it is a scandal that members of the party opposite are continuing to validate and legitimate that kind of propaganda by going on those programs,” Johnson said. In an [editorial](#), *RT* fired back that Johnson’s own father, Stanley Johnson, spoke to the network about his anti-Brexit book. *RT* also pointed out that “a number of prominent Conservative parliamentarians” had also been guests of the channel.

Britain’s broadcasting regulator, Ofcom, has repeatedly fined *RT* for biased news coverage. Just last month, the Russian television network lost its [legal challenge](#) against a fine of 200,000 pounds sterling (\$250,020) for breaching the UK’s rules on impartiality regarding matters of political controversy in its reporting about the poisoning of Sergey and Yulia Skripal. More than once, Russian state officials have [threatened sanctions](#) against *BBC* journalists working in Russia in retaliation for any actions by the UK against *RT*.

Meduza has asked “*Rossiia Segodnya*” to comment on these allegations. Speaking over WhatsApp, Margarita Simonyan offered the following response: “Your sources are lying. Or you’re lying that you have these sources. I learned about this story from the newswire, just like you. I not only didn’t issue any ‘demands,’ but on the contrary, I called the chief editor myself to find out where this news had come from. Please find some other sources. The ones you have now are broken. Please quote me verbatim without any misinterpretation.”

Update: what happened after this story was published

After *Meduza* released this article, *RIA Novosti* posted a [response](#) on its Telegram channel, titled “How *Meduza* Invented News About *RIA Novosti* Inventing News About Boris Johnson and a Ventilator.” Here’s a brief summary of that text:

- *RIA Novosti*’s London bureau was directly involved in preparing the report about Johnson needing mechanical lung ventilation. The account published by *Meduza* is “a lie.”
- Regarding how it supposedly learned about Johnson’s ventilator needs, *RIA Novosti* says, “Our source was described very clearly: It was a source who has a very trusting relationship with a senior representative of England’s NHS leadership.”
- *RIA Novosti* says Downing Street’s official denial that the prime minister was ever on a ventilator is “an absolutely false official version of events.” The news agency says Johnson’s spokespeople also inaccurately described *RIA Novosti*’s story, which claimed that the prime minister “would be given mechanical ventilation during his emergency hospitalization,” not that he’d already been connected to a ventilator. *RIA Novosti* believes its report “was essentially confirmed.”
- The news agency denies that the Johnson-ventilator story was written by one of its managing editors. “It was released according to a just-in-time process immediately after the official announcements about the prime minister’s ‘planned’ hospitalization.”
- *RIA Novosti* says claims that *Rossiia Segodnya* and *RT* editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan ordered the Johnson story are also “a lie”: “She learned about this news when she read it in *RIA Novosti*’s newsfeed.”

- Additionally, *RIA Novosti* says its management did not instruct reporters to cite the rumor about Johnson needing a ventilator in every subsequent story about the prime minister's health — this decision was supposedly made by the agency's production editors.
- *RIA Novosti* says allegations that it deliberately reports unreliable information about Western countries' struggles against the coronavirus pandemic are “nonsense” and potentially grounds for litigation.

Dmitry Kiselyov, an outspoken pro-Kremlin TV pundit and *Rossiya Segodnya*'s general director, later [wrote](#) on his Telegram channel: “Will we ever learn the truth about Prime Minister Boris Johnson being connected to a ventilator? Judging by British traditions, it's doubtful. When Prime Minister Lloyd George got sick with the Spanish Flu in 1918 and nearly died, it went unreported. When Prime Minister Winston Churchill spent a couple of months recovering from a stroke in 1953, there was silence. When even today nobody in London could say in whose hands this nuclear power's ‘red button’ was, that says a lot.”

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