

“Russian Covid 19 related information manipulations in the EU and US”



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SUMMARY

Covid 19 pandemic and ensuing competition on vaccine markets led Russia to engage in an information war in order to discredit the Western vaccine producers, in particular Pfizer, and destabilize the Western societies by sowing discord and promoting conspiracy theories. While the global market is dominated by Western produced vaccines, such as those made by Pfizer or Moderna, Russia strives to win a substantial segment of the market for its own Sputnik V vaccine. To achieve that goal, Russia engages in information manipulation campaign to undermine trust in vaccines produced by its rivals, and boost confidence in Sputnik V. As part of this campaign, Internet sources with connections to Russian state security agencies pushed the conspiracy theories suggesting that the virus originated in the USA or was intentionally created by the USA government to maintain its global domination. Such theories were often spread from Russian controlled separatist regions of Luhansk and Donetsk in the Ukraine. Russian state media and Russian government Twitter accounts also attempted to raise concerns about the cost and safety of the Pfizer vaccine to promote the sale of Russia's own Sputnik V vaccine. The disinformation-countering project of the European External Action Service contends that Russia and China use state-controlled media, networks of proxy media outlets and social media, including official diplomatic social media accounts to advance their agenda in vaccine competition. In addition, Russia attempted to hire popular international bloggers to spread false narratives about Covid 19. A company owned by a business woman with close connection to Russian government circles was behind this campaign. While some bloggers made the attempts to recruit them public, others appear to have taken up the deal. Eventually, Facebook had to remove hundreds of Facebook and Instagram accounts for violating its policy against foreign interference due to them being used in the disinformation campaign run from Russia. Experts believe that the Russian propaganda uses disinformation as a means of economic warfare, and Russian state propaganda and Internet trolls increasingly target companies with disinformation campaigns to damage their corporate reputations. In this report, Tarand expert group undertake an in-depth analysis of this issue, as well as refer to findings and researches of their colleagues from around the world.



Covid 19 crisis led to a fierce competition on vaccine markets among leading vaccine producers. Russia joined the competition and tried to win a substantial share of the global market for its own Sputnik V vaccine. To gain an advantage in the competition, Russian state propaganda has been engaged in persistent efforts to undermine the reputation of Western-produced vaccines, in particular Pfizer, and raising concerns about their cost and safety, in order to promote sales of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. In particular, Russian controlled websites and social network profiles accentuate actual international news reports that cast a negative view of the western vaccines without providing accurate information about their safety and efficacy.

Rand Corporation in its 2021 report came to a conclusion that Russia and its agents appeared to have used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to promote Russia's agenda, employing information manipulation in service to the country's apparent domestic and international objectives.¹

Russia-linked sources repeatedly shared conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus. For example, one conspiracy theory focused on the "world elite," claiming that the world's richest individuals and corporations instigated and funded the COVID-19 pandemic to facilitate their objectives for world domination. Another set of conspiracy theories focused on the United States as the origin of the virus; relatedly, a third set proposed that the United States purposefully manufactured the virus in one of its domestic or international labs with the aim of weakening Russia. Although there were some variations in details of these conspiracy theories, the common point is that the United States had developed the virus as a means for sustaining its global domination and curbing the ascent of its adversaries.

In addition to conspiracy theories, other disinformation messages connected to Russia or its agents also perpetrated false or unconfirmed information. Among such messages are discussions of the likely overestimation of the danger of COVID-19 and the unnecessarily restrictive measures to stop its spread. While it is possible that these messages were initially created with no intention of deceit, they often appeared in conjunction with suggestions that the U.S. government or its "elites" were exaggerating the virus' spread to control the U.S. population, which is a claim that clearly falls into the disinformation category.²

On 17 July 2020, websites of the self-declared Luhansk People's Republic, a separatist entity supported by Russia, posted a press release about an alleged COVID-19 vaccine trial that had been conducted by US on Ukrainian volunteers, including soldiers, in the city of Kharkiv, controlled by the Ukrainian Government. According to the press release, of the 15 patients who received the trial vaccine, five died, including four Ukrainian soldiers. The press release was published the day after Russia announced plans to mass-produce its own vaccine within weeks.

¹ Miriam Matthews, Katya Migacheva, and Ryan Andrew Brown, "Superspreaders of Malign and Subversive Information on COVID-19." (RAND Corporation, 2021), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-11.html.

² Miriam Matthews, Katya Migacheva, and Ryan Andrew Brown.

In reality, there was no vaccine trial in the Ukraine. However, this false information was spread across the globe in multiple languages, even getting reposted by a prominent Australian anti-vaccination Facebook group. The press release was published the day after Russia announced plans to mass-produce its own vaccine in a matter of weeks. The obvious political message of this fictitious story was that irresponsible Ukrainian Government authorities are willing to endanger Ukrainians, including soldiers, at the request of Americans who do not want to test their vaccines on their own citizens and do not value Ukrainian lives.³

U.S. officials accuse Russian intelligence agencies being behind such discreditation campaigns. In particular, in March 2021, an official with the State Department's Global Engagement Center, which monitors foreign disinformation efforts, identified four publications, which he claimed served as fronts for Russian intelligence. The websites played up the vaccines' risk of side effects, questioned their efficacy, and said the U.S. had rushed the Pfizer vaccine through the approval process, among other false or misleading claims.⁴

Among the websites identified by the Global Engagement Center are New Eastern Outlook and Oriental Review, which are believed to be controlled by Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and News Front, which is claimed to be run by Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). News Front is operated from Russian-occupied Crimea.

In addition, Russian state media and Russian government Twitter accounts have made overt efforts to raise concerns about the cost and safety of the Pfizer vaccine in order to promote the sale of Russia's own Sputnik V vaccine. Though the outlets' readership is small, U.S. officials say they inject false narratives that can be amplified by other Russian and international media.

Russia-linked propaganda also seems to have been designed to appeal to audiences across the political spectrum. For example, messages about U.S. failures to effectively counter the spread of the virus could have appealed to the moderate left that viewed the Trump administration with skepticism. Meanwhile, messages that compared the inefficiency of U.S. systems with the better approaches in China could have appealed to those on the left of U.S. political margins.

The different types of messages spread by Russia linked sources could appeal to a variety of audiences across the political spectrum: Trump supporters on the moderate and far right and Trump skeptics on the moderate and far left, capitalism skeptics on farther edges of the left and capitalism supporters on the right, and conspiracy theorist and those who are against vaccination (commonly known as anti-vaxxers) on both the left and right margins of the political spectrum.⁵

³ Elise Thomas, Albert Zhang, and Emilia Currey, "COVID-19 Disinformation and Social Media Manipulation: Pro-Russian Vaccine Politics Drives New Disinformation Narratives," Analysis & Policy Observatory (APO), August 25, 2020, <https://apo.org.au/node/307763>.

⁴ "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say," The Wall Street Journal, March 7, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-disinformation-campaign-aims-to-undermine-confidence-in-pfizer-other-covid-19-vaccines-u-s-officials-say-11615129200>.

⁵ Miriam Matthews, Katya Migacheva, and Ryan Andrew Brown, "Superspreaders of Malign and Subversive Information on COVID-19."

Russian intelligence services have a rich experience in this kind of operations since the Soviet times. In particular, the infamous Operation INFEKTION, an active measure disinformation campaign run by the KGB in the 1980s to spread the rumour that the United States had invented HIV/AIDS, is strikingly similar to present day Covid 19 related information operations by KGB's successors. Back then, the Soviets pursued goals similar to those pursued by modern-day Russia, such as undermining the United States' credibility, fostering anti-Americanism, and creating tensions between the U.S. and its allies.

In April 2021, a report by EUvsDisinfo, the disinformation-countering project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force, accused Russian and Chinese media of systematically seeking to sow mistrust in Western COVID-19 vaccines in their latest disinformation campaigns aimed at dividing the West. The report said that Russia and China continue to intensively promote their own state-produced vaccines around the world, and their so-called "vaccine diplomacy" follows a zero-sum game logic and is combined with disinformation and manipulation efforts to undermine trust in Western-made vaccines, EU institutions and Western/European vaccination strategies. In order to achieve these goals, both Russia and China use state-controlled media, networks of proxy media outlets and social media, including official diplomatic social media accounts. EUvsDisinfo added more than 100 new examples of pro-Kremlin disinformation claims about vaccination to its database since the beginning of 2021.⁶

According to EUvsDisinfo, during December 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, the Russian campaign to promote the Sputnik V vaccine intensified and developed into a whole-of-government approach including state authorities, state companies and state mass media in almost daily interventions. Russian officials not only promote the Sputnik V vaccine, but also engage in antagonistic messaging, using disinformation to accuse the West and the EU of sabotaging the Russian vaccine. In this context, pro-Kremlin media outlets, including the official Sputnik V Twitter account, attempted to undermine public trust in the European Medicines Agency and cast doubt on its procedures and political impartiality. By sowing distrust in the European Medicines Agency, pro-Kremlin disinformation actors aim to undermine and fragment the common European approach of securing vaccine supplies.⁷

In May 2021, an RFE/RL investigation revealed that a network of Russian marketing companies, which as involved in selling dubious nutritional supplements and pushing malware, was behind a disinformation campaign to denigrate Western coronavirus vaccines. The campaign was led by Moscow-based businesswoman Yulia Serebryanskaya, who was active in pro-Kremlin political circles and was engaged in political campaigns and event planning for the ruling United Russia party, and ran as an independent for election in the Moscow city elections in 2019.

⁶ "EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic (Update December 2020 - April 2021)" (EUvsDisinfo, April 28, 2021), <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-update-december-2020-april-2021/>.

⁷ "EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic (Update December 2020 - April 2021)."

The main target of the campaign were social-media influencers in different countries, including France and Germany, and it reportedly attracted the attention of French intelligence agencies.⁸

According to reports, a French and a German bloggers received e-mails from a person claiming to work for a marketing firm called Fazze, which offered to pay the bloggers to produce videos on YouTube, Instagram, and other platforms criticizing the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine in particular. Leo Grasset, a French science blogger whose YouTube account has 1.2 million subscribers, reported he had been contacted, and posted screenshots of some of the e-mails to his Twitter account. In Germany, another social media influencer with a sizable following named Mirko Drotschman also posted screenshots to Twitter of an e-mail he received asking him to participate in a campaign against the Pfizer vaccine. It was eventually established that Fazze was one of the shell companies linked to Serebryanskaya.⁹

Fazze offered to pay bloggers to promote “leaked information” that suggested the death rate among people who had the Pfizer vaccine was almost three times that of the AstraZeneca jab. However, the information provided was not true.

The bloggers pretended to be interested in order to try to find out more and were provided with detailed instructions about what they should say in their videos. The brief that they received instructed them to act as if they had the passion and interest in the topic. It also told them not to mention that the video had a sponsor and pretend they were spontaneously giving advice out of concern for their viewers.

The data the influencers were asked to share had actually been compiled from different sources and taken out of context. It presented the numbers of people who had died in several countries sometime after receiving different Covid vaccines. But just because someone dies after having a vaccine doesn't mean they died because they had the vaccine. They could have died from various causes, such as a car accident.¹⁰

After this story made its way into mass media, at least four other influencers in France and Germany went public to reveal that they also rejected Fazze's attempts to recruit them. However at least two popular influencers, one from India, and another one from Brazil, have apparently taken up the offer. Indian YouTuber Ashkar Techy, who is known for making joke videos, and Brazilian prankster Everson Zoio with three million Instagram followers posted uncharacteristic videos, pushing the same message as the Fazze campaign and shared the fake news links from the agency's brief.¹¹

In August 2021, Facebook announced that it removed 65 Facebook accounts and 243 Instagram accounts for violating its policy against foreign interference that were part of a disinformation campaign mostly run out of Russia.

⁸ “Exclusive: Meet The Murky Russian Network Behind An Anti-Pfizer Disinformation Drive In Europe,” RFE/RL, May 27, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-pfizer-covid-disinformation-serebryanskaya-murky-vaccine-influencers/31277170.html>.

⁹ “Exclusive: Meet The Murky Russian Network Behind An Anti-Pfizer Disinformation Drive In Europe.”

¹⁰ “The YouTubers Who Blew the Whistle on an Anti-Vax Plot,” BBC News, July 25, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-57928647>.

¹¹ “The YouTubers Who Blew the Whistle on an Anti-Vax Plot.”

According to Facebook, the campaign was run in two distinct waves, with five months of inactivity in between. First, in November and December 2020, the network posted memes and comments claiming that the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine would turn people into chimpanzees. Then in May 2021, it questioned the safety of the Pfizer vaccine by posting a fake “leaked” AstraZeneca document. Both phases coincided with periods when governments in different parts of the world, in particular in Latin America, India and the United States, were reportedly discussing the emergency authorizations for these respective vaccines. Facebook called the anti-vaccine campaign a “disinformation laundromat”, which created misleading articles and petitions on multiple forums including Reddit, Medium, Change.org, etc., and used fake accounts on social media, including Facebook and Instagram to amplify false content by employing spam tactics. The campaign also attempted to engage influencers with large following on Instagram, YouTube and TikTok to post content and use particular hashtags without disclosing the origin of the posts. Fazze was eventually banned from the platform.¹²

In October 2021 British tabloid The Sun alleged that a Russian spy “stole” the formula of the vaccine, developed by UK-Swedish company AstraZeneca, and Russia used it to “help create” its own vaccine. The article in the Sun claimed that British security services had told ministers that the blueprint was “stolen by a foreign agent in person,” and that the Sputnik vaccine was copied from that produced by AstraZeneca.¹³ Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which promotes and sells Sputnik V, strenuously denied the allegations.¹⁴

Rand’s analysis of messages that were distributed from January 2020 to July 2020 shows that Russia engaged in subversive information efforts, such as disinformation and propaganda, on the topic of COVID-19. The diversity of the messages and sources could appeal to various audiences across the U.S. political spectrum. Emphasizing divisive content, these disinformation campaigns appear to be aimed at sowing distrust within the United States, amplifying existing sociopolitical divides, damaging the U.S. image, and polluting information space. The overall strategic goal of this campaign is to discredit, weaken, and destabilize the United States.¹⁵

According to a research by the Network Contagion Research Institute (NCRI), a non-profit that studies the spread of misinformation and deception on social media like Facebook and Twitter, there is presently a trend to use disinformation as a means of economic warfare. NCRI believes that Russian propagandists and Internet trolls are increasingly targeting companies with disinformation campaigns that are intended to damage their corporate reputations and stir public animosity.¹⁶

¹² “July 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report,” Facebook (blog), July 2021, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/July-2021-CIB-Report.pdf>.

¹³ “Russian Spies ‘Stole Formula for Oxford/Astra Zeneca Covid Jab and Used It to Create Sputnik Vaccine,’” The Sun, October 10, 2021, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/16381674/russia-stole-formula-oxfords-covid-jab/>.

¹⁴ “Lavrov Slams Allegation Russian Spies Stole AstraZeneca Formula,” Al Jazeera, October 12, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/12/lavrov-slams-allegation-russian-spies-stole-astrazeneca-formula>.

¹⁵ Elise Thomas, Albert Zhang, and Emilia Currey, “COVID-19 Disinformation and Social Media Manipulation: Pro-Russian Vaccine Politics Drives New Disinformation Narratives.”

¹⁶ “The Future of Disinformation Operations and the Coming War on Brands” (Newtork Contagion Research Institute, July 23, 2021), <https://networkcontagion.us/reports/the-future-of-disinformation-operations/>.

The NCRI report discovered that Russian troll outlets spread conspiracy theories on social media with the intention of sowing doubt about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines produced by Pfizer and Moderna. Their goal is to promote the Russian Sputnik V vaccine at the expense of other COVID-19 vaccines, especially in African countries. Even if the propaganda campaign does not succeed in convincing U.S. citizens to choose the Sputnik V vaccine, the spread of the general idea that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are ineffective or even dangerous is valuable to the Russian troll networks.¹⁷

For the report, the researchers analyzed 4 million articles since January 2020 that mentioned U.S. pharmaceutical companies like Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and Pfizer and discovered that known-disinformation sources produced over half-a-million of those articles. The researchers also analyzed over 8 million Twitter posts and noticed a huge uptick of tweets containing the name Pfizer and words associated with conspiracy theories like “plandemic,” “big pharma,” and “scandemic” over the past year and a half. Sometimes, up to 100 of these malicious tweets were posted in a single minute, with surges occurring during the recent U.S. presidential election and when the phase 3 clinical trials of Pfizer’s COVID-19 vaccine were revealed.

In order to produce the report, NCRI identified over 4 million articles since January of 2020 mentioning American pharmaceutical companies involved in COVID-19 vaccine production (Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, and Pfizer), and discovered that known-disinformation sources produced over half-a-million of those articles, and the content from known disinformation outlets generated the most engagement. NCRI also determined that sources connected to the Russian State (like Global Research and RT), and non-state actors (like Natural News and Children’s Health Defense) generated the highest number of online articles on the topic, and those articles have been the most cited in other online articles. NCRI also collected over 8 million original tweets with the term “pfizer” from early 2009 to July 2021, analyzed the prevalence of conspiracy terms in conjunction with mentions of the word “Pfizer”, and found substantial surge in the use of these terms during the contested election of 2020.¹⁸

Tarand expert group believe that the evidence provided above shows that Russia engaged in a well-organized and coordinated information campaign to undermine trust in Western produced vaccines and Western pharmaceutical industry in general, and promote its own Sputnik V vaccine, while also trying to destabilize the Western societies by sowing discord and promoting conspiracy theories. Tarand expert group came to a conclusion that in order to counter this, and prevent being caught off-guard, companies and governments must make resolute efforts for strengthening disinformation defense, and invest in development of analytical and forecasting capabilities.

¹⁷ Jonathan Vanian, “Russian Disinformation Campaigns Are Trying to Sow Distrust of COVID Vaccines, Study Finds,” Fortune, July 23, 2021, <https://fortune.com/2021/07/23/russian-disinformation-campaigns-are-trying-to-sow-distrust-of-covid-vaccines-study-finds/>.

¹⁸ “The Future of Disinformation Operations and the Coming War on Brands.”

February - 2022

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