

## EEAS SPECIAL REPORT UPDATE: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic (UPDATE DECEMBER 2020 - APRIL 2021)

28 April 2021

*Disclaimer: The objective of this report is to provide a snapshot overview of the current trends and insights into disinformation activities related to COVID-19/Coronavirus. The report builds on the findings of previous EEAS special reports on this subject, notably the update covering May-November (2020)<sup>i</sup>. In the period of this period, it became clear that yet another type of information manipulation had manifested itself; an aggressive promotion of one type of vaccines and state strategy while denigrating others. This report draws on open sources, does not provide a comprehensive or complete overview and focusses primarily on the external dimension, in line with the European External Action Service (EEAS) mandate. The report was authored by the EEAS Strategic Communications and Information Analysis Division, which contributes to the EU's efforts to counter disinformation, including through detection, analysis and exposure of disinformation campaigns. In addressing disinformation and identifying and analysing disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the EEAS is working closely with the European Commission, European Parliament services and EU Member States. The EEAS also cooperates on this issue with international partners (G7, NATO and civil society). The results are regularly published on EUvsDisinfo.eu and social media channels. Insights are shared with EU institutions and EU Member States in real time, including through the Rapid Alert System on Disinformation.*

### General Overview

- Disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic, measures taken to contain it and vaccine roll-out campaigns continue to be significant. Since our last special report, issued in December 2020<sup>ii</sup>, the roll-out of different vaccines gained momentum in many countries around the world, and in conjunction with this, vaccine-related disinformation increased and contributed to spreading fear and mistrust in any type of vaccine.
- In parallel to the vaccine roll-outs, the vaccines themselves have become commodities in global public diplomacy and the national promotion of locally-produced vaccines has accelerated. As our analysis documents, since the beginning of 2021 state-sponsored disinformation also intensified, targeting in particular Western-developed vaccines. **“Vaccine diplomacy” has fully replaced “mask diplomacy”.**
- The EU and individual Member States, have also been the targets of disinformation related to the handling of public health measures. The fact that COVID-19 cases continue to rise (which is reported to the public in a trustworthy fashion), is being twisted into disinformation attacking the EU's response to the pandemic and cast as a failure of democracies and open societies.
- Russia and China, in particular, continue to intensively promote their own state-produced vaccines around the world. The 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.** Both Russia

and China are using state-controlled media, networks of proxy media outlets and social media, including official diplomatic social media accounts, to achieve these goals. Since the beginning of 2021 more than 100 [new examples](#)<sup>iii</sup> of pro-Kremlin disinformation claims about vaccination have been added to the EUvsDisinfo database.

- During December 2020 and the first quarter of 2021, the **Russian campaign to promote the Sputnik V vaccine has accelerated and developed into a *whole-of-government* approach including state authorities, state companies and state mass media in almost daily interventions**<sup>iv</sup>. 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<sup>v</sup>.
- In this context, pro-Kremlin media outlets, including the official Sputnik V Twitter account, have sought 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.
- **China continues to promote its vaccines as a “global public good”**, emphasising the accessibility and stable supply of Chinese vaccines and presenting them as more suitable for developing countries<sup>vi</sup> and also the Western Balkans<sup>vii</sup>. Such display of success contrasts with the negative framing of the Western response to the pandemic in Chinese state-controlled channels that have relied on misleading narratives to sow doubt about the safety of Western vaccines and the origin of the virus.
- In the **Western Balkans**, conspiracy theories surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic followed the global narratives, including disinformation about the pharmaceutical industry and the origins of the virus,<sup>viii</sup> and have been amplified with the official start of vaccination campaigns. Social media - especially Facebook and messaging applications - continued to play an important role as [distribution channels](#)<sup>ix</sup> of these narratives. In the context of COVID-19, Chinese media and officials have widely promoted the supply and planned production of Chinese vaccines in Serbia, which reflects the country’s important role in promoting **China’s vaccine diplomacy and overall positive image in the Western Balkans**<sup>x</sup>. The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) has been also actively engaging in the region , promoting the deliveries of Sputnik V<sup>xi</sup> (e.g. in Serbia) and capitalising on the recent decisions of some governments in the region towards the procurement or authorisation<sup>xii</sup> of the Russian vaccine.
- Pro-Kremlin disinformation towards the **Eastern Partnership countries** is tailored to the local situation and is often conveyed in the local language(s). While the main narratives originate from Russian state-controlled media and chiefly focus on promoting Sputnik V, denigrating Western vaccines, and blaming the EU for its failure in vaccination or its COVID-19 handling, there is also country-specific focus targeting individual governments or local situations. Such specific focus includes: **blaming the Ukrainian government** of “genocide” over its refusal to buy Sputnik V; **praising the Belarusian government’s** handling of COVID-19 including the cooperation with Russia and Minsk using and producing the Sputnik V; **criticising Georgia** for its decisions to use COVAX-provided vaccines and not Sputnik V, and accusing Tbilisi of accepting orders from the West. Russian state media outlets, including RT and the Sputnik

news agency, have been used systematically and local pro-Kremlin proxies have mirrored the main narratives as well<sup>xiii</sup>.

- Disinformation related to COVID-19 and vaccines continues to spread widely on social media in the EU and its neighbourhood. **Foreign state actors have sensationalised and misrepresented information about the safety of Western-made vaccines<sup>xiv</sup> and fuelled anti-vaccination movements within the EU<sup>xv</sup>.** While social media platforms took actions to curb the spread of the “infodemic”, global civil activist network **Avaz** found that more than a half (56%) of fact-checked misleading content on Facebook in major non-English European languages was not acted upon, **exposing non-English speaking Europeans to greater risk of encountering disinformation online<sup>xvi</sup>.**

In detail:

Pro-Kremlin media target the European Medicines Agency

- During the monitoring period, pro-Kremlin media have continuously targeted the European Medicines Agency<sup>xvii</sup> (EMA), accusing it of **deliberately delaying the review of Sputnik V vaccine** and of **political bias**.
- Pro-Kremlin media have tried to sow confusion over the timing of the submission of the official application for a rolling review of Sputnik V vaccine with the European Medicines Agency<sup>xviii</sup>. While it is not definitely clear whether the initial premature claims of the submission of the application were a deliberate step or the result of a **mistake<sup>xix</sup>** of Sputnik V developers, pro-Kremlin **sources<sup>xx</sup>** have exploited the situation to fuel allegations that the EMA was **deliberately postponing<sup>xxi</sup>** the review of Sputnik V vaccine. These allegations have spread beyond the known pro-Kremlin media outlets into the Twitter sphere.
- Pro-Kremlin outlets have also accused the EMA and the EU in general of **political bias<sup>xxii</sup>** against the Russian-made vaccine. Such accusations were fuelled by personal attacks on the **EMA<sup>xxiii</sup>** and **EU officials<sup>xxiv</sup>** and, in at least one case, were facilitated by false claims published in a press release of the **Russian Foreign Intelligence Service<sup>xxv</sup>**.
- The official Twitter account of Sputnik V combines advertising of the Russian-made vaccine with amplification of pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives about an alleged Western bias against the Russian vaccine and, more specifically, “**big pharma<sup>xxvi</sup>**” and Western politicians conspiring against Russia. The account has lashed out at **European politicians<sup>xxvii</sup>** and **media<sup>xxviii</sup>** whenever questions over the development and trials of Sputnik V were raised, and made implicit threats that Sputnik V might be **withdrawn<sup>xxix</sup>** from the EMA approval process altogether.

## Russian and Chinese state-controlled media accuse the EU (the West) of politicising the vaccines

- The general message spread by Chinese state-controlled media is **that Western countries politicise the vaccines and contribute to a “vaccine divide”<sup>xxx</sup>**, thus stressing the **difference between the Chinese and Western approaches**. This overall narrative is punctuated by negative reports on the EU’s vaccination process, accusations of hoarding vaccines at the expense of poorer countries and mishandling of AstraZeneca’s vaccine.<sup>xxxi</sup> In Chinese state media, there is an **ongoing attempt to blame “Western media” for alleged double standards<sup>xxxii</sup> and lack of professionalism<sup>xxxiii</sup> when it comes to covering Chinese vaccines**. Chinese media and officials accuse any critical voices of “anti-China spirit”, “spreading rumours” and “lies”<sup>xxxiv</sup>. Even the use of expressions such as “China’s vaccine diplomacy” has been qualified as “disinformation”<sup>xxxv</sup> by Chinese officials and media.
- Pro-Kremlin media have framed the vaccination issue in geopolitical terms, since the roll-out of the Sputnik V vaccine in August 2020, creating a narrative that the West and the EU were **predisposed<sup>xxxvi</sup>** against the Sputnik V vaccine. Various iterations of this narrative continued to appear throughout the monitoring period in multiple languages (**Greek<sup>xxxvii</sup>**, **Italian<sup>xxxviii</sup>**, **Bulgarian<sup>xxxix</sup>**, **Spanish<sup>xl</sup>**, **Czech<sup>xli</sup>**, **Polish<sup>xlii</sup>**, **Lithuanian<sup>xliii</sup>** and others), alleging that Europe and the West were waging a **vaccines war<sup>xliv</sup>** against Russia and seeking to **discredit<sup>xlv</sup>** the Sputnik V vaccine.
- Closely related to these narratives were disinformation messages alleging that the EU was **prioritising (geo)politics<sup>xlvi</sup>** and **corporate profit<sup>xlvii</sup>** over the well-being of its citizens (see also **here<sup>xlviii</sup>** and **here<sup>xlix</sup>**). Unfounded claims that EU officials were representing the interests of pharmaceutical companies rather than citizens were **echoed at the highest level in the Kremlin** (see here amplification in **Spanish<sup>l</sup>** and **French<sup>li</sup>**).
- Pro-Kremlin media outlets targeting European audiences have also claimed that renouncing Sputnik V vaccine would mean European suicide<sup>lii</sup> and blamed the EU for unfair distribution of vaccines<sup>liii</sup>. Pro-Kremlin media catering to international audiences have also claimed that **Brexit saved the UK from the “vaccine chaos”<sup>liv</sup>** engulfing the EU. Taken together, such narratives indicate an **effort to sow division within the EU**.
- To further support the narrative that the West is trying to “discredit” the Sputnik V vaccine, multiple pro-Kremlin outlets in Russia have referred to “anonymous sources” inside the Kremlin who alleged that the West was preparing a large-scale smear campaign including **fake footage of mass patient deaths<sup>lv</sup>** following inoculation with Sputnik V. Such messages were also circulated in Russian-language **Twitter<sup>lvi</sup>** conversations, with some pro-Kremlin outlets **amplifying** them for international audiences<sup>lvii</sup>.

## Commercial aspects around Sputnik V – a liability to solve via localising production

- As the vaccine roll-out gained pace in many countries around the world during the first quarter of 2021, the **commercial aspect of vaccines** has gained more prominence in the Russian narrative claiming that Sputnik V should be having its fair share of the by-now considerable

global market for vaccines<sup>lviii</sup>. However, **Russian domestic industry capacity to produce vaccines is very small compared with China**, which speedily exported millions of vaccine doses<sup>lix</sup>. Sputnik V has been donated in rather small, PR-style packages, for instance to 1,020 people in Armenia<sup>lx</sup>, and so far delivered globally in much smaller quantities than Chinese exports. This liability of not being able rapidly to satisfy potential global customers is addressed by advocating **local production**<sup>lxi</sup> under a license and has been also turned into a disinformation asset; perhaps to buy time before production can be set up. The owner behind the Sputnik V production, the state-controlled Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), has recently appeared more frequently in news reporting<sup>lxii</sup>. Many of RDIF's statements accuse the EU of delaying the approval of Sputnik V, of mounting [unspecified] 'provocations' against Sputnik V, of attempting to slow down local production and of running a 'smear campaign against Sputnik V' to keep the vaccine out of important markets and to bow to western 'Big Pharma'-lobby against Sputnik V. All this can help explain why Sputnik V is not yet on the market in desired quantities.

- To engage audiences on social media, official Sputnik V accounts have been promoting summer trips to Russia, which will include vaccination with Sputnik V<sup>lxiii</sup>. Although it is stated that such trips will only start in July 2021 and that Russian officials have earlier ruled out the idea of vaccinating foreigners ahead of local population<sup>lxiv</sup>, the Spanish edition of RT has already reported on a number of German tourists travelling to Russia for the vaccine<sup>lxv</sup>. The international media has also investigated such trips<sup>lxvi</sup>.
- Russian state-controlled media also publicized vaccination of foreign tourists to domestic audiences, claiming that a group of German tourists wanted the Sputnik V vaccine so much that they were exceptionally allowed to come to Russia despite travelling restrictions<sup>lxvii</sup>. Such reports further advance the narrative of Europeans desperately turning to Russia for vaccines.

#### Russian and Chinese state-controlled media target Western vaccines

- **Both Chinese official channels and pro-Kremlin media have amplified content** on alleged side-effects of the Western vaccines<sup>lxviii</sup>, misrepresenting and sensationalising international media reports and associating deaths to the **Pfizer/BioNTech** vaccine in Norway<sup>lxix</sup>, Spain<sup>lxx</sup> and elsewhere<sup>lxxi</sup>. Selective highlighting of the potential vaccine side-effects and disregarding contextual information or ongoing research helps to present the Western vaccines as unsafe, has the potential to fuel anti-vaccination moods in Europe and beyond, and reinforces the promotion of Chinese and Russian vaccines as alternatives<sup>lxxii</sup>.
- Pro-Kremlin media actively follows international media reports to highlight suspected side-effects of the Western vaccines. For example, news reports about possible links between the **AstraZeneca** vaccine and rare cases of blood clots were intensively broadcasted on all Russian state-controlled media platforms and pro-Kremlin proxies starting in early March 2020. This pushed aside the prior focus on undermining the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, which barely got a mention during the rest of March. More recently though, the official Sputnik V Twitter account has compared the AstraZeneca vaccine favourably vis-à-vis the Pfizer/BioNTech one<sup>lxxiii</sup>.
- The fate of the AstraZeneca vaccine received huge prominence in the pro-Kremlin media. The main narratives revolved around the '**EU in chaos and COVID-fatigue**', with news reports

becoming longer and coupled with carefully edited reports about widespread protests in the EU; citizens protesting lock-down measures; violent clashes and brutal police; cities out of control during riots or collapse of public services - as coined in prime time, in Russian main state TV<sup>lxxxiv</sup>.

- In some cases, **mRNA vaccines** were specifically targeted both by the pro-Kremlin<sup>lxxxv</sup> and Chinese state-controlled media. While early reports on the Western vaccines were relatively neutral<sup>lxxxvi</sup>, Chinese media outlets soon started comparing the vaccines and approaches<sup>lxxxvii</sup>, highlighting the allergic reactions allegedly associated to the Pfizer vaccine<sup>lxxxviii</sup> but also the delays, allergic reactions, and risk for elderly people<sup>lxxxix</sup> to **sow doubt about the safety of mRNA vaccines in general**<sup>lxxx</sup> and contrasting these to inactivated vaccines<sup>lxxxi</sup>.
- Notably, Russian state-controlled media are largely silent about **China-made vaccines**. In comparison with other policy areas, where Russian media openly promote relations with China, Chinese vaccine brands like Sinovac or Sinopharm are kept out of the picture. An analysis of Russian and Chinese messaging by GMF's Alliance for Securing Democracy also found that Russia and China aggressively promoted their own vaccines but not one another's.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

#### The revival of the “secret labs” narrative

- As vaccine roll-out started in earnest, conspiracy theories about the origins of coronavirus, Bill Gates, 5G and other topics described in the previous reports<sup>lxxxiii</sup> largely faded from the prominent pro-Kremlin media outlets. Nonetheless, Russian media recently quoted the secretary of the Russian Security Council repeating unfounded allegations about the existence of US-controlled bio-laboratories along Russian and Chinese borders<sup>lxxxiv</sup>. In 2020, allegations about “US secret labs<sup>lxxxv</sup>” fuelled conspiracy theories online about the origins of coronavirus.
- Chinese top officials have also been actively calling for an investigation at the US biological laboratory Fort Detrick based on the conspiracy narrative that the virus could have originated there, and referred to previously debunked Russian claims raising doubts about the activities of US-funded laboratories in Ukraine<sup>lxxxvi</sup>.

#### Other regions

- Across the **Western Balkans region**, disinformation narratives related to vaccine safety and negative side effects (especially of the Western vaccines) were amplified and distorted by different actors, including mainstream and traditional media. Subsequently, the situation has further catalysed the decline of trust in vaccines and immunisation among the population<sup>lxxxvii</sup>. Pro-Kremlin media outlets in the region (e.g. Sputnik Serbia) continued to build a positive narrative around the Sputnik V, exploiting every occasion to discredit “Western” vaccines (especially Biontech/Pfizer and AstraZeneca) as well as the EU's approval and internal distribution process<sup>lxxxviii</sup>.
- Fact-checking organisations in **Turkey** continued their COVID-19 related work, with an increasing focus on false claims about the vaccines. Among the claims fact-checked by

Teyit<sup>lxxxix</sup>, a member of the International Fact-Checking Network, was the claim that people vaccinated with Sinovac would not be able to get a Schengen visa, a narrative that was spread on various Turkish social media accounts and news websites. The claim was based on a false interpretation of the discussion around the **Digital Green Certificate** aimed at facilitating travel inside the EU.

- Pro-Kremlin media operating in the **Arabic language** continues to portray the EU as plagued by divisions<sup>xc</sup>, incapable of handling the COVID-19 pandemic and actively seeking to discredit the Sputnik V vaccine<sup>xcj</sup>. In some cases, Russia is presented as a humanitarian actor saving the world from the pandemic, in contrast with the “profit-oriented” EU<sup>xcii</sup>.
- Research by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue<sup>xciii</sup> (ISD) indicates that the number of Facebook users who like Arab-language Facebook pages peddling COVID-19 conspiracies and misinformation has been increasing since September 2020. According to ISD, Arabic-language conspiracy hubs are masquerading as independent institutions, think tanks and research initiatives and regularly amplify COVID-19 disinformation originating in the West.
- Amid substantial vaccine-scepticism / hesitancy across most **Eastern Partnership countries**, ranging from 30% to over 50% of the total population according to different national studies<sup>xciv</sup>, there is a promotion of both vaccine and COVID-19-related pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives via Russian-language platforms as well as via pro-Kremlin outlets in local languages.
- **Ukraine** and its government have been the subject of particularly harsh criticism by Russian state-controlled and pro-Kremlin media in Ukraine. The Ukrainian government was accused of genocide<sup>xcv</sup> of the Ukrainian population and of refusing to buy the Sputnik V vaccine. The accusation of a ‘genocide’ policy is linked to Kyiv being presented as a ‘puppet of the US and acting on Washington’s orders<sup>xcvi</sup>’.
- In **Belarus**, pro-Kremlin outlets first downplayed the COVID-19 problem in Belarus, claiming that Minsk’s response was very successful and at the same time mocking western vaccines. Later, when vaccination became a priority in Russia and in Belarus due to the rapid spread of the virus, the policy of the Belarusian authorities and pro-Kremlin narratives swung around to embrace vaccination and curb anti-vax messages while criticising EU officials for groundlessly attacking Sputnik V<sup>xcvii</sup>.
- In **Armenia**, COVID-19 was not on top of the agenda as the dire consequences of the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war -- from political crisis to acute socio-economic problems for large groups of refugees -- dominated the information environment. Later, during the first quarter of 2021, pro-Kremlin outlets heavily promoted vaccination with Sputnik V while denigration of western vaccines continued<sup>xcviii</sup>.
- Toward **Georgia**, the Russian state news agency Sputnik’s channels catering to mainland Georgia and the breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia play an active role in disinformation. They replicated and amplified criticism towards Tbilisi for relying on the COVAX platform and not betting on the Russian vaccine<sup>xcix</sup>. The outlets promote Sputnik V vaccine as well as disinformation against western vaccines, amplifying messages about their

risks or inefficiency, which also contribute to vaccine scepticism as Tbilisi has opted for Pfizer/BioNTech, AstraZeneca and Moderna vaccines<sup>c</sup>.

- Also in **Moldova**, pro-Kremlin media amplified the negative narratives around western vaccines while Chisinau had opted for the Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca. Pro-Kremlin outlets play a significant role in Transnistria where local authorities decided to wait for the Sputnik V to be delivered and reject the AstraZeneca vaccine<sup>ci</sup>.
- In **Azerbaijan**, President Aliyev's criticism<sup>cii</sup> towards developed countries for not distributing vaccines in time as promised, like AstraZeneca to his country, received ample attention from pro-Kremlin outlets<sup>ciii</sup>.

#### Disinformation and vaccine hesitancy inside Russia

- **Domestically**, pro-Kremlin media deliver heavily biased reporting about the shortfalls of vaccine delivery processes and vaccination efforts in Europe. Public discontent in individual Member States with national restrictive measures has featured prominently in Russian state media. In this regard, the COVID-19 pandemic has become just another brick in the standard narrative of showing how bad everyday life is in the EU. During the first months of 2021, the Russian narrative sharpened to claim that the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the EU system's dysfunctionality<sup>civ</sup>.
- Although Russian-state controlled media present Russian vaccination efforts in a favourable light (and often in contrast with the "dire" situation in Europe), remarkably, there is still no systematic reporting of overall vaccination data in Russia. However, according to independent Russian fact-checkers<sup>cv</sup>, Russian state-controlled media ignore the fact that in most EU countries the vaccination rate is higher than in Russia. Overall, **vaccine scepticism** remains significant in Russia: according to opinion pollster Levada Center, on 1 March the estimated<sup>cvi</sup> vaccine hesitancy stood at 62% and was rising during the last months.

#### Social media platforms and online media

- The research of non-profit organization **Avaaz** warns that more than a half (56%) of fact-checked content in major non-English European languages is not acted upon by Facebook, exposing non-English speaking Europeans to greater risk of seeing and interacting with COVID-19 misinformation. The research indicates that measures are lacking for 69% of examined content in Italian, 58% in French, 50% in Portuguese, and 33% in Spanish.
- The gaps in Facebook efforts to tackle COVID-19 misinformation are also noted in the research of the **Institute for Strategic Dialogue**<sup>cvi</sup>, which found that Arabic-language COVID-19 misinformation pages on Facebook regularly amplify and localise COVID-19 misinformation themes that were first seeded in the West, using Arabic subtitling or voiceovers often unencumbered by moderation and fact-checking efforts.



- The situation is further aggravated by the fact that foreign state-actors like **Russia, China, or Iran have been sensationalizing and mis-representing information about the safety of Western-made vaccines** and promoting the theory that “mainstream” or “Western” media outlets provide biased coverage of Russian and Chinese vaccines, according to research conducted by the **Alliance for Securing Democracy**<sup>cviii</sup>. Of the three studied countries, Russia was the most likely to suggest links between the Pfizer vaccine and deaths of vaccine recipients.
- Independent global media organization OpenDemocracy found that **content from Russian state-controlled media like RT Deutsch and SNA (Sputnik) questioning scientific consensus about the pandemic and the efficacy of face-masks and vaccine was widely shared in German-language Telegram groups**<sup>ciix</sup>, thus fuelling mass protests against German government’s response to COVID-19.
- The US Global Engagement Centre identified at least four websites<sup>cx</sup> serving as **fronts for Russian intelligence agencies** spreading false and misleading information to undermine confidence in Western vaccines.
- Research by the **Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH)** conducted in 2020 found that the COVID-19 pandemic presented a historic opportunity for existing anti-vaccination movements to recruit new followers. The investigation of 409 English-language anti-vaccination social media accounts showed that these have over 58 million followers<sup>cxii</sup>. According to the CCDH, such a following could be worth up to 1 billion USD in annual revenue for social media giants<sup>cxiii</sup>. Research by the **Global Disinformation Index**<sup>cxiiii</sup> showed that a number of popular commercial brands may be unknowingly funding COVID-19 disinformation sites through ads.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-update-may-november/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-update-may-november/>

<sup>iii</sup> [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=vaccine&date=&per\\_page=](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=vaccine&date=&per_page=)

<sup>iv</sup> For example President Putin appearing regularly in state media reports promoting Sputnik V and commenting on western vaccines. Recently in his State of the Union [speech](#) 21 April 2021; The Russian MFA regular press briefings found via [here](#), Russia’s state Investment Fund owning the Sputnik V production ([here](#)), state media like Channel One’s special, long-term feature programmes; this feature on COVID-19 ([here](#)).

- <sup>v</sup> For example on 30 March 2021 Russian Foreign Intelligence service released a press statement accusing “European bureaucrats” of taking “urgent measures” to discredit the Russian vaccine. <http://svr.gov.ru/smi/2021/03/o-podkhode-es-k-vaktsinatsii-naseleniya.htm> More recently, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was quoted by the Russian media as accusing the West of trying to “neutralize” the positive effects of Sputnik V vaccine, in the backdrop of its own problems countering COVID-19. <https://ria.ru/20210419/vaktsina-1728945875.html>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1213185.shtml>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215005.shtml>;  
<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1214904.shtml>
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Conspiracies-and-COVID19-in-the-Balkan-English-2.pdf>
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/medij/facebook-profil-i-stranice>
- <sup>x</sup> [https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/01/serbias-vaccine-diplomacy-isnt-as-benign-as-it-looks/?utm\\_source=Balkan+Insight+Newsletters&utm\\_campaign=5f45841521-BI\\_PREMIUM&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_4027db42dc-5f45841521-319799633](https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/01/serbias-vaccine-diplomacy-isnt-as-benign-as-it-looks/?utm_source=Balkan+Insight+Newsletters&utm_campaign=5f45841521-BI_PREMIUM&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_4027db42dc-5f45841521-319799633)
- Serbia seems to encourage some competition to boost vaccination rates and have plans for local production of both Sputnik V and Sinopharm vaccines, in addition to the current purchases of AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNTech. On 11 March Serbian officials [announced](#) the intended start of Sputnik V vaccine production in Serbia by 20 May, and President Vučić, while visiting the UAE, [stated](#) that he agreed with the UAE and China that the production of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine in Serbia should begin by 15 October 2021.
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://m.facebook.com/RusEmbassyAlbania/posts/3656933377733749>
- <sup>xii</sup> [https://rdif.ru/Eng\\_fullNews/6503/](https://rdif.ru/Eng_fullNews/6503/)
- <sup>xiii</sup> A scan of RT and Sputnik News agency reporting on its many different language platforms shows the simultaneous promoting of key news stories. See: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-battle-for-shoulders-which-vaccine-should-be-injected/> or here <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/dizzy-by-vaccine-disinfo-capturing-vaccines-rollout-in-the-eus-neighbourhood-and-russia/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russia-china-iran-covid-vaccine-disinformation/>
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/germanys-covid-sceptics-fuelled-by-russian-media-and-far-right-conspiracies/>
- <sup>xvi</sup> [https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook\\_neglect\\_europe\\_infodemic/](https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/facebook_neglect_europe_infodemic/)
- <sup>xvii</sup> In December 2020 the European Medicines Agency came under a cyberattack, following which unlawfully accessed documents and email correspondence related to COVID-19 medicines and vaccines have been leaked on the internet. The criminal investigation into the data breach was launched. The Dutch media have implicated Chinese and Russian hackers in attacking the EMA. See: <https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/news/cyberattack-ema-update-6> and <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/russian-and-chinese-hackers-gained-access-to-ema~bdc61ba59/>
- <sup>xviii</sup> Claims regarding the submission of the rolling review application to the European Medicines Agency appeared on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 2021, with multiple Russian media outlets claiming that the application was submitted on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. More recently Sputnik V Twitter account claimed that the application was submitted on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January 2021. The European Medicines Agency denied the claims on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2021, and published a press release once the rolling review of Sputnik V vaccine began on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March, 2021. For details see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fsbz8YhS3Vs> and <https://ria.ru/20210209/vaktsina-1596631281.html>  
<https://twitter.com/sputnikvaccine/status/1375475322725019650>  
<https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/news/clarification-sputnik-v-vaccine-eu-approval-process>  
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- lviii <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2021-04-18/405100-vypusk-programmy-voskresnoe-vremya-v-21-00-ot-18-04-2021>, minute count 15:15 – 21:20
- lix President Putin has occasionally hinted that Sputnik V should be given to Russians first before other markets are served. See also: [https://pism.pl/publications/Russias\\_Problems\\_in\\_the\\_Vaccine\\_Race](https://pism.pl/publications/Russias_Problems_in_the_Vaccine_Race)

<sup>lx</sup> [http://arka.am/en/news/society/ambassador a batch of russian sputnik v vaccine to arrive in armenia very soon/](http://arka.am/en/news/society/ambassador-a-batch-of-russian-sputnik-v-vaccine-to-arrive-in-armenia-very-soon/)

<sup>lxi</sup> Claims of readiness to begin the production in Italy, Germany, France and Spain featured prominently on Russian media, for example on 15 March 2021. However earlier on March 9 2021, France denied that French companies signed an agreement for production of Sputnik V. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EfNEwO6OQ>; <https://rg.ru/2021/03/15/sputnik-v-budut-vypuskat-v-italii-ispanii-francii-i-germanii.html>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-france-vaccine-idUSKBN2B11M0>  
Recently, localised production of Sputnik V was agreed in India and Belarus. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mt-ZNmC0om4> and <https://tass.com/world/1270469>

<sup>lxii</sup> The main Russian State TV media Channel One run weekly updates promoting this view. On such example See: <https://www.1tv.ru/news/2021-04-11/404644-vypusk-programmy-vremya-v-21-00-ot-11-04-2021>, minute count 02:30 – 12:08, See also there interview with Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of RDIF.

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<sup>lxix</sup> <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/29-people-have-died-in-norway-after-receiving-the-pfizer-vaccine/>;

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<sup>lxxi</sup> <https://twitter.com/Nrg8000/status/1351081139700690953>; <https://factcheck.afp.com/social-media-posts-misrepresent-pfizer-biontech-covid-19-vaccinations-germany>;

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