

Sputnik V: Not Just a Vaccine

Narratives travelling the information space

On March 1, 2021, a plane loaded with 200,000 Sputnik V vaccine doses was greeted to an ostentatious welcome in Slovakia by (then) Prime Minister Igor Matovič and (then) Minister of Health Marek Krajčí. Officials informed during the press conference, held directly on the airport runway, that two million doses of the

vaccine had been purchased from Russia. Slovakia became the second EU member state (the other being Hungary) to procure the jab even though it lacks approval from the European Medicines Agency (EMA). The decision, in turn, provided fuel to Moscow's propaganda machinery and contributed to numerous Kremlin

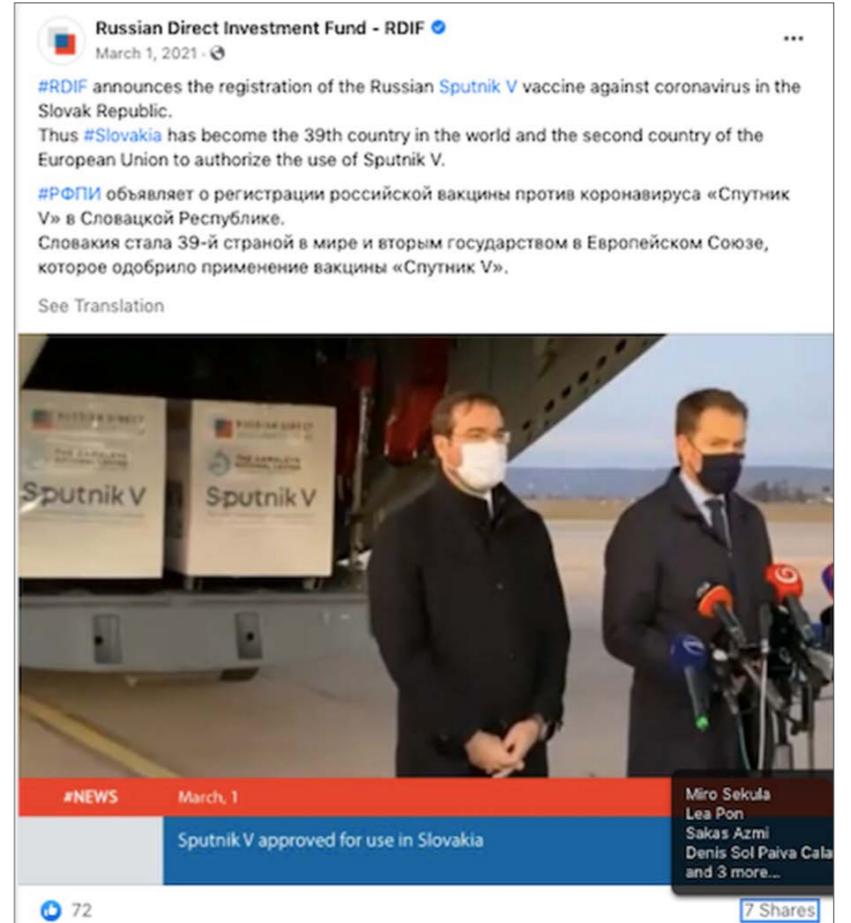
information operations. This includes the spread of misleading information and a concerted press campaign conducted by the vaccine producer. The events also ultimately sparked an internal political crisis in Slovakia.

Touting ‘great’ accomplishments

The target audience of Kremlin communication efforts, first and foremost, remains the Russian public. Slovakia’s vaccine purchase was promoted widely by Russian domestic media outlets. The Russian news agency TASS, for its part, distorted Slovak polling data to claim that 74% of Slovaks wanted the Sputnik V vaccine.¹ While the original TASS article was later amended, misinformation, purporting that a majority of Slovaks prefer the Sputnik V, continued to permeate across Russia media.²

This disinformation was also disseminated by the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), a Sputnik V investor, and the Kremlin press machinery immediately following the arrival of the first planned shipment of vaccines. “*Thus Slovakia has become the 39th country in the world and the second country of the European Union to authorize the use of Sputnik V. The vaccine was approved under the emergency use authorization procedure. The approval is based on the results of the clinical trials of Sputnik V in Russia and a comprehensive assessment of the vaccine by experts in Slovakia,*” claimed a RDIF press release dated March 1st. And Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, asserted that “*In Europe Sputnik V vaccine has been approved in Slovakia, Hungary, San-Marino, Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska, Belarus and Russia with other countries of the region also showing strong interest in it.*”³

Despite these declarations, the Slovak State Institute for Drug Control had not yet carried out its approval process to authorize administration of the Sputnik V vaccine.



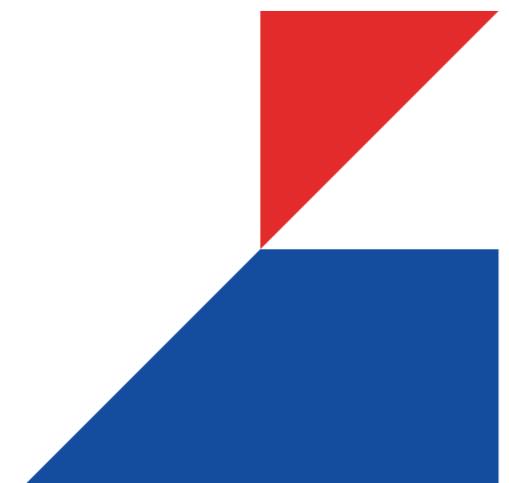
Source: Facebook

The growing number of countries procuring and approving the Russian vaccine was repeatedly circulated on social media platforms. And while (pro-)Kremlin media outlets and institutions have boasted about the rising approval of the Russian vaccine in the world and its efficacy, the same media

outlets have peddled disinformation about Western vaccines, as the official Sputnik V vaccine Twitter account demonstrates.⁴

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1 Commentary by a Slovak journalist debunking the TASS article: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/869835/koronavirus-ako-slovaci-podla-niektojich-ruskych-medii-zaregistrovali-sputnik-v/>; amended article: <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/10809553>
2 <https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/284846/>; <https://ria.ru/20210301/vaktsina-1599495548.html>
3 https://rdif.ru/Eng_fullNews/6479/
4 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-disinformation-campaign-aims-to-undermine-confidence-in-pfizer-other-covid-19-vaccines-u-s-officials-say-11615129200>

Examples of Sputnik V vaccine promotion on social media



Source: Twitter



Russian TV programme Vesti News spreads disinformation about AstraZeneca vaccine, claiming it will turn people into monkeys.
Source: EUvsDisinfo⁷

Examples of communication about Western vaccines and information campaigns

RT ONLINE direct اسأل أكثر RT

Mix Software Sports Economy Corona news

An expert warns the Iraqi government of the complications of the "AstraZeneca" vaccine

Arab world news | Publication date: 12.04.2021 | 12:43 GMT

نعتذر.. في المواد القديمة الصور غير متوفرة

Falah Al-Saadi, a former expert at the International Federation of the Red Cross, warned today, Monday, the Iraqi government of the complications of the "AstraZeneca" vaccine

Mirko Drotschmann @MrWissen2Go

Sehr interessant: Eine Agentur meldet sich und fragt, ob ich Teil einer „Informationskampagne“ sein will. Es geht darum, einen Link zu angeblich geleakten Dokumenten zu Todesfällen bei Corona-Impfungen zu teilen. Gegen Geld. Sitz der Agentur: London. Wohnort des CEO: Moskau.

Very interesting: An agency contacts me and asks if I want to be part of an "information campaign". It's about sharing a link to allegedly leaked documents on deaths from corona vaccinations. Against money. Agency seat: London. Residence of the CEO: Moscow.

INFORMATION campaign

My name is [REDACTED]

I am engaged in an information campaign regarding the Covid-19 vaccine. The data leak showed a significant number of deaths after the Pfizer vaccination. We would like to invite you to share this information link - [REDACTED]

Please send us statistics on the age of your subscribers in social networks (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok) and how much it would cost!

Best regards,

German influencer and blogger, Mirko Drotschmann, is approached to take part in an "information campaign" against the Pfizer vaccine.⁸
Source: Twitter

Sputnik V leads to government crisis

The Slovak deal was negotiated by the then prime minister and health minister, both OĽaNO party members. But the agreement failed to garner the backing of the entire government. The controversy contributed to a coalition crisis, with two coalition party members threatening to leave the government.⁹ A few public officials, including Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivan Korčok, sought to underscore the implications of Slovakia's purchase of a vaccine that had not yet undergone proper EMA scrutiny. As the coalition crisis took shape and pro-Kremlin actors circulated propaganda, Minister Korčok noted that "there is only one explanation: it is not just a vaccine, it is a tool of hybrid warfare."¹⁰

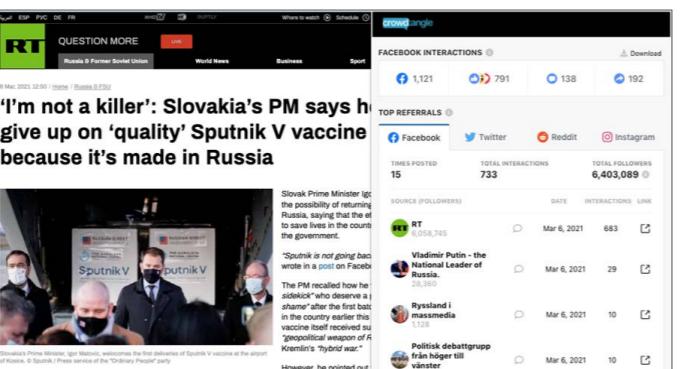
These critics of the deal, however, were publicly undermined by Prime Minister Matovič's adamant refusal to withdraw the contract. "I cannot refuse to save our people with a quality vaccine just because it is made in Russia ... I am not a killer," he proclaimed.¹¹ Matovič's statement, notably, was immediately picked up by Russian outlets and amplified to further promotion of the vaccine. RT, the Russian state-controlled international television network, published



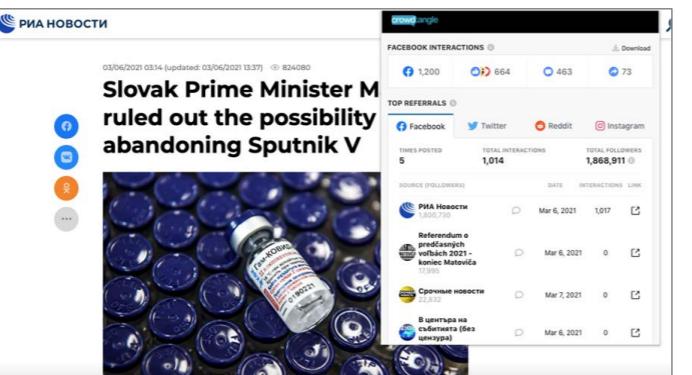
Source: RT

an article¹² disseminating the comments to 6.4 million unique users on Facebook. The article was diffused on Facebook by, among others, the pages and groups of the Russian Embassy in Jamaica, Central Military Academy Alumni Association of the Republic of China, the Pan African Hub, Justice for Global South and the Swedish Facebook group Politisk debattgrupp från höger till vänster¹³ (Political debate group from right to left), reaching a variety of audiences the world over.

A similar article was published by Ria Novosti¹⁴, a Russian state-owned domestic news agency, potentially reaching an additional 1.8 million (or more) Facebook users.



Source: RT, CrowdTangle Extension



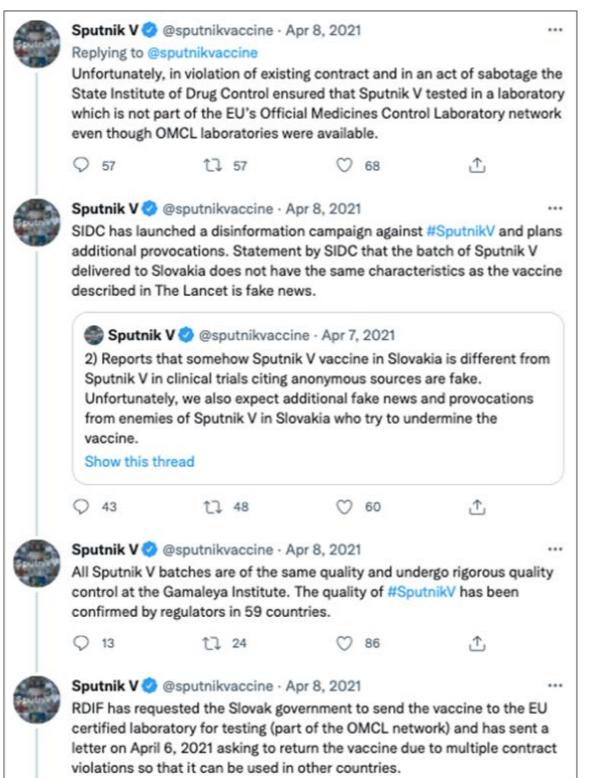
Source: Ria Novosti, CrowdTangle Extension

Barbs directed at medical experts

The bid to gain approval of and administer the Sputnik V vaccine in Slovakia also sparked caustic attacks directed at leading medical authorities and Slovak State Institute for Drug Control (SUKL) officials by both Slovak¹⁵ and Russian actors. These attacks came after the Slovak drug agency declared that it was unable to evaluate the Russian vaccine due to a lack of information provided by Russian developers. The agency further indicated that the 'Slovak' batches showed different characteristics than those used in studies published in the Lancet peer-reviewed medical journal.¹⁶

The claims were vehemently contested and derided as "fake news" by RDIF.¹⁷ And the Twitter account for the Sputnik V vaccine accused SUKL of sabotage.¹⁸

Russian actors, far and wide through tweets and other information channels, claimed an intensive disinformation campaign had been waged against the Sputnik V vaccine



Source: Twitter

12 <https://www.rt.com/russia/517405-slovakia-sputnik-vaccine-matovic/>

13 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/666623716711188/permalink/5434320036608175>

14 <https://ria.ru/20210306/sputnik-v-1600169588.html>

15 <https://spravy.pravda.sk/domace/clanok/584759-o-lano-stoji-za-matovicom-expremier-utoci-na-batovu-kyticou/>

16 <https://dennikn.sk/2333976/sputnik-v-u-nas-nie-je-ten-isty-ako-v-lancete-statny-ustav-nema-dost-informacii-na-to-aby-odporuci-ockovanie/>

17 <https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/08/slovakia-told-to-return-sputnik-v-vaccines-amid-row-over-their-quality>

18 <https://twitter.com/sputnikvaccine/status/1380158704704761861>

in Slovakia.¹⁹ The Slovak drug agency was particularly singled out.

An analysis of Twitter accounts that retweeted²⁰ Sputnik V tweets using the TruthNest application revealed that accounts operating in or based, among others, in several countries of Latin

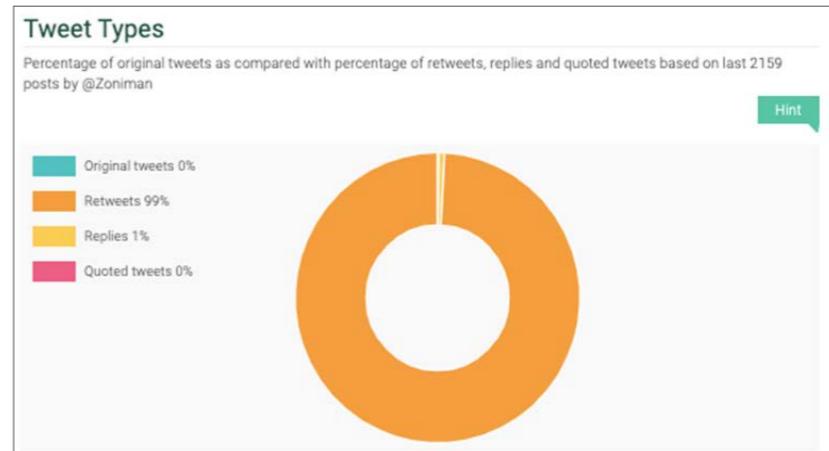
America or Russia were particularly active. According to TruthNest, most of these social media accounts showed signs characteristic of automated/inauthentic accounts – they often, for example, tweeted in different time zones and/or posted an excessively high numbers of tweets every day. Inauthenticity was further evidenced by the fact that a

majority of content posted by these Twitter accounts consisted of retweets and only around 5% original tweets on average. As illustrated in the diagrams below, closer scrutiny reveals the accounts especially amplify far-right and populist figures and/or content from Kremlin-controlled outlets.

Characteristics of Twitter accounts indicating possible automatization and inauthentic behaviour of a bot.



High number of Tweets per day (this particular Twitter account posted over 250 Tweets on January 24th).



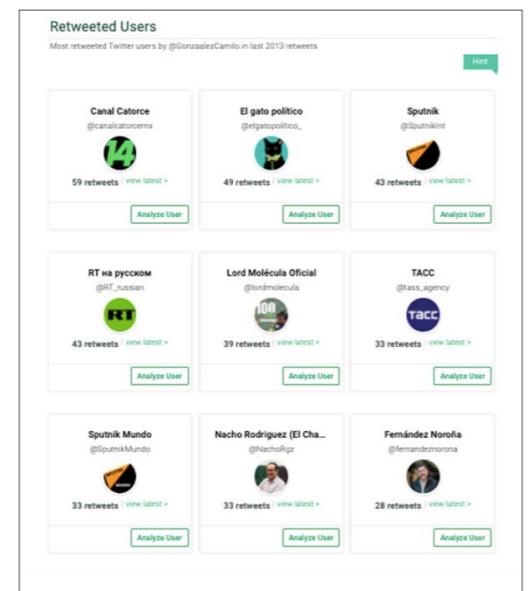
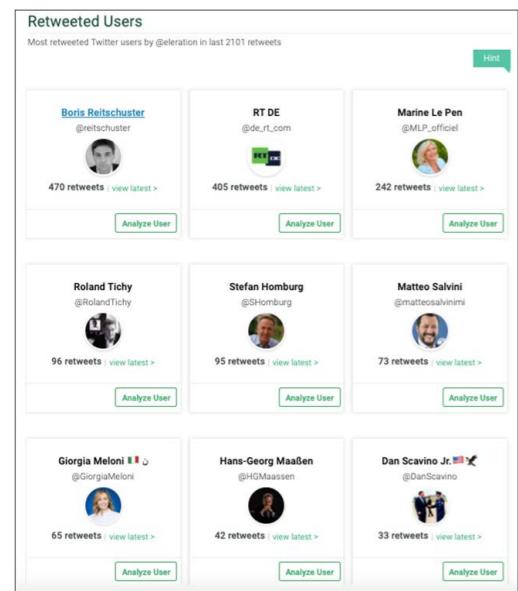
High number of retweets with 0% original Tweets could be indicative that an account aims to merely amplify particular messages.

Examples of other users retweeted by two Twitter accounts that reposted the above mentioned Sputnik V tweets

The lobs directed at Slovak and EU health experts and accusations of bias against the Russian vaccine²¹ were often disseminated throughout Latin America, a move that

may have been part of an orchestrated campaign to bolster vaccine distribution in the region.²² Several Latin American countries, at the outset of 2021, indeed

approached Moscow concerning the acquisition of Russian vaccines.²³ The initial deals, however, faced delivery problems.²⁴



Source: TruthNest

While several researchers have sought to put a spotlight on the intensive information operations and propaganda (exhibiting

characteristics associated with inauthentic behaviour and coordination) behind the Sputnik V vaccine,²⁵ the Sputnik Twitter

account has labelled the allegations as the “unethical” politicization of vaccines.



Data on the most re-tweeted posts from the Sputnik V Twitter account, generated by the Twitonomy²⁶ application, found that

Spanish speaking communities were one of the target audiences. The Spanish language was the third most used by the account,

with Argentina, Mexico and Guatemala, among other countries, appearing frequently in hashtags.²⁷

Not just a vaccine

The pervasiveness of propaganda and the intensity of (dis)information operations deployed by Kremlin and pro-Russian actors in connection to the Sputnik V vaccine underline the weaponization of health communication. The amplification of attacks against Slovak health authorities and the dissemination of news about the approval of the vaccine in Slovakia into communities in Africa or Latin America demonstrate the power of Russian state propaganda as it seeks to grow its audience and presence worldwide.

If the aim of hybrid threats, including information operations, orchestrated by foreign actors is to undermine trust in public institutions and leading (medical) authorities and incite greater societal polarisation, the Kremlin can declare a small victory from this Slovak case. The arrival of the Sputnik V vaccine precipitated a weeks-long coalition crisis and changes in the Slovak government including the positions of prime minister and minister of health.²⁸ While initial polls had indicated that the Sputnik V vaccine would increase vaccination in Slovakia by 40%,²⁹ not even

10,000 Slovaks ultimately opted for the Russian jab once it became available.³⁰

A key lesson learned for Slovakia and other public officials in this respect, therefore, concerns the need to continue building awareness of public representatives regarding hybrid threats and information operations. This can be accomplished, in part, by pointing out cases where certain institutions and actors involve themselves in efforts to undermine trust in democratic institutions and Western unity.



21 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/west-criticizes-russian-coronavirus-vaccine-cant-accept-russia-primacy/>

22 <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/amid-scramble-covid-19-vaccine-latin-america-turns-russia-2021-03-01/>

23 <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/02/17/america/russia-putin-sputnik-vaccine-latin-america-intl/index.html>

24 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/sputnik-v-from-vaccine-hope-to-frustration-for-latin-america/>; <https://www.as-coa.org/articles/timeline-tracking-latin-americas-road-vaccination>

25 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sputnik-v-the-covid-vaccine-that-spreads-influence-and-dismay-g9jdr3q7/>; <https://medium.com/dfrlab/official-twitter-account-of-sputnik-v-manipulates-information-to-target-western-covid-19-vaccines-cla13dac580d>

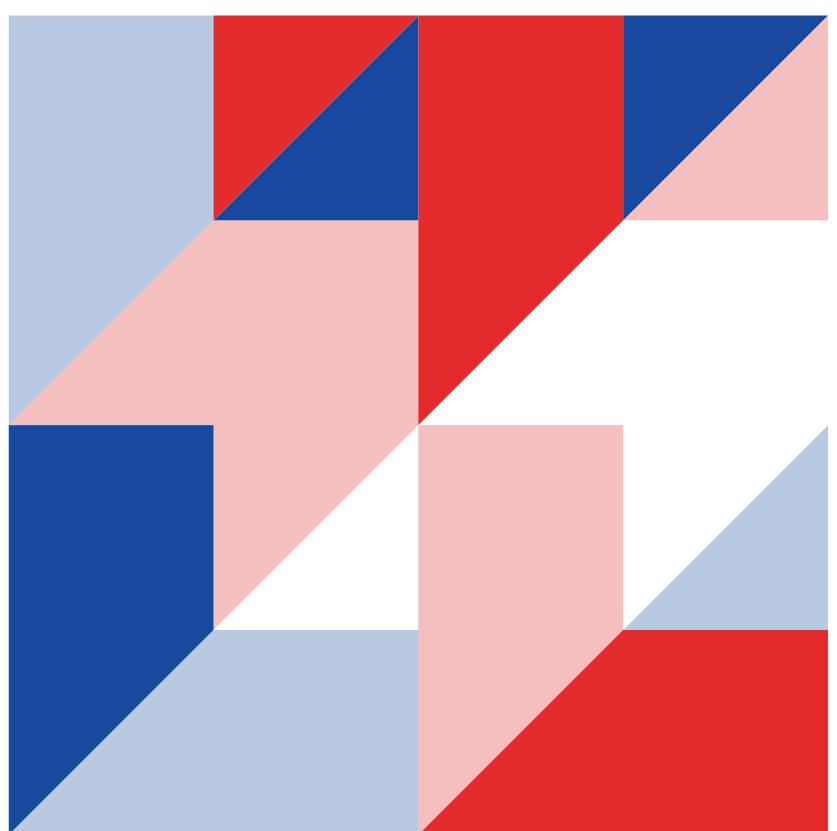
26 <https://www.twitonomy.com/profile.php?sn=sputnikvaccine> as of January 24, 2022

27 <https://app.truthnest.com/analysis-results/user/sputnikvaccine>

28 <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-gets-new-government-ending-russian-coronavirus-vaccine-crisis/>

29 <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-slovensko-nakupi-dva-miliony-kusov-ruskej-vakciny-sputnik-v/>

30 <https://www.trend.sk/nazory-a-komentare/osem-dovodov-preco-matovicov-sputnik-skonic-fiaskom>



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