Sputnik V: Not Just a Vaccine

Narratives travelling the information space
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On March 1, 2021, a plane loaded with 200,000 Sputnik V vaccine doses was greeted with an ostentatious welcome in Slovakia by (then) Prime Minister Igor Matovič and (then) Minister of Health Marek Krajči. 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. 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.

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 1. 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.”

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.

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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.
These information operations, orchestrated by the Kremlin and Russian institutions, came as Russian authorities faced continued problems (and presumed reluctance) in advancing the Sputnik V vaccine through the EMA approval process.  

**Examples of Sputnik V vaccine promotion on social media**

[Sputnik V promotion image]

**Examples of communication about Western vaccines and information campaigns**

[German influencer and blogger, Mirko Drotschmann, is approached to take part in an “information campaign” against the Pfizer vaccine.]

[Russian TV programme Vesti News spreads disinformation about the AstraZeneca vaccine, claiming it will turn people into monkeys.]

**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.

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.”

Those 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.

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

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5 More information: https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-pfizer-covid-disinformation-serebryanskaya-murky-vaccine-influencers/31277170.html
7 https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/eu-ambassador-says-russia-delays-ema-vaccine-inspections-report-2021-10-08/
9 https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=261970362192804
10 https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221592311529590
11 https://www.facebook.com/government/7/posts/10223040315126509
Barbs directed at medical experts

The bid to gain approval 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 Slovak 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.\footnote{https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/sputnik-v-faced-a-huge-disinformation-in-slovakia}

The claims were vehemently contested and derided as “fake news” by RDIF.\footnote{https://twitter.com/sputnikvaccine/status/1380158704704761861} And the Twitter account for the Sputnik V vaccine accused SUKL of sabotage.\footnote{https://www.euronews.com/2021/04/08/slovakia-told-to-return-sputnik-v-vaccines-amid-row-over-their-quality}

Russian actors, far and wide through tweets and other information channels, claimed an intensive disinformation campaign had been waged against the Sputnik V vaccine in Slovakia.\footnote{https://twitter.com/sputnikvaccine/status/1380158704704761861} The Slovak drug agency was particularly singletout. An analysis of Twitter accounts that retweeted 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.
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 vaccine were often disseminated throughout Latin America, a move that may have been part of an orchestrated campaign to bolster vaccine distribution in the region. Several Latin American countries, at the outset of 2021, indeed approached Moscow concerning the acquisition of Russian vaccines. The initial deals, however, faced delivery problems. 21

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, 22 the Sputnik Twitter account has labelled the allegations as the “unethical” politicization of vaccines.

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 polarization, 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. 23 While initial polls had indicated that the Sputnik V vaccine would increase vaccination in Slovakia by 40%, not even 10,000 Slovaks ultimately opted for the Russian jab once it became available. 24

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.

If the perception of the vaccine as a result of the hybrid campaign is reinforced through the information operations, it can grow beyond the borders of a single country, potentially reaching new territories and populations. 25

The pervasiveness of propaganda and the intensity of de/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.

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