

Report by the Institute of Modern Russia

THE RISE AND FALL OF SPUTNIK V

How the Kremlin used the
coronavirus vaccine as a tool of
information warfare

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has become a litmus test for all political systems—from democracies to dictatorships. Essentially, the global fight against the pandemic has hinged on the outcome of the so-called “vaccine race”—scientific efforts to develop an effective coronavirus vaccine as soon as possible. The fact that Russia was the first country to register a COVID-19 vaccine (Sputnik V) shocked the world, allowing the Kremlin to seize global attention. However, the highly publicized early registration—before completion of all necessary clinical trials and thus bypassing international standards—laid the foundation for deep mistrust of the Russian vaccine, both at home and abroad.

This report, the first in a new series by the Institute of Modern Russia (“The Kremlin complex: strengths and weaknesses of the Putin regime”), examines the Russian government’s information strategies to promote Sputnik V. These strategies are analyzed in the framework of information warfare (the so-called “discursive Cold War”), in which the Kremlin presents itself as a victim of Western aggression. In recent years, Russian disinformation campaigns have come to be regarded in the West as a threat not only to national security, but to the very foundations of democratic states, while the Kremlin’s propaganda machine is perceived as a powerful weapon employed by the Putin regime—one of its strengths. In turn, the Putin regime, which heavily relies on the projection of power, only welcomes such an assessment. In practice, however, this “weapon” is far less hard-hitting, and the story of the Sputnik V promotion showcases the regime’s actual strengths and weaknesses.

The report is based on original research of the coverage of Sputnik V by Russian and Western media (using media content analysis) in the course of five key media events: vaccine registration, the announcement of a “large-scale” and then “mass” vaccination in Russia, *The Lancet*’s favorable review of Sputnik V, and the news of Vladimir Putin’s inoculation. Our analysis identified the key speakers who have become the main advocates of the Russian vaccine (all of them are connected with the Russian state), as well as five key narratives about Sputnik V promoted by the Kremlin in the media. These narratives claim a Russian victory in the global “vaccine race” and portray Sputnik V as a victim of the West’s information war against Russia, despite it supposedly being a “vaccine for all mankind” and destined to “save the world.” Only one of the narratives calls on all “conscientious Russians” to get vaccinated.

Key takeaways:

- Promoting Sputnik V internationally, rather than vaccinating Russians domestically, was the Kremlin’s top priority.
- Sputnik V was used by the Kremlin as a tool of information warfare against the West and as a product with which the Putin regime sought to increase geopolitical influence and gain financial benefits.
- Sputnik V’s early registration was not a strategic miscalculation, but rather a typical “two-mover” (*dvukhkhodovka*) of the Kremlin: first, shocking the world with the premature vaccine registration, provoking criticism and posing as a victim of Western Russophobia, then using the positive

review in *The Lancet* as a means of validation and to score geopolitical points against the West.

- By betting on the “discursive Cold War” with the West, the Kremlin has achieved some success: drew global attention, proved Sputnik V’s effectiveness and safety, made agreements with dozens of countries to supply the Russian vaccine.
- However, the Putin regime failed on mass vaccination at home: the government’s effort turned out ineffective, and state propaganda, which promoted conspiracy theories and scary side effects of Western vaccines, backfired by contributing to the already high vaccination hesitancy in Russia.
- Despite the victorious rhetoric of its propaganda narratives, the Kremlin has lost the race for influence. The irony is that Sputnik V could have been promoted on merit—for its safety, efficiency, affordable price, ease of transportation. If the Kremlin had followed international protocols and not rushed to register the vaccine, Russia would have finished the vaccine race, if not the first, then among the first. At the same time, it

could have genuinely impressed the world with its scientific achievements and gained trust for years to come. Instead, the Kremlin opted for a high-profile PR stunt that sparked fierce controversy and irreversibly undermined confidence in the Russian vaccine.

Russia remains a land of paradoxes, and its behavior is notoriously difficult to explain and predict. Our analysis tracks the “binary optics” of the Putin regime that present Russia as both a great power and a victim of Western aggression. This model can be defined as “political narcissism”—a “diagnosis” that explains the country’s dualism of grandeur and victimhood. In practice, this means that establishing a constructive dialogue with the Putin regime remains a futile effort for the West. However, given Russia’s integration into the global economy and international affairs, cutting ties with it is impossible. The Putin regime is a challenge for the West, but the key issues are located in the political and communication realms. Solving them requires a better understanding of the regime’s dual nature and the belief system that underlies its behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Russia abounds with paradoxes, and the story of the rollout and promotion of its first COVID-19 vaccine—Sputnik V—is yet another. It brings to light numerous nuances that make Russia so hard to understand and predict. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was described in the West as a country with a failing economy, a shrinking and aging population, and a corrupt authoritarian political regime. It was dismissed as a “regional power” acting out of weakness¹ and as a “gas station masquerading as a country.”² These descriptions contributed to a misperception that “Russia’s decline was so deep and irreversible that it would no longer be able to resist Western initiatives.”³ However, over the past two decades, Russia proved capable and willing to challenge the West on various issues. While ceding to the West in terms of conventional military and economic power (“hard power”), it was able to skillfully employ asymmetric and hybrid tools in what has been recently described as “sharp power.”⁴ This strategy keeps confrontation with the West simmering below the threshold of a military conflict, by taking advantage of new opportunities presented by the digital and technological revo-

lution. Russia’s new-found assertiveness has gained much attention since its 2014 annexation of Crimea and 2016 interference in the U.S. presidential elections. Still, new misperceptions emerged in the West, including overestimating Russia’s influence capabilities and creating unnecessary alarmism. “An accurate yet clear-eyed assessment of the Kremlin’s actual influence” remains a goal to be reached.⁵

This report, the first in IMR’s series on the Putin regime’s strengths and weaknesses, seeks to contribute to the growing body of research that offers a more nuanced and sober view of the regime and the country. This report looks at the successes and failures of the Kremlin’s “vaccine politics,” using the Sputnik V⁶ rollout as a case study. We identify and analyze key narratives put forward by the pro-Kremlin domestic and foreign propaganda outlets during five pivotal public announcements related to the vaccine promotion at home and abroad. The case of Sputnik V’s promotion offers a unique insight into the Putin regime’s priorities, political behavior, and propaganda efforts in the challenging environment of the global health crisis. It also reveals elusive

1 Scott Wilson. “Obama Dismisses Russia as ‘Regional Power’ Acting Out of Weakness”, *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-dismisses-russia-as-regional-power-acting-out-of-weakness/2014/03/25/1e5a678e-b439-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html

2 Burgess Everett. “McCain: Russia is a ‘gas station’”, *Politico*, March 26, 2014. <https://www.politico.com/story/2014/03/john-mccain-russia-gas-station-105061>

3 Eugene Rumer, and Richard Sokolsky. “Grand Illusions: The Impact of Misperceptions About Russia on U.S. Policy”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/30/grand-illusions-impact-of-misperceptions-about-russia-on-u.s.-policy-pub-84845>

4 See both Christopher Walker, Jessica Ludwig, et al., “Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence,” National Endowment for Democracy (December 2017), and Christopher Walker (2018), “What Is ‘Sharp Power’?”, *Journal of Democracy*, 29 (3), p. 9-23. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>

5 Andrew Weiss. “New Tools, Old Tricks: Emerging Technologies and Russia’s Global Tool Kit”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 29, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/29/new-tools-old-tricks-emerging-technologies-and-russia-s-global-tool-kit-pub-84437>

6 As the vaccine’s name—Sputnik V—suggests, it aimed to create another “Sputnik moment” for the Kremlin, the first being in 1957 when it awed the West by successfully launching the world’s first artificial satellite into space.

qualities of Russia as a state and society, where talent and ambition are often undermined by systemic flaws—from self-interested leadership through bad governance to flawed communication strategies that result in policy failures and inadvertent side effects.

Sputnik V vaccination hesitancy in Russia has been consistently high throughout the year—over 50%,⁷ while vaccination rates have remained very low. As of late September, about 47 million (32% of the population) had received at least one dose and about 28% had been fully vaccinated with two vaccine doses.⁸ These low figures are particularly astonishing given that:

1) the Kremlin's propaganda machine has been relentlessly calling for people to vaccinate;

2) Russia has four more COVID-19 vaccines (EpiVacCorona, EpiVacCorona-N, CoviVac, Sputnik Light) alongside its flagship Sputnik V;

3) several regions have seen the *de facto* introduction of mandatory vaccination.⁹ As a result, the initial policy target set by the Russian government—to achieve 60% population immunization by September 2021—had to be adjusted to a much

more realistic 30-35%, which the government might just be able to vaccinate with at least one dose.¹⁰

This report will argue that the Russian vaccine's premature registration (before the end of trials) and the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns to undermine Western vaccines backfired by driving deep public distrust in the Russian vaccines at home and persistent skepticism abroad. The propaganda efforts aimed at ridiculing strict lockdown measures and underscoring violations of freedom in the West set up the Russian authorities for a crisis when new waves of the pandemic hit the country, leaving them with few policy options to stop the spread of the coronavirus. At the end of the day, the work of the Kremlin's propaganda machine, which is seen by some observers as one of Russia's strengths, tainted the country's scientific achievement, undermined the vaccine promotion abroad, and created unnecessary antagonism with the West. The question, however, remains: should Russia be treated as a mere spoiler¹¹ that needs to be deterred, or as a "strategic challenge"¹² that should be further studied?

7 Coronavirus, Vaccinations, and Mandatory Vaccinations", (in Russian: "Коронавирус, прививки и обязательная вакцинация"), Levada Center, July 5, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/05/koronavirus-privivki-i-obязatelnaya-vaktsinatsiya/>

8 Open-sourced data available here: "Coronavirus Vaccination Statistics", gogov.ru. <https://gogov.ru/articles/covid-v-stats>

9 Anastasia Antipova, Maya Bobenko, et al. Four Russian regions vaccinated over 20% of the population (in Russian: "Четыре региона России привили больше 20% населения"), RBC, June 26, 2021. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/25/06/2021/60d-47d019a79472b4a4bdebe>

10 Farida Rustamova, Authorities abandoned the plan to vaccinate 60% of the adult population by the fall (in Russian: "Власти отказались от плана привить к осени 60% взрослого населения по всей стране"), TV Rain, June 29, 2021. https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/notes/vlasti-otkazalis_ot_plana_privit_k_oseni_60_vzroslogo_naselenija_po_vsej_strane-532844/

11 Brittany Beaulieu and Steven Keil, (2018). "Russia as Spoiler: Projecting Division in Transatlantic Societies", The German Marshal Fund of the United States, 23. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Russia-as-Spoiler.pdf>

12 White House, Interim National Security Strategy, March 2021. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>

PART I: SPUTNIK V AS A TOOL OF THE KREMLIN'S INFLUENCE CAMPAIGNS

Background

Despite numerous reports on the decline of Russian science,¹³ in August 2020 Russia stunned the world by becoming the first country to register a COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V. The vaccine was developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, an established Russian state scientific institution, which at the time was little-known outside the country. While Russia's ambitions in the "vaccine race" had been already reported,¹⁴ the fast-tracked registration still caught the world by surprise. The highly publicized announcement delivered personally by Vladimir Putin triggered an immediate controversy: essential clinical trials (phase III) of Sputnik V had yet to be completed, despite the Russian president claiming so. Many observers were understandably baffled by the Kremlin's decision to approve an essentially experimental vaccine by-passing the international standards for such pro-

cedures, leading to deep skepticism in the global scientific community and sharp criticisms among political commentators in the West.¹⁵ But others understood that Sputnik V was employed as a tool of the Russian state "to expand its influence—at low cost and maximum impact."¹⁶

Sputnik's phase III trials were barely finished in late November 2020, but Vladimir Putin, undeterred by skeptics, wasted no time doubling down on the risk by calling for a "large-scale" vaccination of Russian essential workers in December 2020 and for a mass vaccination of the general population six weeks later. On February 2, 2021, the world was stunned once again when *The Lancet*, a prestigious peer-review medical journal, gave Sputnik V a favorable assessment, hailing it safe and 91.6% efficient¹⁷—on par with the top Western vaccines, Pfizer BioNTech and Moderna.¹⁸ As of late September 2021, Sputnik V had been approved in 70 countries, according to official statements.¹⁹

13 Michael Banks, "Russian science in a state of 'decline'", *Physics World*, January 26, 2010. <https://physicsworld.com/a/russian-science-in-a-state-of-decline/> and Quirin Schiermeier (2018) "Russian science chases escape from mediocrity", *Nature*, 555, p. 297-298 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-02872-8> and "Exodus of Russian Researchers Grew Fivefold Since 2012", *The Moscow Times*, April 21, 2021. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/04/21/exodus-of-russian-researchers-grew-fivefold-since-2012-a73682>

14 Georgi Kantchev and Drew Hinshaw. "Hit Hard by Coronavirus, Russia Joins Global Race for a Vaccine", *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hit-hard-by-coronavirus-russia-joins-global-race-for-a-vaccine-11591867861>

15 "How are vaccines developed?", World Health Organization, December 8, 2020. <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/how-are-vaccines-developed>; David Ignatius, "Opinion: Putin is reckless because we allow him to be," *The Washington Post*, August 12, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/putin-is-reckless-because-we-allow-him-to-be/2020/08/11/2e89b79c-dc17-11ea-b205-ff838e15a9a6_story.html.

16 Ignatius, "Opinion: Putin is reckless because we allow him to be."

17 Ian Jones, and Polly Roy. (2021) "Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine candidate appears safe and effective." *The Lancet*, 397 (10275): p. 642-643. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00191-4/fulltext#articleInformation](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00191-4/fulltext#articleInformation)

18 Sam Fazeli. "Would You Take Russia's Covid-19 Vaccine?" *Bloomberg*, January 8, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-01-08/how-does-russia-s-covid-19-vaccine-compare-with-pfizer-moderna>

19 Russian Direct Investment Fund. "Indonesia becomes the 70th country to approve the Sputnik V vaccine," August 25, 2021. <https://sputnikvaccine.com/newsroom/pressreleases/indonesia-becomes-the-70th-country-to-approve-the-sputnik-v-vaccine/>

All these achievements may look good on paper, but they barely scratch the surface of the story. By shocking the world and seizing the headlines, Russia did manage to create a new “Sputnik moment,” but this “triumph” turned out to be short-lived and marred by widespread distrust and skepticism that still lingers even now. As of late September 2021, Sputnik V had not yet been approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the World Health Organization, while full details about the study designs are still unavailable, and questions remain about inconsistencies in the published data on the vaccine.²⁰ Vaccination rates in Russia are spectacularly sluggish, with only about 30% of the population being fully vaccinated (as of late September²¹), while vaccine hesitancy levels remain high—52% of Russians are against vaccination.²²

All these contradictions are, to various extents, consequences of the Kremlin’s behavior. As we have found, creating a mere constructive agenda to promote the Russian vaccine was not the Kremlin’s priority. The regime’s messaging at the time of Sputnik V registration contained several important claims that serve as pointers for analysis of what transpired next. First, the Russian vaccine was said to have won the global “vaccine race.” Second, it was supposedly destined to be offered as humanitarian aid to struggling countries and

save the world from the pandemic. Third, these claims were framed in terms of the information war that the West was allegedly waging against Russia—the narrative that allowed the Putin regime to act defensively in response to any criticisms. The information war framing is crucial for understanding the regime’s *modus operandi*.

Russia’s information war as a form of a discursive Cold War against the West

The Kremlin’s adherence to the paradigm of information warfare and the creation of an entire media ecosystem, whose main purpose is to foster legitimacy for the Putin regime, preserve his rule, and project power abroad,²³ are well documented.²⁴ Since the early 2000s, the Kremlin has taken over the country’s mass media, focusing on national TV networks, and installed loyalists in key positions.²⁵ Today, the new Kremlin-approved “media guard”²⁶ operates what has become a multifaceted and sophisticated propaganda machine, where political agitation is mixed with entertainment, conspiracy theories, and *kompromat* (compromising materials and “black PR”). This machine intends to confuse, disorient, and intimidate the Russian public, generating a constant state of emergency by promoting ideas of “foreign threats” and “domestic enemies.”

At the same time, Russia’s political and media

20 Megan Steain and Jamie Triccas. “Growing evidence suggests Russia’s Sputnik V COVID vaccine is safe and very effective. But questions about the data remain”, *The Conversation*, July 27, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/growing-evidence-suggests-russias-sputnik-v-covid-vaccine-is-safe-and-very-effective-but-questions-about-the-data-remain-164392>

21 Open-sourced data available here: “Coronavirus Vaccination Statistics” (in Russian: “Статистика вакцинации от коронавируса”), [gogov.ru](https://gogov.ru/articles/covid-v-stats) <https://gogov.ru/articles/covid-v-stats>

22 “Coronavirus and Vaccination”, (In Russian: “Коронавирус и вакцинация”), Levada Center, September 3, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/09/03/koronavirus-i-vaktsinatsiya/>

23 Gulnaz Sarafutdinova (2020). *Red Mirror: Putin’s Leadership and Russia’s Insecure Identity*. Oxford University Press, p. 133.

24 U.S. Department of State. (2020) “GEC Special Report: August 2020 Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem”. Available here: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

25 Sharafutdinova, 135-9.

26 Joshua Yaffa. “Dmitry Kiselyov Is Redefining the Art of Russian Propaganda”, *The New Republic*, July 2, 2014. <https://newrepublic.com/article/118438/dmitry-kiselev-putins-favorite-tv-host-russias-top-propogandist>



One of the key people in the Kremlin's information war and propaganda efforts is Dmitry Kiselev (67), who heads the government-owned international news agency Rossiya Segodnya. He is also the host of Vesti Nedeli ("News of the Week"), the most popular primetime news show in Russia. Photo: Vladimir Pesnya | Sputnik via AP

establishment operates within the framework of **"information war/fare"** (*informatsionnaya voyna/protivobostrvo*), which, as they claim, plays out on the international arena and informs their behavior. Russian strategic thinkers define information warfare as a confrontation in the information space between two or more state-backed actors who "exert informational and psychological influence" by means of "propaganda, agitation, disinformation, and demonstrative and demonstrational actions," with the aim to "destabilize the internal political and social situation" and "coerce states to make decisions in the interests of the opposing

side."²⁷ A UK government intelligence report on Russian interference in Western domestic affairs interpreted these efforts as stemming from a "fundamentally nihilistic" Russia that seeks, through a wide-ranging and well-coordinated ecosystem of political actors and media outlets, "to undermine the Rules Based International Order—whilst nonetheless benefitting from its membership."²⁸

The Kremlin's domestic and foreign information campaigns, however, cannot be neatly separated; nor can they be decoupled from other malign activities produced by state-aligned proxy websites and fake social media accounts, as well as from cybercrimes. As noted by the U.S. State Department, there is "no single media platform where propaganda and disinformation are distributed. Nor is there uniformity of messages among different sources."²⁹ The domestic and foreign strategies often work together, executed by closely aligned actors, and while messages are tailored for different audiences, they work to pursue similar goals. Together they form the aforementioned ecosystem of Russian domestic and foreign, official and unofficial, overt and covert information efforts to produce and amplify narratives, disinformation, and propaganda messages that serve the regime's goals.

This report views Russia's information campaigns during the pandemic and its engagement in what has become known as the "vaccine wars," the "vaccine race," and "vaccine diplomacy" with-

27 "Conceptual views on the activities of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation in the information space", (in Russian: "Концептуальные взгляды на деятельность Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации в информационном пространстве"), Russian Ministry of Defence, 2011. <http://ens.mil.ru/science/publications/more.htm?id=10845074@cmsArticle>. "The Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation", Russian Presidential Administration, 2016. <http://scrf.gov.ru/security/information/document5/>.

28 UK Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, Russia, July 2020. https://isc.independent.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CCS207_CCS0221966010-001_Russia-Report-v02-Web_Accessible.pdf

29 U.S. Department of State. (2020) "GEC Special Report: August 2020 Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem". Available here: https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf

in the framework of the information war. Throughout the pandemic, various Kremlin-backed actors engaged in information campaigns to sow doubt about Western vaccines' safety and efficacy, undermine the Western political establishment, and exploit divides within Western societies, all the while pursuing the Putin regime's financial and geopolitical objectives under the guise of Russia's image as a victim of "information attacks" coming from the West.

These efforts did not go unnoticed. As some analysts pointed out, "the COVID-19 public health crisis prompted an information war in which the United States and its allies are losing ground to adversaries, particularly Russia and China."³⁰ As part of this confrontation in the media space, Russia tapped its long-standing relationships with anti-vaxx communities and spread disinformation about vaccines through proxy and unattributed Russia-backed sites.³¹ The U.S. State Department also warned that "Russian intelligence agencies have mounted a campaign to undermine confidence in Pfizer Inc.'s and other Western vaccines, using online publications."³² The fact that such attacks against the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine stopped in December 2020, following an agreement to conduct a joint experiment with Sputnik V ("which triggered an immediate and noticeable shift in coverage"³³), shows a government-level coordination behind these actions.³⁴

These practices by the Kremlin are reminiscent of the Cold War era, when information operations served very similar purposes as they do today. However, since the fundamentals of the Cold War, such as nuclear confrontation and rival ideologies and ideals of social development, are now gone, Russia's competition with the West is manifested primarily in terms of geopolitical influence and information, which can be also described as a "**discursive Cold War**." The Sputnik V vaccine was "weaponized" by the Putin regime to prove that Russia can win this war and prove its technological superiority, like in Soviet times, when the original Sputnik was launched, as well as to expand the regime's international reach by targeting a high-demand global vaccine market. Given the fact that the key person behind the Sputnik V market drive is a member of Putin's inner circle, the lucrative market opportunities also suggest that Putin or his associates stand to gain personally from this effort.

Information, however, is not a straightforward weapon, and information operations can have unpredictable side effects (e.g. low domestic and international trust in the Russian vaccine, low vaccination rates at home, delays in approval of the vaccine abroad). While the Kremlin's propaganda machine can be seen as a strength of the Putin regime, its advantages are relative and situational, while the costs (e.g. credibility and trust) might also be high.

30 Edward Lucas, Jake Morris and Corina Rebegea, Information Bedlam: Russian and Chinese Information Operation During COVID-19, Center for European Policy Analysis, March 15, 2021. <https://cepa.org/information-bedlam-russian-and-chinese-information-operations-during-covid-19/>

31 Lucas at el., Information Bedlam.

32 Michael R. Gordon and Dustin Volz. "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say," *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>

33 Bret Shafer, Amber Frankland, Nathan Kohlenberg and Etienne Soula, Influence-enza: How Russia, China, and Iran Have Shaped and Manipulated Coronavirus, Alliance for Security and Democracy (German Marshall Fund), March 6, 2021. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/russia-china-iran-covid-vaccine-disinformation>

34 Shafer at el., Influence-enza

Methodology and sources

This report analyzes key narratives related to Sputnik V as they emerged during five media events identified as pivotal in the vaccine promotion.

- The first event was the **registration of Sputnik V on August 11, 2020**, as the first COVID-19 vaccine in the world.
- The second and third events were connected: President Putin announced a **“large-scale” vaccination of Russia’s essential workers on December 2, 2020**, and ordered a **“mass” vaccination of the population on January 13, 2021**.
- The fourth event is ***The Lancet’s* peer-reviewed results of Sputnik V published on February 2, 2021**, hailing the vaccine efficacy at 91.6% and deeming it safe to be used.
- The fifth event is **Putin’s own inoculation on March 23, 2021**—eight months after Russia’s first vaccine had been registered and after many other world leaders had been vaccinated.

Three of the five events—Russia’s vaccination campaigns and Putin’s inoculation—had mainly national significance and involved information strategies targeting a domestic audience, while the remaining two—Sputnik V registration and *The Lancet* review—were meant to gain international traction. Owing to this distinction, the Kremlin’s narratives and the amount of effort put into Sputnik V promotion differed significantly.

To identify the official narratives related to Sputnik V promotion, we conducted content analysis of the coverage of these five events in six media outlets, namely: ***Vesti Nedeli***, a popular Sunday

evening news show hosted by well-known Kremlin propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov—broadcast by *Rossiya 1* TV channel, a state-owned network; ***Kommersant***, a reputable daily newspaper owned by pro-Kremlin oligarch Alisher Usmanov; the English-language websites of ***RT International*** and ***Sputnik News***—two news media outlets sponsored by the Russian state; ***The New York Times*** and ***Financial Times***—reputable U.S. and UK dailies, respectively. This selection includes media outlets that have broad reach and diverse content—targeting different segments of the Russian public (*Vesti Nedeli’s* mass outreach and *Kommersant’s* highbrow audience) and covering content produced for English-speaking audiences by the Russian state’s media outlets (RT and *Sputnik News*), as well as reputable and independent Western publications (NYT and FT). This selection also allows for the content to be compared, contrasted, and cross-referenced (e.g. *Kommersant’s* balanced reporting was used as a baseline for fact-checking information provided by other Russian outlets).

For each of the five events we analyzed all relevant materials (news articles, op-eds, interviews, and video footage in the case of *Vesti Nedeli*) that mention Sputnik V. A total of **ten** *Vesti Nedeli* episodes and **570** articles were included in the selection: **190** from *Kommersant*, **92** from RT, **222** from *Sputnik News*, **31** from NYT, and **35** from FT. The surveyed period starts on the day the news about a particular event first broke, and spans a week for online publications and two weeks for *Vesti Nedeli* (to include at least two shows in the analysis).

PART II: SPUTNIK V NARRATIVES



Russian president Vladimir Putin (left) and head of the Russian Direct Investments Fund Kirill Dmitriev are the key people in the Sputnik V promotion, with the latter taking the most vocal role, especially on the international arena. Photo: Alexei Druzhinin | Sputnik via AP

Our analysis of Sputnik V coverage identifies the key narratives behind the Kremlin's vaccine promotion both in Russia and abroad as well as the voices shaping these narratives. When cross-referenced, fact-checked, and contextualized, these narratives and auxiliary messages reveal a complex picture of the Putin regime's internal dynamics and its double-game nature, where information is often used as a smokescreen to cover the regime's true intentions.

Voices that shape the Sputnik V discourse

The top-level voice was **Vladimir Putin** himself. In line with the patterns of the Russian personalist regime, Putin himself broke the news that Sputnik V was the first COVID-19 vaccine in the world to be formally registered, and endorsed it as “effective” and “forming sustainable immunity.”³⁵ This high-profile involvement signals that the regime deemed it a significant political development with a positive message of a scientific “breakthrough” amidst the global health crisis, which also explains why Putin delivered the news personally. While pointing out that one of his daughters was among the first to have been successfully vaccinated with Sputnik V, Putin was reportedly inoculated only eight months later, in March 2021, by which point Russia had approved two other vaccines—Epi-Vac-Corona and CoviVac.³⁶ He did not disclose that he had received Sputnik V until June 2021. The Russian president never became a spokesperson or an avid advocate for Sputnik V, opting for an arm's-length relationship with the vaccination effort, aligned with his overall hands-off approach³⁷ to managing the pandemic in Russia—presumably to insulate him from any negativity, e.g. policy failures or public outrage, tarnishing his image.

The most vocal group of Sputnik V advocates identified in our analysis includes: **Kirill Dmitriev**, head of the government-backed Russian Direct

35 “Putin announced the registration of the world's first coronavirus vaccine”, (In Russian: “Путин объявил о регистрации первой в мире вакцины от коронавируса”), *Kommersant*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4450228>

36 Zulfikar Abbany. “Two more Russian vaccines: What we do and don't know”, *Deutsche Welle*, March 9, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/two-more-russian-vaccines-what-we-do-and-dont-know/a-56811025>

37 Alexander Chunov et. al., “Putin expanded the powers of governors to fight the coronavirus”, (In Russian: “Путин расширил полномочия губернаторов для борьбы с коронавирусом”), *Vedomosti*. April 2, 2020. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2020/04/02/826921-putin-rasshiril-polnomochiya>

Investment Fund (RDIF), which financed the vaccine development; **Alexander Gintsburg**, director of the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, who oversaw the development process; and **Denis Logunov**, Gintsburg's deputy and Sputnik V lead researcher. While Gintsburg and Logunov mostly promoted the vaccine's science, Dmitriev had a wide-ranging role.

As a representative of the Russian state, Dmitriev has multiple vested interests in the Sputnik V project. Note that RDIF is not a private enterprise, but a sovereign wealth fund established by the Russian government and therefore is an instrument of the state. However, in Russia's personalist regime, state instruments can be easily employed for the personal gain of the president or members of his inner circle. According to the investigation by *Important Stories (IStories)*, an independent Russian media outlet, Dmitriev and his wife, Natalia Popova, are associates of Putin's younger daughter, Yekaterina Tikhonova.³⁸ On *Vesti Nedeli*, the couple shared that they had participated in Sputnik V's early clinical trials (presumably, alongside Tikhonova, which would make her the daughter Putin mentioned in his announcement of the vaccine registration). Popova also said that she had been administered the vaccine before her husband, because she is a scientist and "believe[s] in *our* science" (italics added for emphasis).³⁹ This proximity to Putin's inner circle could be one of the key reasons why Dmitriev was greenlighted by the Kremlin to register the

vaccine before the end of the trials and to take the lead in shaping the narrative and driving Sputnik V's international PR and marketing campaigns. But from Dmitriev's public meetings with Putin, we can also infer that his role was subordinated to the Kremlin's (if not Putin's personal) patronage and oversight.⁴⁰ Recently, Dmitriev's name has been floated by the pro-Kremlin outlets as a future deputy prime minister and a potential successor to Putin.⁴¹ This combination of official and unofficial duties makes Dmitriev a crucial figure in the Sputnik V story, acting at the intersection of the public and nonpublic interests of the Putin regime.

Another group of actors who emerged in our analysis as important voices in domestic discourse on vaccination efforts consists of Russian government officials: Prime Minister **Mikhail Mishustin**, Health Minister **Mikhail Murashko**, Deputy Prime Minister **Tatiana Golikova** (tasked with overseeing the pandemic management), **Anna Popova**, head of Roszdravnadzor, Russia's consumer health watchdog, and, to some extent, Moscow Mayor **Sergei Sobyanin**. However, this group had a weaker messaging power and was contradictory in its public statements.

Sputnik V narratives

Based on our analysis of the five media events pivotal to Sputnik V promotion, we identified the following narratives put forth by pro-Kremlin speakers over the course of the surveyed period spanning seven months.

38 Roman Anin et al., "Love, Offshores, and Administrative Resources: How Marrying Putin's Daughter Gave Kirill Shamalov a World of Opportunity", *IStories*, July 12, 2020. <https://istories.media/en/investigations/2020/12/07/love-offshores-and-administrative-resources-how-marrying-putins-daughter-gave-kirill-shamalov-a-world-of-opportunity/>

39 News at 20:00. Results of the week (in Russian: «Вести в 20:00. Итоги недели») (In English: Russia-24's YouTube channel, August 16, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXvLZilwOL8&authuser=0>

40 Event can be viewed here: "Meeting with Russian Direct Investment Fund CEO Kirill Dmitriev", The Kremlin, April 2, 2021. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65269>

41 Mikhail Shchibanov. "Kirill Dmitriev: successor or vice prime minister" (in Russian: «Кирилл Дмитриев: преемник или вице-премьер»), News.ru, April 12, 2021. <https://news.ru/politics/kirill-dmitriev-priemnik-ili-vice-premer/>; and political commentator Dmitry Spirin's Telegram channel, May 7, 2021. <https://t.me/kaktovottak/12823>

Five Sputnik V narratives

1. The “Sputnik moment”: Russia wins the global vaccine race*
2. Sputnik V saves the world: Russia offers humanitarian aid to poor countries*
3. Sputnik V is a victim of the West’s information war against Russia*
4. Sputnik V is a “vaccine for all mankind”**
5. Be good and vaccinate!***

* These narratives are part of Russia’s larger discursive Cold War with the West

** Claims that fall under this narrative include: it’s the best vaccine out there—first, safest, cheapest, easily distributed, and widely accepted; this narrative is also an updated version of narrative no. 1.

*** Although COVID-19 vaccination is not mandatory in Russia, propaganda outlets present people who have vaccinated as good and those who refuse to as bad (the narrative is part of the Russian government’s effort to boost the sluggish vaccination rates in the country).

These narratives developed alongside other messages, and our detailed analysis of the coverage not only shows how the same story played out in propaganda outlets (*Vesti Nedeli*, RT, *Sputnik News*), but also provides valuable context through the balanced coverage of *Kommersant* (focusing on Russia’s domestic affairs) as well as leading Western outlets, *The New York Times* and *Financial Times*.

Pivotal events coverage

The “Sputnik Moment”

August 11, 2020: Sputnik V registration

Our analysis shows that the early registration of Sputnik V on August 11, 2020, framed, to a large extent, the vaccine perception both inside and outside Russia.⁴² The announcement simultaneously launched three key narratives: 1) This is the first registered COVID-19 vaccine in the world—a victory for Russia in the “vaccine race;” 2) It is destined to help to save the world as it is envisioned as part of the “humanitarian aid program to help with immunization in poorer, developing countries;”⁴³ 3) It is already the target of Western countries waging an information war against the Russian vaccine in order “to discredit and hide the correctness of the Russian approach to drug development.”⁴⁴

The validity of these bold claims, however, is easily undermined by simple fact-checking and contextualization. When Putin introduced and endorsed Sputnik V, he falsely claimed that the vaccine “had gone through all the necessary trials.”⁴⁵ In reality, the Russian authorities fast-tracked the emergency registration process and ignored the standard public health procedures that require vaccines to complete all three phases

42 The very name of the vaccine, Sputnik V, was intended to invoke associations with the 1957 launch of the Soviet satellite amidst the Cold War—a technological “win” for the Soviet system in confrontation with the West (the “Sputnik moment”). This association was underscored in the RT coverage of the registration, e.g.: Jonny Tickle, World’s first registered Covid-19 vaccine named ‘Sputnik V’, Russia launches official website. RT, August 11, 2020. URL: <https://www.rt.com/russia/497707-russian-vaccine-sputnik-v-website/>

43 Jonny Tickle. “After ‘Sputnik V’ announced, Russia now targeting a quarter of the world’s \$75 billion coronavirus vaccine market – report”, RT, August 12, 2020. <https://www.rt.com/russia/497809-russia-targets-covid19-vaccine-market/>

44 “Western countries fighting ‘info war’ to discredit Russian Covid-19 vaccine are ‘endangering lives of their citizens’ – developer”, RT, August 11, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/497737-western-countries-russian-vaccine-endanger/>

45 News at 20:00. Results of the week (in Russian: “Вести в 20:00. Итоги недели”), Russia-24’s YouTube channel, August 16, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXvLZilwOL8&authuser=0>



On the Russian domestic front, among the top speakers on the Sputnik V issues were Alexander Gintsburg (left), director of the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, which developed the vaccine, and Health Minister Mikhail Murashko. Photo: Vladimir Pesnya | Sputnik via AP

of clinical trials even for emergency registration.⁴⁶ Phase III of clinical trials are crucial, as they involve thousands of people in testing of the new drug to make sure it works properly. Russia registered its vaccine after testing it on just 76 people and before even starting the third phase.⁴⁷ The early

registration caused a great stir among scientists, some of whom called this decision “reckless and foolish”⁴⁸ and raised suspicion and disbelief in the vaccine’s efficacy.

Promoting Sputnik V, Dmitriev emphasized its safety and technological superiority over competitors. For instance, speaking on *Vesti Nedeli* on August 16, 2020, he claimed that the Russian vaccine is safer in comparison to the “immature technologies... in the West, where nobody tested long-term effects on fertility.”⁴⁹ Dmitriev also implied that Sputnik V had been developed using the well-tested adenoviral vaccine technology,⁵⁰ while the mRNA technology⁵¹, employed by Pfizer and Moderna, was allegedly more dangerous—the latter is a baseless and misleading claim.⁵² It is unlikely that Dmitriev was not familiar with the scientific facts about both technologies, which suggests that his statements did not intend to promote Sputnik V on its own merit,⁵³ but rather to open a new front in Russia’s information war against the West. As our analysis of later events has shown, the Kremlin likely expected an uproar in the West over the early registration of Sputnik

46 Russia is not the only country bending the rules in the vaccine race: China, too, fast-tracked the emergency use of its own coronavirus vaccines before completion of phase III trials. See: Emily Deng and John Ruwitch. “China Is Inoculating Thousands With Unapproved COVID-19 Vaccines. Why?”, *NPR*, November 12, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/11/12/933956247/china-is-inoculating-thousands-with-unapproved-covid-19-vaccines-why>

47 Denis Logunov, etc. “Safety and immunogenicity of an rAd26 and rAd5 vector-based heterologous prime-boost COVID-19 vaccine in two formulations: two open, non-randomised phase 1/2 studies from Russia.” *The Lancet*, September 4, 2020. [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736\(20\)31866-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(20)31866-3/fulltext)

48 Bianca Nogarty. (2021) “Mounting Evidence suggests Sputnik COVID vaccine is safe and effective”, *Nature*, 595, p. 339-340 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01813-2>

49 News at 20:00. Results of the week (in Russian: «Вести в 20:00. Итоги недели»), Russia-24’s YouTube channel, August 16, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXvLZilwOL8&authuser=0>

50 Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Understanding Viral Vector COVID-19 Vaccines, April 13, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines/viralvector.html>

51 Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Understanding mRNA COVID-19 Vaccines, March 4, 2021. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/different-vaccines/mrna.html>

52 Nina Shapiro, The Covid-19 Vaccine Does Not Cause Infertility. Here’s Why People Think It Does. *Forbes*, December 27, 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ninashapiro/2021/12/27/the-covid-19-vaccine-does-not-cause-infertility-heres-why-people-think-it-does/?sh=3bbb99d368f5>

53 Sputnik V has been positively evaluated for its safety, high efficacy, affordable pricing, and easy logistics, compared to Western competitors.

V and premeditated its information strategies to account for this development.

For instance, on the day of the vaccine registration announcement, the *Sputnik News* website published a column by Dmitriev titled “A Forbidden Op-Ed: The Sputnik Vaccine as a Lifesaving Global Partnership.”⁵⁴ The editors claimed that this piece had been “rejected by all leading Western media”⁵⁵ due to a “blockade imposed on positive information about the Russian COVID-19 vaccine.” The article is a classic example of Kremlin propaganda and demagoguery⁵⁶: elevating the “excellent” legacy of Russian vaccine research and providing only elementary facts about the vaccine science, it downplayed concerns over its early registration. The article is strewn with logical shortcuts, biases, and falsehoods, while promoting Dmitriev’s (and the Kremlin’s) grievances over Western politics, which “stand in the way of the Russian technology”—a tendency that, he claims, goes back to the 1950s.

The significance of the international promotion of Sputnik V over the domestic is confirmed by the expansive coverage of the vaccine registration by RT and *Sputnik News*, which focused on highlighting the positive reception of the Russian

breakthrough among some heads of states (e.g. greetings from Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro and the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte, as well as from the leaders of Argentina, Thailand, India, and Brazil, all expressing interest in Sputnik V production or import⁵⁷). As for Western skepticism, RT retorted on August 12, 2020, that “while Sputnik V has been met with extreme prejudice in the West, Russia has already received orders for the vaccine from at least 20 countries.”⁵⁸ Overall, Western criticisms of the early registration were written off as Russophobic: Russian officials and pro-government experts implied that critics were bitter losers in the “race for a vaccine,” accused them of a “premeditated attempt to discredit a competitor,” and alluded to a covert “negativity campaign” against Sputnik V and Russia.⁵⁹

At the same time, content analysis of *Kommersant*’s coverage shows that skepticism was not just a Western prerogative: experts quoted by the publication raised questions about Sputnik V’s incomplete trials, while others, acknowledging the issue, justified the Kremlin’s strategy by the vaccine’s political significance.⁶⁰ It was also reported that Russia’s Association of Clinical Research Organizations, a nonprofit entity, had called

54 “Putin, Vladimir Putin: Russian Covid-19 vaccine inspires 007-style front page of French newspaper”, Tim Corso. “Simple and Effective: Top Medic Explains Why Russia’s Anti-COVID Vaccine Can Be Trusted”, *Sputnik News*, August 11, 2020. <https://sputniknews.com/russia/202008111080137480-simple-and-effective-top-medic-explains-why-russias-anti-covid-vaccine-can-be-trusted/>

55 This is a false claim: *Financial Times* along with other Western media outlets spoke with Dmitriev, allowing him to lay out his case for Sputnik V as well as his accusations against “a concerted [western] effort to stop anything that is Russian.” See: Henry Foy and Max Seddon. “World must pick sides in vaccines battle, says Russian wealth fund chief”, *Financial Times*, July 17, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/85bc377b-7d91-44e4-9ab2-467e03f54e7f>

56 “Modus Trollerandi. Part 1: The straw man”, *EU vs Disinfo*, July 28, 2021. <https://euvdsinfo.eu/modus-trollerandi-part-1-the-straw-man/>

57 “Nicolas Maduro: I Will be the First in Venezuela to Get Vaccinated Against COVID-19”, *Sputnik News*, August 17, 2020. <https://sputniknews.com/latam/202008171080192463-nicolas-maduro-i-will-be-the-first-in-venezuela-to-get-vaccinated-against-covid-19/>

58 “Putin, Vladimir Putin: Russian Covid-19 vaccine inspires 007-style front page of French newspaper”, *RT*, August 12, 2020. <https://www.rt.com/news/497843-putin-vaccine-james-bond/>

59 *Ibid.*

60 “Vladimir Putin has found a cure for COVID”, (in Russian: “Владимир Путин нашел средство от COVID”), *Kommersant*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4450381>

for the Health Ministry to postpone Sputnik V's registration, arguing that the idea to accelerate the process was an "atavism of the heroic paradigm typical for the times of the vaccination pioneers," but Roszdravnadzor disagreed.⁶¹ In a different story, *Kommersant* reported on an early poll conducted among medical workers, 52% of whom said they would not vaccinate with a recently registered vaccine, reflecting Russians' mistrust and anxieties that exist beyond official narratives.⁶² It is also noteworthy that *Kommersant's* reporting, while being thorough and neutral in tone, still prioritizes official news and commentary, with government officials being its key newsmakers on domestic issues, such as pandemic efforts—e.g. Health Minister Murashko, who, while routinely commenting on the pandemic and vaccination issues, would also engage in responding to Western criticisms of the vaccine. For instance, he called U.S. colleagues' skepticism "baseless," claiming that they likely "feel the Russian vaccine's

competitive advantages."⁶³ These comments likely come in reaction to earlier statements that week made by Dr. Antony Fauci, head of the White House's coronavirus taskforce, who said that he "seriously doubted" that Russia had "definitively proven that [its] vaccine is safe and effective."⁶⁴

Additionally, we observed mixed messaging among the leading speakers on the vaccine. For instance, following Sputnik V registration, Gamaleya's Gintsburg claimed that within four to six weeks three Russian factories would start producing 1 million doses of vaccine per month,⁶⁵ with the needs of the entire country to be covered within a year—but as we know today, none of these projections passed the test of time.⁶⁶ He also claimed on August 16, 2020, that phase III clinical trials of Sputnik V would begin within 7-10 days,⁶⁷ but they started only on September 6, 2020, more than two weeks later. While Gintsburg assured that tens of thousands volunteers would participate,⁶⁸ Roszdravnadzor misleadingly reported that about

61 "Putin announced the registration of the world's first coronavirus vaccine", (In Russian: "Путин объявил о регистрации первой в мире вакцины от коронавируса"), *Kommersant*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4450228>

62 "More than half of surveyed doctors are not ready to get vaccinated against coronavirus", (in Russian: "Более половины опрошенных врачей не готовы сделать прививку от коронавируса"), *Kommersant*, August 14, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4451922>

63 This comment comes in response to: "Murashko called criticism of the Russian coronavirus vaccine groundless" (in Russian: "Мурашко назвал критику российской вакцины от коронавируса безосновательной"), *Kommersant*, August 14, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4450784>

64 Caterina Anderano. "Fauci says he has serious doubts Russia's COVID-19 vaccine is safe, effective", *ABC News*, August 11, 2021. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/fauci-doubts-russias-covid-19-vaccine-safe-effective/story?id=72309297>

65 "Head of the Gamaleya Center: Russians will be provided with a vaccine within a year", (in Russian: "Глава Центра Гамалеи: россияне смогут обеспечить вакциной в течение года"), *Kommersant*, August 15, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4457347>

66 Alexander Osipov, Khalil Aminov. "Sputniks of vaccination"(in Russian: «Спутники вакцинации»), *Kommersant*, August 6, 2021 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4929568>

67 "The Russian vaccine will be administered to tens of thousands of people at the third stage of research", (in Russian: "Российскую вакцину на третьем этапе исследований введут десяткам тысяч человек"), *Kommersant*, August 16, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4457506>

68 "The Russian vaccine is planned to be launched into civil circulation within 1.5 months", (in Russian: "Российскую вакцину планируют запустить в гражданский оборот в течение 1,5 месяца"), *Kommersant*, August 16, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4457510>



The Russian government's efforts to facilitate mass vaccination in the country were offset by both bureaucratic inefficiency and high vaccine hesitancy among the population. According to Levada Center's public opinion polls, Russian elderly people are more willing to be inoculated compared to other demographic groups. Photo: Alexey Kudenko | Sputnik via AP

2,000 people were to take part.⁶⁹ Similar examples of confused messaging and unfulfilled projections made by the vaccine advocates are abundant in our analysis, underscoring the gap between official statements and reality, and pointing to a poor domestic communication strategy.

As for the Western publications, we could not identify attempts to impose a “blockade” against positive coverage of Sputnik V or to attack its credibility, as suggested by RDIF’s Dmitriev in his “forbidden” op-ed. The coverage, however, was

framed in political terms—e.g. the early registration was perceived as an incentive for the Putin regime (and for China) to use the “vaccine race” as “a proxy war for their personal leadership and competing national systems”.⁷⁰ NYT also reported that, despite skepticism over the early registration, U.S. scientists admitted that the Russian vaccine “may work.”⁷¹ An FT story stipulated that some of the Western skepticism “may be rooted more in geopolitics than science,” which is due to Russia’s behavior on the international arena (e.g. meddling in the U.S. elections or the downing of the MH17 flight over Ukraine) that has eroded trust in most of Moscow’s initiatives.⁷²

Vaccinate!

*December 2, 2020: “Large-scale” vaccination;
January 13, 2021: “Mass” vaccination*

On December 2, 2020, Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of a “large-scale” vaccination (prioritizing essential workers and the military)⁷³, and claimed that Russia had already produced 2 million doses of vaccine. The vaccination was said to be voluntary and free for all. At a government meeting, Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin delegated this effort to Russian governors and other regional leaders as their “personal responsibility.” Moscow took the lead, and other regions were expected to join within a week after the announcement. At the time, the Health Ministry reported

69 While Gintsburg’s estimate was based on his scientific experience, Roszdravnadzor’s numbers were clearly erroneous and counterproductive.

70 Andrew E. Kramer. “Russia Approves Coronavirus Vaccine Before Completing Tests”, *The New York Times*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/11/world/europe/russia-coronavirus-vaccine-approval.html>

71 Peter Baker. “Trump v. Putin: A Vaccine Manhood Contest”, *The New York Times*, August 11, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/11/us/politics/trump-putin-vaccine.html>

72 Henry Foy. “West’s response to Russian vaccine owes as much to geopolitics as science”, *Financial Times*, August 13, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/5e320e6b-1182-47a6-993e-0bb7f6c7bc2d>

73 “Putin orders a large-scale vaccination against COVID-19 to start next week”, (in Russian: “Путин поручил начать масштабную вакцинацию от COVID-19 на следующей неделе”), *Kommersant*, December 2, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4595301>

“CLAIMS BY RUSSIAN OFFICIALS WERE PITTED AGAINST THE GRIM REALITIES OF THE FAILING VACCINATION EFFORTS, UNDERSCORING BUREAUCRATIC INEFFICIENCY, LACK OF RELIABLE INFORMATION ABOUT THE VACCINES, CONFUSING MESSAGING, AND OVERALL POOR QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE.”

that about 100,000 Russians (0.06% of the population) had been vaccinated.⁷⁴

Six weeks later, on January 13, 2021, Putin ordered a scaleup of the effort and the launch of a “mass” vaccination (now targeting the general population) within five days,⁷⁵ describing the Russian vaccine as “the best in the world” in terms of efficacy and safety. According to some observers, the main reason for the gap between these two events was the complexity of production of the second dose of the vaccine.⁷⁶ Deputy Prime

Minister Golikova promised that 2.1 million doses would be available to the Russian public by the end of January—another example of data discrepancy in official statements, considering that in December Putin claimed that 2 million doses had already been produced.

Our analysis of media coverage of these two events shows a noticeably smaller vaccine promotion effort on the domestic front. The “large-scale” vaccination announcement was the second story on *Vesti Nedeli* on December 13, 2020, briefly covering the news in mostly neutral terms, but presenting only the government’s side of the story.⁷⁷ The “mass” vaccination announcement made it as the show’s leading story on January 17, 2021, explaining the basics of the vaccination process and calling for the public to get the shot, showing footage of average Russians who had already got inoculated. The reporter claimed that Sputnik V is produced by five Russian companies, with “hundreds of thousands of doses daily being delivered across the Russian regions.”⁷⁸ No official data supported these claims. In fact, analysis of the information publicized by the regional authorities

74 “The head of the Ministry of Health announced the vaccination of more than 100 thousand Russians”, (in Russian: “Глава Минздрава сообщил о вакцинации более 100 тыс. россиян”), *Kommersant*, December 2, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4595388>

75 “Putin orders a mass vaccination against coronavirus”, (in Russian: “Путин поручил начать массовую вакцинацию от коронавируса”), *Kommersant*, January 13, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4641383>

76 Unlike Western vaccines, where the booster second dose is similar to the first injection, Sputnik V uses different adenoviruses (rAd26 and rAd5) for the first and second doses of the vaccine, respectively. This was hailed in Russia as an innovative approach, which gives higher levels of protection against COVID-19. It also, however, complicated production and the delivery of the vaccine to the population. For more on early production shortages, see: Bianca Nogrady, Mounting evidence suggests Sputnik COVID vaccine is safe and effective, *Nature*, July 6, 2021 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01813-2>; and “Putin announces the beginning of the mass vaccination against Covid in Russia. But there is a problem: pharmaceutical companies can stably produce only one component out of two.” (in Russian: “Путин объявил о начале массовой вакцинации от ковида в России. Но есть проблема: фармкомпании могут стабильно выпускать лишь один ее компонент из необходимых двух”), *Meduza*, December 4, 2020. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/12/04/putin-ob-yavil-o-nachale-massovoy-vaktsinatsii-ot-kovida-v-rossii-no-est-problema-farmkompanii-mogut-stabilno-vypuskat-lish-odin-ee-komponent-iz-neobhodimyh-dvuh>

77 “News of the week with Dmitry Kiselyov” (in Russian: “Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселевым”), Russia-24’s YouTube channel, December 13, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FINhUsXICB0>

78 News of the week with Dmitry Kiselyov” (in Russian: “Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселевым”), Russia-24’s YouTube channel, January 17, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghpVJ0whCQA>

shows that deliveries of the vaccine were on a significantly smaller scale—in the range of hundreds to a few thousands of doses per week.⁷⁹ The reporter painted a rather rosy picture, presenting the vaccination process as something positively viewed by the Russian public, but, according to the January 2021 polls, only 16% of Russians said they were willing to inoculate, with 40% “categorically against.”⁸⁰

In addition, the reporting emphasized the risks and dangers of COVID-19 infection, while ensuring viewers that the Russian vaccines are effective even against the newest virus variants. Overall, in *Vesti Nedeli*’s coverage we observed several methods of the Kremlin’s approach to manipulating information: glossing-over (*lakirovka*) of the pandemic situation in Russia to signal that the Kremlin was in control of the situation, and fear-mongering about coronavirus-related health risks to scare the public and increase vaccinations. At the same time, the reporting visibly lacked footage of public opinion leaders getting a vaccine shot—an omission that likely contributed to the low vaccination rates.

Kommersant’s coverage offered a more nuanced picture of the government’s efforts to im-

plement the vaccination policy and the actual situation in the regions, as well as Russians’ perception of the vaccine. Our analysis of the reporting on the launch of the “large-scale” vaccination revealed numerous issues marring the vaccination efforts (in contrast to the glossed-over picture promoted by *Vesti Nedeli*): absence of stable large-scale production, lack of equipment,⁸¹ lack of information on vaccine availability both in Moscow and other regions, incidents of authorities forcing medical workers and teachers to vaccinate despite official claims that vaccination is not mandatory⁸² public concerns over Sputnik V’s incomplete trials.⁸³

The coverage of the “mass” vaccination shows additional issues with the vaccine rollout. A January 2021 think tank report revealed large disparities in the vaccination rates between Moscow and the rest of the country due to vaccine scarcity: in 50 regions the vaccine was not available at all,⁸⁴ while only five regions showed a “high rate” of vaccination.⁸⁵ This data was reported by *Kommersant* on the same day when Prime Minister Mishustin rather optimistically claimed that Russia had reached a “turning point” in the pandemic and, in his opinion, things would improve

79 Mark Krutov, “300,000 instead of 1.5 million. How many Russians have been vaccinated with Sputnik? (in Russian: “300 тысяч вместо 1,5 миллионов. Сколько россиян привились «Спутником?»”) *Svoboda*, January 12, 2021. <https://www.svoboda.org/a/31043098.html>

80 “The number of people wishing to get vaccinated against COVID in Russia has returned to the summer level”, (in Russian: “Число желающих привиться от COVID в России вернулось к летнему уровню”), *RBC*, January 15, 2021. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/15/01/2021/60001b129a79473c74e37db6>

81 “Vaccination is scaled”, (in Russian: “Вакцинация определяется с масштабом”), *Kommersant*, December 3, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4595656>

82 “Prick my sorrow”, (in Russian: “Уколы моя печали”), *Kommersant*, December 4, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4596245>

83 At the time, Sputnik V’s phase III trials were not published yet..

84 Russia’s highly political and economic system is notoriously centralized, with Russian people increasingly seeing Moscow as a city that builds prosperity at the expense of the rest of the country. See, for example: András Tóth-Czifra. “Moscow vs Regions: Who “Feeds” Whom?” Institute of Modern Russia, February 4, 2021. <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3230-moscow-vs-regions-who-“feeds”-whom>

85 “Oh, where are you, syringe?” (in Russian: “О, где же ты, шприц?”), *Kommersant*, January 14, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4641648>

going forward, as the vaccine would facilitate economic recovery.⁸⁶

These and other claims by Russian officials were later pitted against the grim realities of the failing vaccination efforts. For instance, Russian authorities initially announced⁸⁷ that people can choose between two vaccines—Sputnik V and EpiVacCorona—but, in reality, only one of them, Sputnik V, was available when mass vaccination began.⁸⁸ Roszdravnadzor’s Anna Popova claimed that 60% of the population (69 million people) will be vaccinated by the fall of 2021,⁸⁹ and Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova promised that 20 million people will receive the first dose by the end of 2021’s first quarter. As of late September 2021, both Popova’s and Golikova’s promises had not been fulfilled.⁹⁰ These examples underscore Russian government’s bureaucratic inefficiency, lack of reliable information about the vaccines, confusing messaging, and overall poor quality of governance, all of which contributed to the failures of the mass vaccination effort.

Our analysis of the RT and *Sputnik News* coverage of the second and third media events (the announcements of the “large-scale” and “mass” inoculations, respectively) shows that Russia’s efforts to promote its own vaccine and disparage foreign competitors continued. In December 2020, both outlets covered the Russian government’s announcements in mostly neutral terms, but presented exclusively official information, featuring quotes by Putin, Mishustin, Golikova, Dmitriev, and Gintsburg. Part of the coverage focused on promoting Sputnik V’s positive image by underscoring its status as the first registered COVID-19 vaccine in the world, its high efficacy and competitive pricing (it was estimated to cost \$10 per shot—about twice cheaper than Western counterparts). These advantages were linked to the vaccine’s “global expansion” with prospective approval by the EMA and countries like Serbia, Venezuela, Brazil, and others.⁹¹

Still, a more significant portion of the RT and *Sputnik News* coverage was dedicated to building

86 “Mishustin announced the turning point of the pandemic”, (in Russian: “Мишустин заявил о переломном моменте пандемии”), *Kommersant*, January 14, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4641936>

87 “Infectionist gave advice on choosing a vaccine for coronavirus”, (in Russian: “Инфекционист дал советы по выбору вакцины от коронавируса”), *Govorit Moskva*, January 21, 2021. <https://govoritmoskva.ru/news/260834/>; and “Mass vaccination against coronavirus began in Russia”, (in Russian: “В России началась массовая вакцинация от коронавируса”), *Kommersant*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4652518>

88 “Mass vaccination against coronavirus began in Russia”, (in Russian: “В России началась массовая вакцинация от коронавируса”), *Kommersant*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4652807>

89 “Goodwill Needles”, (in Russian: “Иглы доброй воли”), *Kommersant*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4652213>

90 “Deputy Health Minister named the number of the Russian residents vaccinated against coronavirus” (in Russian: «Замглавы Минздрава назвал число привитых от коронавируса жителей России»), *RBC*, August 5, 2021. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/610ba5db9a79472be96397ff>

91 “Serbia Receives First Batch of Russia’s Sputnik V Coronavirus Vaccine for Study – Vucic”, *Sputnik News*, December 3, 2020. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202012031081351748-serbia-receives-first-batch-of-russias-sputnik-v-coronavirus-vaccine-for-study--vucic/> “EU could approve Russian-made Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine for use as early as February, amid concern over missed shipments from US”, *RT*, January 20, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/513075-european-union-sputnik-approval/> “Reports that Brazil rejected Russian Covid-19 vaccine are ‘inaccurate’, Sputnik V sponsor says, after approval hiccup”, *RT*, January 17, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/512775-sputnik-vaccine-brazil-approval-coronavirus/> Jonny Tickle. “Western media has spent months bashing Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine, but now its Moscow correspondents lining up for Covid-19 jabs”, *RT*, January 14, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/512428-western-journalists-sputnik-vaccination/> “Venezuela to Receive First 10Mln Doses of Russia’s Sputnik V Vaccine Soon, Maduro Says”, *Sputnik News*, January 13, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/20210113/venezuela-to-receive-first-10m-doses-of-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-soon-maduro-says-1081750327.html>

a narrative about Western hypocrisy,⁹² incompetence, and weakness. Classic demagoguery manipulations were employed—twisting information by taking it out of context,⁹³ mocking Western officials,⁹⁴ criticizing delayed deliveries of Western vaccines,⁹⁵ playing up conspiracy theories, spinning falsehoods,⁹⁶ all the while accusing the West of being biased against Russia.⁹⁷

In mid-December 2020, Russia doubled down on the information war narrative, after the Ministry of Defense claimed it had “detailed knowledge” of foreign plans to “discredit” the Russian vaccine both inside and outside the country via funding

of “pseudo-analytical investigations” about Sputnik V’s dangers and “false testimonies” about Russians’ refusal to vaccinate.⁹⁸ Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov reiterated these claims, noting that vaccine competition is tough, but it should not be politicized or involve “dirty methods” to discredit the Russian vaccine.⁹⁹

These anti-Western narratives became visibly stronger in RT in January 2021, as the positive coverage of the Russian vaccine gave way to new attacks on Western competitors, including exaggeration of Western vaccines’ side effects¹⁰⁰ as well as issues with fast-tracked approval proce-

92 Jonny Tickle. “Western media has spent months bashing Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine, but now its Moscow correspondents lining up for Covid-19 jabs”, *RT*, January 14, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/512428-western-journalists-sputnik-vaccination/>

93 “4 volunteers develop FACIAL PARALYSIS after taking Pfizer Covid-19 jab, prompting the FDA to recommend ‘surveillance for cases’”, *RT*, December 9, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/usa/509081-pfizer-vaccine-fda-bells-palsy-covid/> In this case, the FDA’s conclusions were grossly misrepresented by RT. For instance, the FDA report explained that adverse effects are extremely rare, but needed to be monitored nonetheless: “The frequency of serious adverse events was low (<0.5%), without meaningful imbalances between study arms. Among non-serious unsolicited adverse events, there was a numerical imbalance of four cases of Bell’s palsy in the vaccine group compared with no cases in the placebo group, though the four cases in the vaccine group do not represent a frequency above that expected in the general population.” See: Federal Drug Administration, “Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee Meeting,” December 10, 2020. <https://www.fda.gov/media/144245/download>

94 “Oscar-worthy performance or sincerity? UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock sheds tear as William Shakespeare gets Covid-19 vaccine”, *RT*, December 8, 2020. <https://www.rt.com/uk/509006-matt-hancock-vaccine-tear/> and “The day UK led humanity’s charge against Covid: Tory MP Sharma mocked for over-the-top cheer as London approves foreign vaccine”, *RT*, December 2, 2020. <https://www.rt.com/uk/508454-uk-lead-covid-vaccine/>

95 “EU could approve Russian-made Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine for use as early as February, amid concern over missed shipments from US”, *RT*, January 20, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/513075-european-union-sputnik-approval/>

96 Graham Dockery. “Cornell University is so scared of being seen as racist, it makes vaccines mandatory for WHITES ONLY. Spot the problem here”, *RT*, December 8, 2020. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/509059-cornell-university-vaccine-white-only/>

97 “Canadian Intel Report Alleging COVID-19 Disinformation Campaign is ‘Madness’, Russian Embassy States”, *Sputnik News*, December 5, 2020. <https://sputniknews.com/russia/202012041081354192-canadian-intel-report-alleging-covid-19-disinformation-campaign-madness-russian-embassy-states/>

98 “Russian Defense Ministry announced plans to discredit Sputnik V abroad”, (in Russian: “Минобороны РФ заявило о планах дискредитации “Спутника V” за рубежом”), *Interfax*, December 11, 2020. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/740856/>; Jonny Tickle. “Russian Army & Kremlin say foreign states & pharma giants waging information war to discredit Sputnik V Covid-19 vaccine”, *RT*, December 11, 2020. <https://www.rt.com/russia/509383-information-war-sputnik-discrediting/>

99 “The Kremlin confirmed attempts of other countries to discredit Sputnik V”, (in Russian: “Кремль подтвердил попытки других стран дискредитировать “Спутник V”), *Interfax*, December 11, 2020. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/740894>

100 For example, see: “Finland Confirms 32 Cases of Side Effects From Pfizer’s COVID Vaccine, Medicines Agency Says”, *Sputnik News*, January 15, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202101151081781561-finland-confirms-32-cases-of-side-effects-from-pfizers-covid-vaccine-medicines-agency-says/>; “California halts injections of Moderna Covid vaccine batch due to ‘higher-than-usual number of adverse events’”, *RT*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/usa/512825-moderna-california-vaccine-adverse-reactions/>; “Second Dose in Doubt After Pfizer Vaccine Reportedly Leaves Dozen Israelis With Facial Paralysis”, *Sputnik News*, January 17, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/202101171081793901-second-dose-in-doubt-after-pfizer-vaccine-reportedly-leaves-dozen-of-israelis-with-facial-paralysis/>

dures. As in other disinformation efforts, RT blended truth and lies, and distorted and twisted news events in ways that served Russian political goals.

In one example, RT picked up on *Le Monde*'s story about leaked EMA emails (which allegedly revealed the regulator's discomfort with Pfizer's and Moderna's fast-tracked approval in the EU¹⁰¹), but largely downplayed the fact that the leaked emails had been altered by the hackers to "undermine trust in vaccines."¹⁰² A different story covered by RT followed up on a viral video of a Louisiana-based woman who experienced convulsions after her first Pfizer shot, implying she might have permanent neurological damage.¹⁰³ RT spoke with her son, portraying him in sympathetic terms, pointing out that he had "been smeared by some as peddling disinformation." But the story failed to report that the viral video was red-flagged by Facebook, where it had been first posted and consequently debunked by the fact-checking website *PolitiFact*¹⁰⁴ and other credible sources.¹⁰⁵ Yet another story portrayed Germany as a country badly hit by the pandemic,

forcing the government to introduce strict lockdown measures, including the placement of repeat violators in so-called "COVID jails" in Saxony.¹⁰⁶ Manipulating a story initially reported by the German tabloid *Bild*, RT reported the defunct idea to place quarantine rule-breakers in psychiatric institutions, but noted that "the idea of imprisoning people in a psychiatric ward appeared Soviet-esque to many." Most importantly, it failed to provide proper context for this last-resort measure, which, at the time of publication, had not been applied to any individual in Saxony and was, in any case, according to *Deutsche Welle*, only meant for a "really small amount of people."¹⁰⁷

It is noteworthy that whereas many Western media outlets track coronavirus infection rates across the world, RT created the so-called "COVID-19 Freedom Index," which tracks pandemic-related restrictions imposed in various countries.¹⁰⁸ According to this index, Russia came up freer than most of Europe. This fallacy was presumably concocted to justify Russia's more relaxed lockdown approach,¹⁰⁹ as well as to maintain

101 "Hacked emails allegedly detail how EU drug regulator was pressured to approve Pfizer jab despite 'problems' with the vaccine", *RT*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/news/512844-eu-approval-pressure-pfizer-covid-vaccine/>

102 "Hackers 'manipulated' stolen COVID vaccine papers, says EU agency", *Deutsche Welle*, January 16, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/hackers-manipulated-stolen-covid-vaccine-papers-says-eu-agency/a-56244504>

103 "Woman who suffered convulsions after taking Pfizer Covid jab being screened for permanent neurological damage, son tells RT", *RT*, January 18, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/usa/512830-griner-mother-pfizer-vaccine-video/>

104 Samantha Putterman and Paul Specht. "The 'shaking' COVID-19 vaccine side-effect videos and what we know about them", *PolitiFact*, January 20, 2021. <https://www.politifact.com/article/2021/jan/20/shaking-covid-vaccine-side-effect-videos-and-what-/>

105 Gian M. Volpicelli. "They claimed the Covid-19 vaccine made them ill. Then they went viral", *Wired*, January 23, 2021. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/covid-vaccine-misinformation-facebook>

106 "Saxony migrant center to be turned into Covid-19 JAIL for repeat quarantine violators – media." *RT*, January 15, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/news/512644-germany-covid-prison-bild/>

107 Elliot Douglass. "COVID jails: Germany clamps down on quarantine violators", *Deutsche Welle*, January 26, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/covid-jails-germany-clamps-down-on-quarantine-violators/a-56344226>

108 RT's Covid Freedom Index is available here: https://www.rt.com/covid_freedom_index/

109 The lockdown decisions were made citing official coronavirus statistics, which over the last year has been repeatedly criticized for being too low. See, for example: "Almost half of Russian doctors believe the coronavirus statistics are lowered" (in Russian: "Почти половина российских врачей считает статистику по коронавирусу заниженной"), *Kommersant*, July 7, 2020. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4406776>; and Vladislav Inozemtsev, "It's Time to End the Bacchanalia of Lies," Institute for Modern Russia, May 11, 2021. <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3284-it%E2%80%99s-time-to-end-the-bacchanalia-of-lies>

the propagandistic image of a “freer country”; the Russian government had to resort to euphemisms: instead of calling the periods of what essentially were national lockdowns as such, it used the term “non-working days.”¹¹⁰

The slightly more neutral, albeit still one-sided coverage of *Sputnik News* focused on highlighting the interest of dozens of countries in the Sputnik V vaccine,¹¹¹ but did not refrain from underscoring negative side effects of competing vaccines¹¹² and publishing op-eds by Western authors critical of the West for overlooking the Russian vaccine.¹¹³ RDIF’s Kirill Dmitriev featured visibly in these reports as the key advocate for Sputnik V, using his high-profile status to criticize Western reporting on the Russian vaccine for being allegedly unfair and antagonistic towards Russia.

One story, reported by several media outlets in the West, covered the Brazilian authorities’ response to Russia’s request for emergency authorization of Sputnik V. To be fair, the vaccine registration process in any country is complex and can involve various setbacks, but the story described below showcases the Kremlin’s unique pattern of presenting itself in megalomaniac terms (e.g. saving the world) and simultaneously spinning a narrative of Russia as a victim of the West’s information war.

According to CNN, citing an official statement by the Brazilian National Health Surveillance Agency (Anvisa), in January 2021 Russia’s request for vaccine authorization was denied due to missing data on phase III clinical trials.¹¹⁴ At the same time, Reuters reported that the request was, in

110 Vera Michlin-Shapir. “Why the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns hurt Russia’s vaccination efforts”, Institute of Modern Russia, June 17, 2021. <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3299-why-the-kremlin-s-disinformation-campaigns-hurt-russia-s-vaccination-efforts>

111 E.g.: “Putin, Bolivian President Discuss COVID-19 Response, Sputnik V Vaccine – Kremlin”, *Sputnik News*, January 19, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202101191081817943-putin-bolivian-president-discuss-covid-19-response-sputnik-v-vaccine-kremlin/>; and “Mexico’s Nuevo Leon State Poised to Purchase, Produce Russia’s Sputnik V Vaccine”, *Sputnik News*, January 15, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/latam/202101151081773162-mexicos-nuevo-leon-state-poised-to-purchase-produce-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine/>; and “Nicaragua in Talks With Russia on Sputnik V Vaccine Supplies”, *Sputnik News*, January 19, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/latam/202101191081809376-nicaragua-in-talks-with-russia-on-sputnik-v-vaccine-supplies/>; and “Forty Percent of Serbians Opt for Russia’s Sputnik V Vaccine, Health Ministry Says”, *Sputnik News*, January 19, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202101191081810974-forty-percent-of-serbians-opt-for-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-health-ministry-says/>

112 “About 100 People Report Side Effects After Pfizer Vaccine Shots in Netherlands, Reports Suggest”, *Sputnik News*, January 15, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202101151081777385-about-100-people-report-side-effects-after-pfizer-vaccine-shots-in-netherlands-reports-suggest/>; and “Second Dose in Doubt After Pfizer Vaccine Reportedly Leaves Dozen Israelis With Facial Paralysis”, *Sputnik News*, January 17, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/202101171081793901-second-dose-in-doubt-after-pfizer-vaccine-reportedly-leaves-dozen-of-israelis-with-facial-paralysis/>; and “Belgian Resident Dies 5 Days After Receiving Pfizer COVID-19 Vaccine”, *Sputnik News*, January 15, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202101151081777929-belgian-resident-dies-5-days-after-receiving-pfizer-covid-19-vaccine/>; and “Finland Confirms 32 Cases of Side Effects From Pfizer’s COVID Vaccine, Medicines Agency Says”, *Sputnik News*, January 15, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202101151081781561-finland-confirms-32-cases-of-side-effects-from-pfizers-covid-vaccine-medicines-agency-says/>

113 Tim Korso. “As Pfizer Side Effects Emerge, Why Is the West Still Overlooking Russian Anti-Covid Vaccines?”, *Sputnik News*, January 19, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202101191081817760-as-pfizer-side-effects-emerge-why-is-the-west-still-overlooking-russian-anti-covid-vaccines/>

114 Jonny Hallam and Rodrigo Pedroso. “Brazil’s health regulator denies emergency use authorization for Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine”, *CNN*, January 16, 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-vaccine-updates-01-17-21/h_994e4bf84400581c2ca0944d4d8f3058

“AFTER WHAT CAN BE SEEN AS A FLEETING MOMENT OF SINCERITY, THE [PRO-KREMLIN] COVERAGE RETURNED TO THE USUAL RHETORIC AIMED AT SCARING, CONFUSING, AND DIVIDING THE PUBLIC. THIS SHOWS THE LIMITED CAPACITY OF THE PROPAGANDA MACHINE—SPECIFICALLY, THE INABILITY TO BE OPEN AND HONEST, TO LEVEL WITH PEOPLE AND SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE TO CONVEY AN IMPORTANT MESSAGE ABOUT THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS.”

fact, delayed on the same grounds.¹¹⁵ In response, RDIF issued a statement rejecting Western media claims that authorization had been denied and complaining of an “ongoing disinformation campaign” against Sputnik V.¹¹⁶ The irony is that among those media that reported on the request’s rejection was Russia’s state-owned news agency

TASS¹¹⁷—a fact that only amplifies RDIF’s (and the Kremlin’s) indiscriminate attacks on the West. And despite RDIF’s claims that Western media “deliberately” spread “inaccurate” information, CNN diligently reported on Russia’s reaction to its original story, quoting RDIF’s statements and accusations.¹¹⁸ In April 2021, Brazil did officially reject Sputnik V’s authorization following a unanimous decision of its board based on concerns over “inherent risks” and lack of information that guarantees its safety and effectiveness,¹¹⁹ but it reconsidered this decision two months later.¹²⁰

Additionally, despite Dmitriev’s spinning of the Western information war narrative, he featured among the speakers at the January 2021 Reuters NEXT summit—an inaugural event that hails itself as “one of the biggest and most ambitious leadership summits in the world,”¹²¹ where he was able to make the Sputnik V case in front of a high-profile Western audience. There, he again complained of Western political bias, blocking attempts, and smear campaigns against the Russian vaccine, in which “fake facts’ had turned into ‘fake storytelling, with sources attempting to find ‘a new angle of attack’” since the vaccine regis-

115 “Brazilian approval of Sputnik V vaccine delayed by missing data”, *Reuters*, January 17, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-brazil-sputnik-idINKBN29M06X>

116 “RDIF Rejects Media Claims Sputnik V Was Denied Authorisation for Emergency Use in Brazil”, *Sputnik News*, January 17, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202101171081792454-rdif-rejects-media-claims-sputnik-v-was-denied-authorisation-for-emergency-use/>

117 “Brazilian healthcare watchdog declines request for emergency use of Sputnik V vaccine,” *TASS*, January 17, 2021. <https://tass.com/world/1245711>

118 James Griffiths et al., “Russia says Sputnik V has not been rejected for emergency use authorization in Brazil,” *CNN*, January 17, 2021. https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-vaccine-updates-01-17-21/h_fdfb4ca40fe3f605d61c93895ca5ab15

119 “Brazil health regulator rejects Russia’s Sputnik vaccine”, *Reuters*, April 26, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazil-health-regulator-anvisas-technical-staff-recommend-against-importing-2021-04-26/>

120 “Brazil approves imports of Russia’s Sputnik V, India’s Covaxin vaccines”, *Reuters*, June 5, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/brazil-approves-imports-russias-sputnik-v-indias-covaxin-vaccines-2021-06-05/>

121 “Reuters launches Reuters Next: An agenda-setting, four-day summit for global leaders”, *Thomson Reuters*, November 10, 2020. <https://www.thomsonreuters.com/en/press-releases/2020/november/reuters-launches-reuters-next-an-agenda-setting-four-day-summit-for-global-leaders.html>

tration.¹²² Despite these accusations, Dmitriev has not been “canceled” and is already slated to speak at the December 2021 Reuters NEXT summit. All these examples point to the fact that Russia’s claims of the West waging information warfare are grossly exaggerated, if not entirely fabricated.

Finally, our analysis of the second and third media events coverage by *The New York Times* and *Financial Times* shows not only the absence of any anti-Russian information campaign, but also the lack of major interest in Sputnik V or Russia (with the exception of opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s dramatic return to his home country in mid-January 2021¹²³). NYT produced only one detailed report on Putin’s announcement of the large-scale vaccination, pointing out Russian people’s “lack of trust” in the vaccine, production challenges, and the Kremlin’s framing the vaccine as “part of its competition with the West.”¹²⁴ FT mostly focused on Russia’s rising number of COVID-19 cases—at that point the world’s fourth-highest number of infections since the beginning of the pandemic.¹²⁵ Russia’s struggles to deliver the vaccine to its regions, lack of official data on the number of vaccinated Russians, and the government boasting that 1.5 mil-

lion were vaccinated worldwide (yet another example of Russia’s prioritizing the vaccine international promotion over the domestic health crisis) were also covered by FT.¹²⁶ In a different report, FT acknowledged that “Russian vaccines are in high demand as the world scrambles for doses,” in contrast to Russian outlets’ claims of the West suppressing praise and interest toward Sputnik V.

A vaccine for all mankind

February 2, 2021: The Lancet gives Sputnik V a favorable review

On February 2, 2021, *The Lancet*, one of the world’s oldest and best-known general medical journals, published a peer-review assessment of the interim results of Sputnik V’s phase III trials, concluding that “the outcome... is clear and the scientific principle of vaccination has been demonstrated,” with the vaccine showing 91.6% efficacy after the second shot.¹²⁷ Against the backdrop of intense media coverage, it was a triumphant moment for the vaccine developers, or, as Dmitriev put it, “the most powerful watershed” and “a monumental achievement for Russia, but also a monumental achievement for the

122 Desmond Cureton. “Russia’s Sputnik V Vaccine Rollout To Expand Globally Despite Western Media Claims, RDIF Chief Says”, *Sputnik News*, January 14, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202101141081766121-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-rollout-to-expand-globally-despite-western-media-claims-rdif-chief-says/>

123 The Editorial Board. “The Extraordinary Courage of Aleksei Navalny,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/17/opinion/aleksei-navalny-russia.html>

124 Anton Troianovski. “The Kremlin Is Offering Russians Free Vaccines, but Will They Take Them?”, *The New York Times*, December 7, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/07/world/europe/russia-coronavirus-vaccine.html>

125 Max Seddon. “Putin orders mass voluntary Covid vaccinations from next week”, *Financial Times*, December 2, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/5669c29c-a998-4373-9541-059169bf5ccb> (Western media confusingly translated Russia’s “large-scale” vaccination as “mass” vaccination, which was announced later).

126 Henry Foy. “Russia struggles to distribute its vaccine to the regions”, *Financial Times*, January 14, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/c86704da-1368-45fd-a1fd-05c3b488442e>

127 Ian Jones, and Polly Roy. (2021) “Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine candidate appears safe and effective.” *The Lancet*, 397 (10275): p. 642-643. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00191-4/fulltext#articleInformation](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00191-4/fulltext#articleInformation)

world, because there are only three vaccines now... with an efficacy of more than 90 percent"¹²⁸ (the other two being Pfizer and Moderna).

Our analysis of this media event coverage by two media outlets targeting the Russian domestic audience allows us to juxtapose the baseline political situation in Russia (*Kommersant*) and the propaganda spin (*Vesti Nedeli*). *Kommersant*'s detailed reporting of *The Lancet*'s results focuses on the vaccine's strengths, stipulating that some reservations about its data remain (e.g. the number of participants in the phase III trials is slightly over 20,000, which is still on the small side for such trials).¹²⁹ The newspaper's coverage also reveals that Russia pledged to supply millions of Sputnik V doses to Hungary¹³⁰ and Serbia,¹³¹ while shortages were still observed in 50 Russian regions. Additionally, a controversy was reported regarding the EMA's review of Sputnik V's scientific results and the receipt of further paperwork from Russia, which RDIF's Dmitriev claimed had been already filed, but the EU regulator said it hadn't received.¹³² Russia's noncompliance with guideline-filing practices was a recurring issue

with the EU well into July 2021, as documented by numerous media reports.¹³³ But, as detailed above with the Sputnik V registration in Brazil, while the process is complex, Russia frames any setback or perceived criticism in Russophobic terms or as part of the information war efforts.

In *Vesti Nedeli*'s propagandistic angle, anchor Dmitry Kiselyov, citing *The Lancet*'s review in his opening monologue, echoed Vladimir Putin, calling Sputnik V "the best in the world," which was, in the former's words, "already a fact."¹³⁴ The show further praised the Russian vaccine's high efficacy—on par with the leading Western vaccines, Pfizer and Moderna—but characteristically fueled the anti-Western disinformation narrative by adding that there were alleged "sad statistics" related to Pfizer: dozens of deaths (false claim) and numerous complaints about side effects (exaggerating and taking out of context). As in the case of Sputnik V registration, *The Lancet*'s favorable review was framed as a Russian victory in the "vaccine race," and the Russian vaccine was described as "a painful injection for Europe."

In his show the following week, Kiselyov also

128 "Lancet driven by science, not politics,' Sputnik V sponsor tells RT as UK journal confirms effectiveness of Russian vaccine", *RT*, February 2, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/514422-lancet-sputnik-vaccine-rdif/> "Critics of Russia's Sputnik V Vaccine Went Silent After Successful Phase 3 Trials, RDIF Says", *Sputnik News*, February 2, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202102021081959807-critics-of-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-went-silent-after-successful-phase-3-trials-rdif-says/>

129 "Sputnik V stimulated the emergence of authority", (in Russian: "«Спутник V» стимулировал появление авторитета"), *Kommersant*, February 3, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4672655>

130 "The Hungarian prime minister announced the start of vaccination with Sputnik V next week", (in Russian: "Премьер Венгрии анонсировал старт вакцинации «Спутником V» на следующей неделе"), *Kommersant*, February 5, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4674239>

131 "The Serbian president asked Putin about new batches of the Sputnik V vaccine", (in Russian: "«Президент Сербии попросил Путина о новых партиях вакцины «Спутник V»"), *Kommersant*, February 3, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4681071>

132 "The Sputnik V vaccine has passed the EU regulator's scientific consultation stage", (in Russian: "Вакцина «Спутник V» прошла этап научной консультации регулятора ЕС"), *Kommersant*, February 9, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4682538>

133 Michel Rose, Polina Ivanova, and Emilio Parodi. "European efforts to assess Russia's Sputnik V vaccine stymied by data gaps", *Reuters*, July 15, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/the-great-reboot/exclusive-european-efforts-assess-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-stymied-by-data-gaps-2021-07-13/>

134 "News of the week with Dmitry Kiselyov" (in Russian: "Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселевым"), Russia-24's YouTube channel, February 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1js8Dk24y84>

promoted the narrative that the Russian vaccine “continues to conquer the world.”¹³⁵ As our analysis shows, it was further propelled by RT and *Sputnik News* for English-speaking audiences. Again, RDIF’s Dmitriev was the key advocate for the vaccine. In an interview with RT,¹³⁶ he stuck to his talking points of the West’s unfair and politically-biased treatment of Sputnik V (which he called the “humankind vaccine”), while underscoring the high demand for the Russian vaccine elsewhere¹³⁷.

Another RT report focused exclusively on the narrative of the West’s information war on Russia, implying a large-scale campaign against Sputnik V in Western media. While suggesting that “UK and American news portrayed Russia’s rollout as a hasty, dodgy endeavor met with skepticism by ordinary Russians,” the only example of such attitude is the article’s embedding of a Twitter post made on August 11, 2020 (that is, on the day of Sputnik V’s registration) by Professor Francois Balloux, director of the Genetics Institute at

the University College London, who said: “The Russian vaccine gamble is reckless and foolish, whether ‘it works’ or not. Actually, the worst long-term outcome may be for the gamble to pay off, at the cost of decades of healthcare ethics ruined.” It is ironic that this post is given as the only example of the “smear campaign,” since it focused on healthcare ethics, which, as our analysis shows, was overlooked by the Kremlin, producing an adverse effect on the Russian vaccination effort.

A portion of these two outlets’ coverage promoted the idea of a U-turn in Western perceptions of Sputnik V based on favorable remarks made by Germany’s Angela Merkel,¹³⁸ Ireland’s Leo Varadkar,¹³⁹ and the EU’s Joseph Borrell,¹⁴⁰ as well as on the news about vaccine procurements by Hungary and Serbia, Austria’s expressed interest in acquiring it, and Italy’s “eager waiting” for Sputnik V registration.¹⁴¹ This positive spin for Sputnik V was supplemented by negative coverage of the situation in the West: feuds among European

135 “News of the week with Dmitry Kiselyov” (in Russian: “Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселевым”), Russia-24’s YouTube channel, February 14, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1js8Dk24y84>

136 “Lancet driven by science, not politics; Sputnik V sponsor tells RT as UK journal confirms effectiveness of Russian vaccine”, RT, February 2, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/514422-lancet-sputnik-vaccine-rdif/>

137 “Mongolia Registers Russia’s Sputnik V COVID Vaccine, RDIF Says,” *Sputnik News*, February 9, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202102091082026898-mongolia-registers-russias-sputnik-v-covid-vaccine-rdif-says/>; and “Russian vaccine Sputnik V has been registered in Mongolia” (in Russian: «В Монголии зарегистрировали российскую вакцину “Спутник V»»), RBC, February 9, 2021. <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/60229c029a79477e41f6e1be>

138 “All vaccines welcome: Merkel eyes Russia’s Sputnik V jab after ‘good data’ shows over 91% effectiveness in clinical trial” RT, February 2, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/514421-merkel-welcomes-sputnik-vaccine-data/>

139 Irish deputy PM says EU’s vaccine rollout ‘not its finest hour’ & praises Russia’s Sputnik V after promising Lancet data”, RT, February 4, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/514555-ireland-varadkar-sputnik-vaccine/>

140 Lilia Dergacheva. “EU’s Borrell Hopes Bloc Will Be Able to Certify Russian Vaccine Sputnik V”, *Sputnik News*, February 5, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202102051081987469-eus-borrell-hopes-bloc-will-be-able-to-certify-russian-vaccine-sputnik-v/>

141 “Italy ‘eagerly waiting’ for EU to register Sputnik V vaccine, head of group promoting Russian-Italian ties tells RT”, RT, February 3, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/514529-italy-eu-coronavirus-sputnik-vaccine/>



Since the beginning of the pandemic, Vladimir Putin has distanced himself from responsibility for leading the efforts to manage the crisis (and potentially from the unpopular measures), delegating it to regional authorities. The president's approval ratings have fluctuated only slightly since March 2020, mostly staying over 60 percent. Photo: Alexei Druzhinin | Sputnik via AP

countries to get ahead in the waiting line for Western vaccines,¹⁴² the vaccines' downsides,¹⁴³ public polls showing vaccine skepticism¹⁴⁴ (Russia, where vaccine skepticism was polled at 54% in December 2020,¹⁴⁵ was not mentioned in the

report), and other problems,¹⁴⁶ implying overall chaos and disarray.

While the vaccine rollout issues were real and extensively covered in the West, our analysis of the NYT and FT coverage showed that the underlying problems often had to do not with chaos and disarray or the West's decline in general, but rather with Western governments' attempts to secure good prices, safety guarantees, and speedy deliveries during negotiations with vaccine manufacturers, all of which led to delays¹⁴⁷ and public frustration.¹⁴⁸

When it comes to *The Lancet's* review, both publications reported accurately on the favorable assessment of the Russian vaccine,¹⁴⁹ with FT rightfully pointing out that "despite the promising results, Russia has struggled to get its population on board," citing an Ipsos survey that showed only 46% of Russians were willing to vaccinate.¹⁵⁰

One NYT story in the surveyed period reported on Russia's disinformation efforts on Spanish-language media, which had been investigated by

142 Lilia Dergacheva. "France's Gov't in Hot Water as UK Inks Hefty Deal to Supply French-Austrian COVID-19 Vaccine Valneva", *Sputnik News*, February 5, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202102051081985435-frances-govt-in-hot-water-as-uk-inks-hefty-deal-to-supply-french-austrian-covid-19-vaccine-valneva/> and Oleg Burunov. "Split in Coalition Ranks? SPD Turns Against Merkel's CDU Amid Vaccine Row, Report Says", *Sputnik News*, April 2, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202102041081977163-split-in-coalition-ranks-spd-turns-against-merkels-cdu-amid-vaccine-row-report-says/>

143 Sturgeon Apologises After Long Queues of Elderly Left Outside Fife Vaccine Centres in Cold Weather", *Sputnik News*, February 9, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/20210209/sturgeon-apologises-after-long-queues-of-elderly-left-outside-fife-vaccine-centres-in-cold-weather-1082027524.html>

144 "New Poll Finds More Vaccine Skeptics in France Than in Other Nations", *Sputnik News*, February 4, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/20210204/new-poll-found-more-vaccine-skeptics-in-france-than-in-other-nations-1081982929.html>

145 "Coronavirus: Fears and the vaccine", (in Russian: "Коронавирус: страхи и вакцина"), Levada Center, December 28, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/12/28/koronavirus-strahi-i-vaktsina/>

146 Kirill Kurevlev. "US Army Veteran Denied Free COVID-19 Vaccine Shot Due to His Income", *Sputnik News*, February 5, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/us/202102051081992387-us-army-veteran-denied-free-covid-19-vaccine-shot-due-to-his-income/>

147 Sylvie Kauffmann. "Europe's Vaccine Rollout Has Descended Into Chaos", *The New York Times*, February 4, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/opinion/eu-covid-vaccines.html?searchResultPosition=18>

148 Valerie Hopkins. "Balkan nations turn to China and Russia for jabs", *Financial Times*, February 2, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/7508a3eb-c36b-4f6b-bd13-4a3a248b0686>

149 Elian Peltier. "A peer-reviewed study finds the Russian vaccine has 91.6 percent efficacy." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/02/02/world/covid-19-coronavirus#a-peer-reviewed-study-finds-the-russian-vaccine-has-91-6-percent-efficacy>

150 Donato Paolo Mancini and Max Seddon. "Russia's Sputnik vaccine shows 91.6% efficacy in clinical trials", *Financial Times*, February 2, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/1180d24e-eeaf-4316-a507-3108bba52c28>

independent researchers and State Department officials, whose conclusions align with this report's analysis: "almost everything [the pro-Kremlin media] are promoting about the vaccine is manipulated and put out without context" and "this was a coordinated effort that was part P.R. campaign and part disinformation" (similar efforts were attributed to China, although it was noted that Moscow and Beijing were not coordinating their activities).¹⁵¹

In a noteworthy NYT op-ed by an Indian public health activist and a Malaysian public interest lawyer, a case is made for the Russian and Chinese vaccines on the grounds that "the richest countries in the world are grappling with shortages of COVID-19 vaccines," while "some of the poorest worry about getting vaccines at all."¹⁵² Acknowledging the two countries' "self-serving propaganda campaigns" and the West's understandable skepticism over premature emergency use authorization of the Russian and Chinese vaccines, the two authors still point out that the science behind them proved solid, while also noting that "no COVID-19 vaccine has been de-

veloped or released as transparently as it should have been." This example, again, undermines Russian allegations of Western information war against Sputnik V.

A "Key Moment"?

March 24, 2021: Putin's vaccination

Putin's own vaccination, which happened privately on March 23, 2021, and was reported on the following day, is the fifth and last media event surveyed for this report. The publicity generated by the news presumably aimed at tackling the public distrust and low vaccination rates in Russia—at the time, around 5% of the population.¹⁵³ Given the regime's closed nature, we can only assume that this vaccination actually took place,¹⁵⁴ because the Russian president decided not to have a photo-op (explained by his unwillingness to "copycat" other world leaders¹⁵⁵), while the Kremlin at the time did not disclose which vaccine Putin had received.¹⁵⁶ This scarce public information combined with a missing image could have diminished the potential media effect on persuad-

151 Sheera Frenkel, Maria Abi-Habib and Julian E. Barnes. "Russian Campaign Promotes Homegrown Vaccine and Undercuts Rivals", *The New York Times*, February 5, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/technology/russia-covid-vaccine-disinformation.html>

152 Achal Prabhala and Chee Yoke Ling. "It's Time to Trust China's and Russia's Vaccines", *The New York Times*, February 5, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/opinion/covid-vaccines-china-russia.html>

153 "Covid-19 Vaccination: A Survey Of Doctors", (in Russian: "Вакцинация От Covid-19: Опрос Врачей"), Levada Center, April 1, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/04/01/vaktsinatsiya-ot-covid-19-opros-vrachej/> or here "Vaccination against covid: who is the leader by number of vaccinations (infographic)", (in Russian: "Вакцинация от ковида: кто лидирует по числу прививок (инфографика)"), *Deutsche Welle*, February 11, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/ru/vakcinacija-ot-kovida-lidery-po-chislu-privivok-infografika/a-56536171>

154 It was reported earlier that Putin had planned to vaccinate in the late summer or early fall. For example, see: Andrei Kolesnikov "Fervent editors: how media heads spoke to Vladimir Putin (in Russian: "Пламенные редакторы. Как руководители СМИ поговорили с Владимиром Путиным)", *Kommersant*, February 11, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4684197>

155 "Putin explained the refusal to be vaccinated publicly by the unwillingness to "monkey around", (in Russian: "Путин объяснил отказ прививаться публично нежеланием «обезьянничать»"), *RBC*, March 28, 2021. <https://www.rbc.ru/society/28/03/2021/6060644c9a79474932b532aa>

156 That Putin had received Sputnik V, he revealed during his annual call-in show Direct Line on June 30, 2021. See: "Putin said he had been vaccinated with Sputnik" (in Russian: "Путин рассказал, что привился «Спутником V»"), *RIA Novosti*, June 30, 2021. <https://ria.ru/20210630/sputnik-1739191868.html>

ing Russian people to vaccinate.

Our analysis of the media coverage, in fact, confirms that the limited media exposure of the president's vaccination made him a far less central figure in the surveyed period. On March 28, 2021, *Vesti Nedeli* only briefly mentioned the president's news, albeit describing it as "a key moment" in Russia's vaccination effort (because "people trust him"). The general tone, however, suggested that at this point the Kremlin was genuinely trying to drive the vaccination rates up, as the regime had grown increasingly aware of the low vaccination risks—if not for the sake of public health, then at least for the sake of macroeconomic and political stability. In his opening monologue, Dmitry Kiselyov addressed his vast audience directly by saying: "Russians have to understand: it depends on each of us when we finally beat the infection. It is time to vaccinate!" Russia's reality of mass vaccine hesitancy seemed to have pierced the Putin regime's façade maintained by the propaganda machine when the following comment appeared in the reporting: "people are coming from abroad to get vaccinated here, but in Russia people are scared [to vaccinate]." After what can be seen as a fleeting moment of sincerity, the coverage returned to the usual rhetoric aimed at scaring, confusing, and dividing the public. This example, however, shows the limited capacity of the propaganda machine—specifically, the inability to be open and honest, to level with people and speak their language to convey an important message about the public health crisis. Instead, the story portrayed those who hadn't

vaccinated as "criminals" and fearmongered about the potential complications from COVID-19 and death risks, presumably, with the goal to induce fear and mobilize the masses to vaccinate.

Russia's efforts were contrasted with a story pushing the narrative of chaos in Europe, where vaccines were "catastrophically lacking." Against this backdrop, a clear message was propagated: Russia had three working vaccines and was willing to supply its flagship Sputnik V to the rest of the world ("humanitarian aid"), but, despite the ongoing social collapse in the EU (grossly exaggerated in the reporting), its officials engaged in politicking to block the Russian vaccine on suspicion of its being "weaponized."¹⁵⁷ The following week, *Vesti Nedeli* followed a similar reporting pattern, while anchor Kiselyov complained about the West's "politicization" of Sputnik V, framing it as a "collective madness of European elites, resulting in hundreds of thousands casualties."¹⁵⁸

Putin's vaccination story was better presented in *Kommersant's* coverage, which featured several short stories and included quotes by presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who, in an interview with *Argumenty i F акты*, a popular weekly newspaper, said he expected that Russians would follow the president's example and start vaccinating more actively.¹⁵⁹ Peskov also noted that Russia's domestic "propaganda in the positive sense of the word needs to be substantially strengthened," while explaining people's resistance to vaccines as a "national trait." In other words, the Kremlin acknowledged that low vaccination rates were a problem and better mobilization

157 "News of the Week with Dmitry Kiselyov (in Russian: "Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселевым), Russia-24's YouTube channel, March 29, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WkzF2tLWyk>

158 "News of the Week with Dmitry Kiselyov (in Russian: "Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселевым), Russia-24's YouTube channel, April 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WkzF2tLWyk>

159 "Peskov believes that Putin's example will encourage Russians to get vaccinated more actively", "Песков считает, что пример Путина побудит россиян активнее вакцинироваться", *Kommersant*, March 30, 2021. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4751408>

efforts were required, but at the same time downplayed, at least publicly, the issue of public distrust in the vaccine, even if it understood its importance.

A similar message was captured in RT's coverage of the Peskov interview; the story also quoted RDIF's Dmitriev, who claimed that 3.5 million people had received both shots of Sputnik V in Russia, which "put the country in first place in Europe" in absolute terms, although not per capita.¹⁶⁰ Cross-checking with Putin's statements about the vaccination numbers shows, again, a significant discrepancy: according to the Russian president, 4.3 million of Russians were at the time fully vaccinated, while 6.3 million had received the first shot.¹⁶¹ Even with Putin's slightly better statistics, the gap between the original pledges (20 million by the end of 2021's first quarter as claimed by Deputy Prime Minister Golikova in December 2020) and the reality is still astounding.

Our analysis of *Sputnik News*' coverage also identifies the vaccine politicization narrative framed as part of a larger discourse about the West's information war against Russia: stories included rebuttals of U.S. and French claims about

the Kremlin's attempts to undermine vaccine confidence¹⁶² and use it as an influence tool,¹⁶³ as well as accusations against the EU for "taking urgent measures to discredit the vaccine created by Russian scientists."¹⁶⁴ The media outlet also followed the usual patterns of highlighting international acceptance of the Russian vaccine, contrasting the news with the EU's slow rollout and Western vaccine (AstraZeneca) problems.¹⁶⁵

As opposed to Russian media outlets, NYT and FT did not report the news of Putin's vaccination and focused on more pressing issues, such as vaccine rollout issues and political controversies in Europe, including the resignation of the Slovakian prime minister over Sputnik V purchases and Austria's talks with Russia on vaccine ordering (FT), as well as Russia's ability to deliver on its promises to supply Sputnik V to over 50 countries (NYT). One NYT story gave credit to the Russian vaccine, calling it "unquestionably effective" and a "sweeping diplomatic win," but raised questions about Russia's production capabilities and prioritizing exports over providing for its own citizens.¹⁶⁶ The author also framed the Kremlin's

160 "Despite roll-out, Russians 'in no hurry' to receive Covid-19 vaccines as suspicion is a 'national characteristic,' Kremlin claims", *RT*, March 30, 2021. <https://www.rt.com/russia/519576-vaccine-rollout-russians-skeptical-attitude/>

161 "Putin cites the number of Russians vaccinated against coronavirus", (in Russian: "Путин назвал число привитых от коронавируса россияня"), *Vedomosti*, March 22, 2021. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/society/news/2021/03/22/862595-putin-nazval-chislo-privitih-ot-koronavirusa>

162 "Moscow Refutes Blinken's Claim That Russia Undermines Confidence in Safe Vaccines", *Sputnik News*, March 26, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/world/202103261082457324-moscow-refutes-blinkens-claim-that-russia-undermines-confidence-in-safe-vaccines/>

163 "Kremlin: Russia Never Politicises Issue of Vaccination Against COVID-19", *Sputnik News*, March 26, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/russia/202103261082457714-kremlin-russia-never-politicises-issue-of-vaccination-against-covid-19/>

164 "EU Attempts to Take Measures to Discredit Russian COVID Vaccine, Intelligence Service Says", *Sputnik News*, March 30, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202103301082491269-eu-attempts-to-take-measures-to-discredit-russian-covid-vaccine-intelligence-service-says/>

165 "Denmark Extends Suspension of AstraZeneca for 3 Weeks", *Sputnik News*, March 25, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202103251082449089-denmark-extends-suspension-of-astrazeneca-for-3-weeks/>; and Igor Kuznetsov. "Third of Danes Don't Want to Get Vaccinated Against COVID-19 Amid AstraZeneca's Blood Clot Drama", *Sputnik News*, March 26, 2021. <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202103261082454839-third-of-danes-dont-want-to-get-vaccinated-against-covid-19-amid-astrazenecas-blood-clot-drama/>

166 Andrew. E. Kramer. "Russia Is Offering to Export Hundreds of Millions of Vaccine Doses, but Can It Deliver?", *The New York Times*, February 19, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/19/world/europe/russia-coronavirus-vaccine-soft-power.html>



Russia's aggressive international promotion of Sputnik V stands in stark contrast to its sluggish domestic vaccine rollout. Photo: Iliya Pitalev | Sputnik via AP

vaccine diplomacy as furthering such goals as deepening divisions within the EU and circulating disinformation in Latin America. The article pointed out that “The Kremlin ... has taken every opportunity to highlight its exports, some of them rather insignificant.”

The pitfalls of Sputnik V's international marketing

While an assessment of Sputnik V marketing and exports lies outside the scope of this report, RDIF's efforts to carve a niche for Russia in the

growing global coronavirus vaccine market did not go unnoticed in our content analysis. The market's value was estimated at \$75 billion in 2020 and is expected to exceed \$90 billion by the end of 2021.¹⁶⁷ Through Dmitriev, Russia has relentlessly targeted this market, focusing primarily on the developing world, and achieved relative success.

In late August, RDIF reported that Sputnik V had been approved in 70 countries “with a total population exceeding 4 billion people.”¹⁶⁸ The scope of this massive marketing drive suggests that Putin's kleptocratic regime¹⁶⁹ is interested in the lucrative opportunities of the vaccine market as much as in geopolitical influence.¹⁷⁰ But a closer look at the proclaimed “success” and the hard numbers of Sputnik V's actual performance reveals a troubling discrepancy and shows the limits of the Kremlin's reach.

For instance, the figure of 3.7 billion, while sounding impressive, is nothing but a misleading marketing trick. According to *Forbes Russia*, as of May 2021 (when RDIF's portfolio already included over 60 countries), Russia had contracted only 205 million doses of Sputnik V, enough to cover the needs of about 100 million people.¹⁷¹

While Russia does see a manifold increase of vaccine export sales in 2021 compared to the previous year¹⁷² (\$300 million worth of the Sput-

167 “Global Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccine Market Research Report 2021: Market is Expected to Grow at a Robust Rate to Reach \$91.3 Billion,” *Yahoo Finance*, July 31, 2021. <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/global-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccine-095300815.html>

168 “Sputnik V approved for use in Chile,” Russian Direct Investment Fund, July 21, 2021. <https://sputnikvaccine.com/newsroom/pressreleases/sputnik-v-approved-for-use-in-chile/>

169 Karen Dawisha (2015). *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* Simon & Schuster.

170 Nina L. Khrushcheva, “Putin Means Money”, *Project Syndicate*, November 22, 2019. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/putin-raid-on-lebedev-physics-institute-by-nina-l-khrushcheva-2019-11>

171 Tatiana Lomskaya. “Diplomatic immunity: who and in what quantity buys the Russian vaccine.” (in Russian: “Дипломатический иммунитет: кто и в каком количестве покупает российскую вакцину”), *Forbes Russia*, May 25, 2021. <https://www.forbes.ru/biznes/429873-diplomaticheskij-immunitet-kto-i-v-kakom-kolichestve-pokupaet-rossiyskuyu-vakcinu>

172 Sergei Mingazov. “Russia exported 32 times more vaccines for humans in 2021.”

nik V vaccine sold abroad, according to customs data¹⁷³), this growth looks less impressive when considered in context. A July report on the Top 20 global vaccine market players doesn't feature Sputnik V or any Russian vaccine at all.¹⁷⁴ Russia's 2021 vaccine exports are six times less than those of China.¹⁷⁵ And as Bruegel, a Brussels-based think tank, points out in its analysis of the vaccine market, "Russia's Sputnik V viral vector vaccine has received a lot of media attention, but Russia, although it is exporting more than usual, only plays a minor role in volume terms."¹⁷⁶

Another example: while one of the Kremlin's narratives promoted the Russian vaccine as humanitarian aid¹⁷⁷ for low-income countries, Russia didn't offer discounts to them.¹⁷⁸ RDIF repeatedly claimed that Sputnik V would cost less than \$10 per shot for international markets,¹⁷⁹ but, while some countries, like Hungary, Slovakia, or

Guatemala, did indeed pay \$20 for two shots, for others the price was higher—e.g. \$26 for Kazakhstan¹⁸⁰ or \$38 for Ghana.¹⁸¹ In fact, according to *Financial Times*, the African Union was charged three times more for Sputnik V than for Oxford/AstraZeneca (U.K./Sweden) and Novovax (U.S.).¹⁸²

Beyond manipulative marketing tricks, RDIF failed to deliver on contract orders yet barely touched on these issues in its public statements. Dmitriev claimed that Russia had the capacity to immunize 700 million people worldwide, but it soon became clear that the production rollout lagged significantly behind these promises.¹⁸³ For instance, in April, Guatemala purchased 16 million doses of Sputnik V, reportedly placing an advance payment for half of them to be delivered within two weeks.¹⁸⁴ But by early July, it had only received 150,000 doses, which prompted the Guatemalan government to ask RDIF to refund the non-deliv-

173 "Russia Has Earned \$300M on Vaccine Exports So Far, Lags China," *Moscow Times*, August 4, 2021. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/08/04/russia-has-earned-300m-on-vaccine-exports-so-far-lags-china-a74692>

174 "Global Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccine Markets, Competition Forecast & Opportunities, 2026 - Moderna, Pfizer, AstraZeneca are Leading the Race and is Currently Administered to Entire Population", *PR Newswire*, July 30, 2021. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/global-coronavirus-covid-19-vaccine-markets-competition-forecast-opportunities-2026--moderna-pfizer-astrazeneca-are-leading-the-race-and-is-currently-administered-to-entire-population-301345160.html>

175 "Russia Has Earned \$300M on Vaccine Exports So Far, Lags China," *Moscow Times*.

176 Lionel Guetta-Jeanreud, et al. "A world divided: global vaccine trade and production." Bruegel, July 21, 2021. <https://www.bruegel.org/2021/07/a-world-divided-global-vaccine-trade-and-production/>

177 To be fair, in May 2021, RDIF signed an agreement with UNICEF to supply Sputnik V to vaccinate 110 people, but procurement and deliveries are subject to the WHO's pending approval of the Russian vaccine. See: "Russia to supply UNICEF with Sputnik V doses for 110m people, says RDIF," *Reuters*, May 27, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/russia-agrees-supply-unicef-with-sputnik-v-doses-110m-people-rdif-2021-05-27/>

178 Henry Meyer, "Russia Wants to Vaccinate Nearly 1 in 10 Globally This Year," *Bloomberg*, March 12, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-12/russia-wants-to-vaccinate-nearly-1-in-10-on-the-planet-this-year>

179 "The cost of one dose of the Sputnik V vaccine will be less than \$10 for international markets." Press release of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, November 24, 2020

180 Sergei Mingazov. "Russia exported 32 times more vaccines for humans in 2021" (in Russian: "Россия экспортировала в 32 раза больше вакцин для людей в 2021 году"). *Forbes Russia*, August 4, 2021. <https://www.forbes.ru/newsroom/biznes/436571-rossiya-eksportirovala-v-32-raza-bolshe-vakcin-dlya-lyudey-v-2021-godu>

181 Abigail Annoh. "Ghana: Covid-19 Vaccine Brouhaha—Govt Negotiated Price Downward From U.S.\$25 to \$19 Per Dose," *All Africa*, June 11, 2021. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202106140317.html>

182 David Pilling, Henry Foy. "Africa will pay more for Russian Covid vaccine than 'western' jabs," *Financial Times*, February 25, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/ffe40c7d-c418-4a93-a202-5ee996434de7>

183 Henry Meyer, "Russia Wants to Vaccinate Nearly 1 in 10 Globally This Year."

184 "Guatemala to buy 16 million Russian Sputnik V vaccines," *Reuters*, April 5, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-guatemala-vaccines-idUSE1N2L0007>

ered doses.¹⁸⁵ Within the month, the two parties managed to resolve the issue by renegotiating the contract down to 8 million doses, for which Guatemala had already paid.¹⁸⁶ In July, more countries voiced their frustrations, including Iran, Argentina, and Ghana, all complaining about receiving only a fraction of what they had ordered.¹⁸⁷ In July, Argentina threatened to cancel its Sputnik V order, too.¹⁸⁸ (The contract issue was eventually resolved). At the same time, it was reported that Russia had granted exclusive rights to a Dubai-based royal middleman to resell Sputnik V

to numerous countries with significant premiums.¹⁸⁹

RDIF did not address the mounting evidence of this poor contract performance until early August when in a brief statement to AFP it attributed delays to a “production scale-up,” assuring that the issue would be “fully resolved” within a month.¹⁹⁰ The fund also denied delivery problems in Guatemala, claiming it was only readjusting to a new schedule. Neither this statement nor any information on delivery issues appear on RDIF’s website.

185 Max Seddon, “Guatemala presses Moscow to pay back Sputnik V vaccine advance,” *Financial Times*, June 30, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/f2ae9fdb-a08c-4492-b1d3-47e3dcff2943>; Guatemala asks Russia to return money over failure to deliver Sputnik COVID-19 vaccine,” Reuters, June 29, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/guatemala-asks-russia-return-money-over-failure-deliver-sputnik-covid-19-vaccine-2021-06-29/>

186 Guatemala renegotiates Sputnik V contract to receive 8 mln doses, says president,” *Reuters*, July 28, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/guatemala-get-8-million-sputnik-v-vaccine-doses-says-president-2021-07-28/>

187 “Covid: stalled Russian vaccines cause global anger,” *BBC*, July 29, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58003893>

188 Uki Goñi, “Argentina threatens to cancel deal for Sputnik vaccine as Russia fails to deliver,” *Guardian*, July 22, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jul/22/argentina-sputnik-vaccine-russia-fails-to-deliver>

189 Pjotr Sauer et al. “A Royal Mark Up: How an Emirati Sheikh Resells Millions of Russian Vaccines to the Developing World,” *Moscow Times*, July 10, 2021. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/07/09/a-royal-mark-up-how-an-emirati-sheikh-resells-millions-of-russian-vaccines-to-the-developing-world-a74461>

190 “Russia promises to solve Sputnik V delivery delays,” *Newsotime*, August 7, 2021. <https://newsotime.com/health/russia-promises-to-solve-sputnik-v-delivery-delays/>

PART III: THIS IS *NOT* A RACE



In April 2021, Iran made a deal with Russia to purchase 60 million doses of Sputnik V, but, as of mid-August, Moscow has delivered just over 1 million shots. Photo: Vahid Salemi | AP

Based on our analysis of Sputnik V promotion in Russian propaganda outlets (*Vesti Nedeli*, RT, *Sputnik News*), we have identified key narratives and auxiliary messages propagated by the Kremlin. Cross-referencing with the more neutral coverage by *Kommersant* and independent reporting by *The New York Times* and *Financial Times* provided the much-needed context that sheds light on Russia's information war against the West (as it unravels in the media space), the Kremlin's political realities, the problems with Russia's vaccination campaign, and the effectiveness of domestic propaganda.

1. Sputnik V is a tool of the information war

Our analysis confirms that throughout the year, since Sputnik V's registration, the Kremlin has actively engaged in an information war (or discursive Cold War¹⁹¹) against the West using the vaccine both as a tool and a high-demand product offering geopolitical influence and financial returns. The anti-Western narratives were propelled through the existing media ecosystem targeting both domestic and international audiences, with propaganda messages cross-pollinating and reinforcing each other.

Few things in the Putin regime are straightforward. The media coverage of Sputnik V's early registration suggests that the Kremlin's strategy might have been envisioned as a "two-mover" (*dvukhkhodovka*)—a problem in chess that is solved by two consecutive moves. First, shock the world with an early registration of the vaccine, draw out the anticipated incredulity, and weather the storm, acting like an innocent victim of Western Russophobia; second, use the expected favorable review in a prestigious medical journal to shut down the critics and benefit from the rightful validation. If this is in fact what happened (we do not have enough evidence that this was the Kremlin's thinking, but our analysis points in this direction), the vaccine sponsors had to be confident in their science and willing to take a calculated risk. In this case, Sputnik V's early registration was not a careless bet, but a tactical political

191 Olga Khvostunova, "Ivan Kurilla: 'Russia and the U.S. have defined themselves through opposing each other for almost a hundred years'," Institute of Modern Russia, June 8, 2021. <https://www.imrussia.org/en/opinions/3296-ivan-kurilla-%E2%80%9Crussia-and-the-u-s-have-defined-themselves-through-opposing-each-other-for-almost-a-hundred-years%E2%80%9D>

move meant to leverage Russian scientific strength to undermine Western adversaries in the discursive Cold War.

What makes this information war even more challenging is the regime's secretive, dual nature: there is a flip side to almost any political claim or behavior: a façade and an actual interior, an imitation of good will and a hidden agenda.¹⁹² As Levada Center sociologists argue, the Soviet “doublethink” remains the main feature of Russian political culture.¹⁹³

The dual nature of the regime is observed in both propaganda and marketing efforts. Sputnik V was presented as a “vaccine for all mankind,” offered by Russia to the world as humanitarian aid to save it from the pandemic. But as our analysis shows, this noble claim is a smokescreen for the Kremlin's opportunistic drive to secure a fair share in the lucrative global vaccine market as well as expand geopolitical influence. It is noteworthy that all 70 countries that ordered the Russian vaccine are outside the Western world—the only exception is San Marino, an enclave country within Italy. A few countries are former territories of the Eastern bloc, which are currently either members of the European Union (Hungary, Slovakia) or on their way to accession (Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia). As such, this selection is reminiscent of Soviet foreign policy practices when Moscow used aid as an instrument to achieve strategic objectives though competition with the United

States for what was then called the Third World (e.g. “peaceful infiltration”).¹⁹⁴ With the Soviet ideology gone, as well as many other Soviet traits, what at first sight might seem as Russia's peaceful offering to struggling countries could be a Kremlin Trojan horse¹⁹⁵—an initial show of good will followed by cooptation and manipulation without any tangible deliverables for those who chose to deal with Moscow. Owing to this duality, Russia and the West were engaged in two different “vaccine races.” While Western governments were striving to develop and roll out vaccines to ensure “herd immunity” and end the pandemic, the Kremlin prioritized a different objective—an influence operation that would allow the regime to undermine the West, extend its reach, tap new sources of revenue, and score geopolitical points in what it sees as a zero-sum game with the West.

2. The international front is a priority, but success is limited at best

Our analysis highlights the fact that the Kremlin heavily prioritized the international promotion of Sputnik V over domestic vaccination efforts, which underscores the regime's political goals as well as insecurities related to geopolitical competition with the West. The Kremlin's propaganda machine is often viewed in the West as the regime's strength, but this machine is too heavy-footed and hard-wired to adjust even to the regime's present needs—it hardly helped the domestic vaccination campaign. As for the information war

192 Ivan Krastev, “Russia haunts the western imagination,” *openDemocracy*, April 16, 2018 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-haunts-the-western-imagination/>

193 Olga Khvostunova: “Lev Gudkov: ‘The unity of the empire in Russia is maintained by three institutions: the school, the army, and the police,’” Institute of Modern Russia, May 3, 2021. <https://imrussia.org/en/opinions/3278-lev-gudkov-‘the-unity-of-the-empire-in-russia-is-maintained-by-three-institutions-the-school-the-army-and-the-police-’>

194 Gu Guan-Fu, “Soviet Aid to the Third World an Analysis of Its Strategy,” *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 1983, pp. 71-89. Also see: Henry Trofimenko. “The Third World and U.S.-Soviet Competition,” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1981 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/1981-06-01/third-world-and-us-soviet-competition>

195 The term used in this Atlantic Council's report: Alina Polyakova, “The Kremlin's Trojan Horses 3.0,” December 4, 2018 <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-kremlins-trojan-horses-3-0/>; and elsewhere.

with the West, as shown in this report and other works on disinformation, the Kremlin's propaganda most often exploits the existing divisions and vulnerabilities of the West, but rarely creates them. By amplifying tensions in the West and muddying public discourse, the Putin regime often seeks to steal global attention and thus project power that it does not necessarily possess, with the unfulfilled promises of Sputnik V international deliveries being one recent example.

Our content analysis of RT, *Sputnik News*, and *Vesti Nedeli*, while revealing a certain coordination on narratives, shows significant downsides. First, the coverage is rarely fueled by attempts to create a constructive agenda, even in the case of a genuine scientific achievement (Sputnik V), which could have been promoted on its own merit. Instead it was plagued by disinformation and criticisms of the West. Second, the coverage agenda is not so much original as it is reactionary to Western news, developments, or official claims. Third, the quality of coverage is extremely low: it abounds in various forms of demagoguery (scapegoating, fearmongering, lying, gross oversimplification, ridicule, etc.) and *whataboutism*. For instance, when in August 2020, U.S. Health Secretary Alex Azar in response to Sputnik V's early registration said that, "a vaccine is not a race to be first,"¹⁹⁶ the Kremlin propaganda started off by denying that Sputnik V was part of any "vaccine race"¹⁹⁷ (even if the name of the vaccine points to the opposite), while claiming that the West was waging an information war against Russia. Then it promoted the idea that the West was a bitter

loser in this race, and finally accused it of selfish political manipulations aimed at blocking the Russian vaccine, thus hurting the world's efforts to stop the pandemic.

Additionally, our analysis shows that the Kremlin propaganda claims about an alleged Western disinformation campaign against Russia were false. Despite RT's and *Sputnik News*' effort to "fight" against information "blocking," we only found evidence of balanced coverage of the Russian vaccination campaign by NYT and FT, which raised valid concerns about Sputnik V but gave vaccine advocate Dmitriev ample opportunity to argue his case, even if it was to accuse the West of waging an information war against Russia.

3. The domestic vaccination campaign has failed

Our analysis reveals side effects of the regime's self-interested behavior. While the Kremlin may have scored some points in the "discursive Cold War" with the West (e.g. gaining publicity with Sputnik V registration, proving the Russian vaccine to be safe and efficient and persuading dozens of countries to buy it), its domestic vaccination efforts failed spectacularly. This could have several explanations. First, the early registration of the Russian vaccine before completion of all clinical trials created deep public mistrust, which, as opinion polls suggest, is often coupled with low trust in the government.¹⁹⁸ According to Levada Center, early registration directly contributed to vaccine hesitancy in Russia. Participants in focus groups explained that they were disturbed by "the

196 Henry Foy. "West's response to Russian vaccine owes as much to geopolitics as science", *Financial Times*, August 13, 2020. <https://www.ft.com/content/5e320e6b-1182-47a6-993e-0bb7f6c7bc2d>

197 "News of the week with Dmitry Kiselyov (in Russian: "Вести недели с Дмитрием Киселевым"), Russia-24's YouTube channel, January 17, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ghpVJ0whCQA>

198 "Coronavirus, vaccinations, and mandatory vaccinations", (In Russian: "Коронавирус, прививки и обязательная вакцинация"), Levada Center, July 5, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/05/koronavirus-privivki-i-obyazatel'naya-vaktsinat-siya/>

incredible speed of development of the Russian vaccine, the *race* between countries, each of which wanted to register the vaccine first at the expense of the thoroughness of clinical trials” (italics ours for emphasis).¹⁹⁹ The top reason for vaccine hesitancy was people’s willingness “to wait for all trials to be finalized” (30% of respondents said so in December 2020²⁰⁰).

Second, by promoting conspiracy theories and narratives of Western vaccines’ dreadful side effects (e.g. blood clotting, infertility, death), the Kremlin’s propaganda might have backfired and inadvertently strengthened the public fear of inoculation in general, regardless of the origins of the vaccine. According to June 2021 opinion polls, 33% of Russians named fear of side effects as the main reason for not vaccinating (20% said they were waiting for the trials to be finished).²⁰¹ Disinformation is thus not a precision weapon: online information circulates freely and often virally, making it hard to distinguish between domestic and foreign audiences. This paradox was observed in Thomas Rid’s work on the Kremlin’s active measures: “Disinformation operations, in essence, erode the very foundation of open societies—not only for the victim but also for the perpetrator. When vast, secretive bureaucracies engage in system deception, at large scale and over a long time, they will optimize their own or-

ganizational culture for this purpose, and undermine the legitimacy of public administration at home.”²⁰²

This brings us to the third point: the vaccination campaign was indeed undermined by poor policy implementation. The regime’s entire attitude to fighting the pandemic might have set the tone for this failure. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Kremlin downplayed its scale and impact on Russia, manipulating the official mortality rates and other data²⁰³ to maintain the illusion that the situation is under control.²⁰⁴ Being aware of the high vaccine hesitancy level in Russia, the regime repeatedly stated that vaccination will not be mandatory—potentially not to cause a stir before the September 2021 parliamentary elections. These attitudes narrowed the government’s room for maneuver and constrained the vaccination agenda: in the realities of the Putin regime it was hard for the Kremlin’s propaganda machine to urge reluctant Russians to vaccinate without acknowledging that the pandemic situation was not under control or resorting to mandatory vaccination. The impact of poor government coordination and confused messaging on vaccination efforts reflected in our analysis are confirmed by Levada’s April 2021 opinion polls among Russian doctors. Answering the question of why Russian people are not vaccinating (mul-

199 Denis Volkov. “Why Russians don’t vaccinate against coronavirus” (in Russian: “Почему россияне не прививаются от коронавируса”). Levada Center, May 18, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/05/18/pochemu-rossiyane-ne-speshat-privivatsya-ot-kovida/>

200 “Coronavirus: fears and the vaccine”, (in Russian: “Коронавирус: страхи и вакцина”), Levada Center, December 28, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/12/28/koronavirus-strahi-i-vaktsina/>

201 “Coronavirus, Vaccinations, and Mandatory Vaccinations”, (in Russian: “Коронавирус, прививки и обязательная вакцинация”), Levada Center, July 5, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/07/05/koronavirus-privivki-i-obязatelnaya-vaktsinat-siya/>

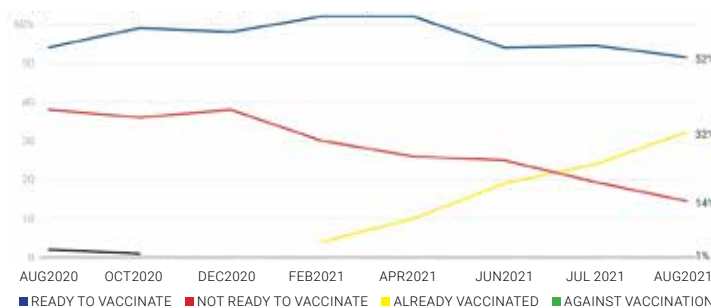
202 Thomas Rid, *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020. P. 11.

203 Vladislav Inozemtsev, “It’s Time to End the Bacchanalia of Lies,” Institute for Modern Russia, May 11, 2021. <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3284-it%E2%80%99s-time-to-end-the-bacchanalia-of-lies>

204 Vladislav Inozemtsev. “Why the Kremlin is in no rush to fight the third wave of the pandemic”, Institute of Modern Russia, July 7, 2021. <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/3308-why-the-kremlin-is-in-no-rush-to-fight-the-third-wave-of-the-pandemic>

multiple-choice answers), 52% named general anti-vaccination sentiment, 46% public distrust in the Russian vaccines, 38% lack of vaccine in their region, and 22% lack of information about vaccination's significance.

Chart 1. Russia's vaccination hesitancy



Respondents were asked if they are ready to participate in a "free and voluntary vaccination." Answers: Yes, No, I'm against any vaccination/shots, Already vaccinated.

Source: Levada Center.²⁰⁵

4. The Kremlin loses at its own game

After *The Lancet's* favorable review of Sputnik V, Dmitriev was quoted saying that "Russia did everything right" when it pushed forward with registration before concluding the trials. But *The Lancet* article did not remove suspicion of the Russian vaccine.²⁰⁶ Reports about political controversies caused by Sputnik V purchases in Eu-

rope (Slovakia,²⁰⁷ North Macedonia²⁰⁸), worries about vaccine quality assurance, and delivery delays²⁰⁹ further complicated its promotion and marketing around the world. Scientists continue to question the absence of the vaccine trials' raw data and the quality of Russia's adverse-event monitoring, which checks for possible rare side effects, like those linked to the Oxford/AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson vaccines.²¹⁰ The lack of robust quality assurance in Russia might be among the reasons for Sputnik V's delayed authorization by the WHO and the EMA.

This situation is another ripple effect of Sputnik V's "original sin"—its early registration. The sad fact is that Russia did not do "everything right," when it decided not to follow international protocols only for the intangible prize of being first. The regrettable truth is that Sputnik V could have been promoted on merit—for its safety, high efficacy, affordable price, and easy transportation.²¹¹ Had Russia followed the standard procedure and waited for completion of the phase III trials, which, in the case of Sputnik V, ended on November 24, 2020, the vaccine could have been registered by early December 2020—still making it either the first or second vaccine to receive government approval (see Chart 2). In theory, the Russian government could have played by the rules and still managed to impress the world with a genuine

205 "Vaccination." Levada Center, August 8, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/08/09/vaktsinatsiya/>

206 Jamie Dettmer. "Doubts Mount About Efficacy of Russia's Sputnik Vaccine", *Voice of America*, May 17, 2021. <https://www.voanews.com/europe/doubts-mount-about-efficacy-russias-sputnik-vaccine>

207 James Shotter. "Slovak prime minister quits in bid to quell coalition infighting", *Financial Times*, March 30, 2021. <https://www.ft.com/content/9b9dc482-597e-4e40-8d63-620a4020ce4d>

208 Alberto Nardelli. "European Officials See Politics Behind Sputnik Balkan Delay" *Bloomberg News*, May 11, 2021. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-11/european-officials-see-politics-at-play-in-sputnik-balkan-delay>

209 "Covid: stalled Russian vaccines cause global anger," *BBC*, July 29, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58003893>

210 Bianca Nogarty. (2021) "Mounting Evidence suggests Sputnik COVID vaccine is safe and effective", *Nature*, 595, p. 339-340 <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01813-2>

211 Sarah Schiffling and Liz Breen. "Russian COVID vaccine: why more and more countries are turning to Sputnik V", *The Conversation*, April 20, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/russian-covid-vaccine-why-more-and-more-countries-are-turning-to-sputnik-v-159158>

scientific achievement, potentially generating more trust and recognition. Instead, it chose to rush ahead and create a short-lived publicity stunt, which caused controversy around the world and irreversibly damaged public trust in the Russian vaccine.

Bloomberg's Covid Resilience Ranking for October 2021 (Table 1) also puts Russia well behind most of the Western countries in terms of vaccination rates, but alongside them in terms of severity of lockdown measures, once again undermining the Kremlin's claims of Russia faring the pandemic better than others. To be fair, Russia did slightly better than two of the BRICS countries (India, South Africa), but worse than China and Brazil.

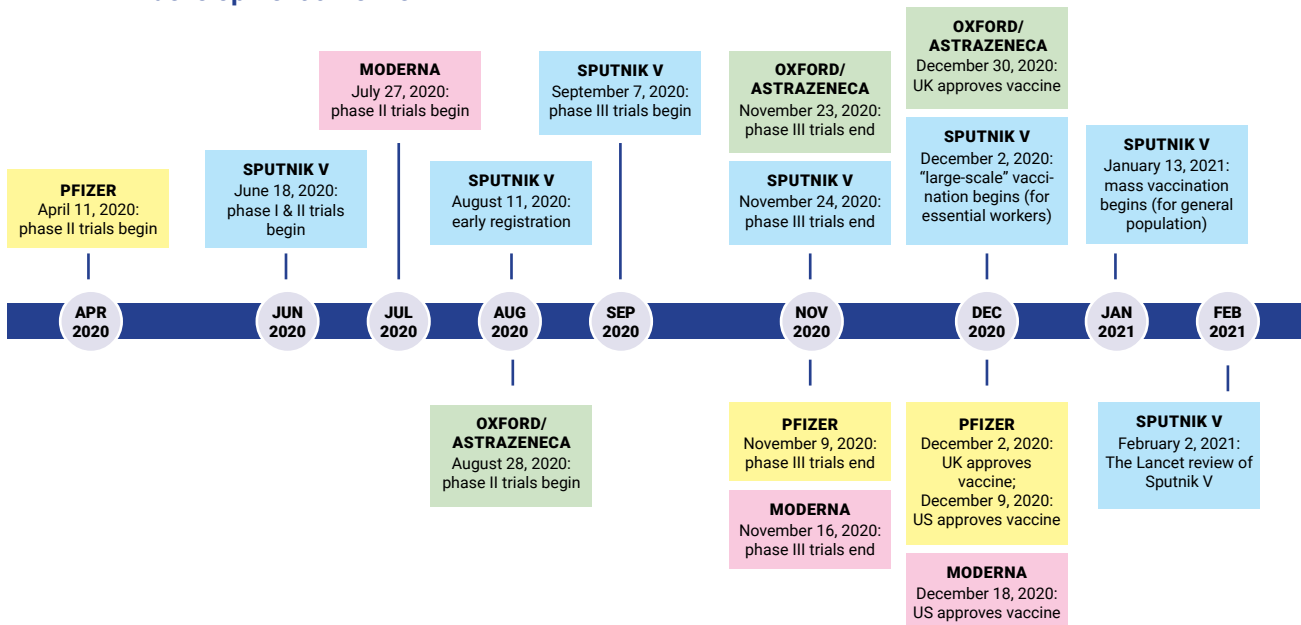
Table 1. Covid Resilience Ranking

Ranking	Country	Vaccination rate	Lockdown severity*
1	Ireland	72.5%	44
2	Spain	75%	42
3	Netherlands	68%	42
4	Finland	67.9%	37
5	Denmark	75.8%	24
15	Germany	64.3%	56
16	United Kingdom	69.9%	41
23	China	78.4%	76
28	United States	60.8%	62
32	Brazil	55.8%	51
35	Russia	30.4%	52
40	South Africa	16.1%	45
45	India	31.3%	71
49	Indonesia	25.2%	69

* A higher score means that social and economic activity is more restricted by government policies and guidelines.

Source: *Bloomberg*²¹²

Chart 2. Leading COVID-19 vaccines development timeline



212 Released monthly, *Bloomberg's* Covid Resilience Ranking shows how the pandemic is handled by 53 countries based on 12 data indicators. Full data is available here: <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/> (accessed on October 4, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A mirror of Russia's strengths and weaknesses

The case of Sputnik V captures the strengths, weaknesses, and paradoxes of the Russian state. On the one hand, Russia's potential and capabilities should not be dismissed: its highly skilled specialists can demonstrate considerable talent and lateral thinking in various fields, including science, information, and technology. The rich Soviet scientific legacy still allows research centers, like Gamaleya, to make significant breakthroughs. The "dark arts" of information warfare, also a legacy of the Soviet/Russian secret services, could be another, albeit imperfect, source of Russia's international power projection. The Kremlin's "remarkable indifference to the knock-on effects of its behavior" makes Russia not only capable, but also willing to challenge Western perceptions of Russian backwardness or frailty.²¹³

On the other hand, Russia's limited conventional military and economic power capabilities are overcompensated by its newly found assertiveness and brazen behavior, which becomes another source of weakness. Aside from bad governance, corruption, overly centralized political system controlled by a small group of people, and the lack of rule of law, the Kremlin's vision of the world in terms of the information war with the West (discursive Cold War), its use of overt and

covert influence operation and overreliance on the blunt propaganda tools stifle the country's potential. Lies, disinformation, and demagoguery may let the regime score quick points in the short term, but undermine hopes for future prosperity.

Table 2. The Sputnik V Scorecard

Strengths	Weaknesses
Talent, skill, and innovative thinking	Ventures cannot achieve full potential
Soviet cultural and scientific legacy	Lack of capable institutions to support best practice in innovation (data transparency, production, quality assurance)
Readiness to take and to withstand risks	Underestimating potential damage and costs of actions
Willingness and ability to use digital media space for political influence	Prioritizing short-term PR victories over long-term achievements

The Kremlin's propaganda machine is wired to sow doubt, intimidate, scare, and generate public apathy, which helps preserve the regime.²¹⁴ Yet, this equilibrium makes any appeal to personal and collective responsibility much harder. The failure of Russia's own vaccination campaign is a stark example of this weakness.²¹⁵ As a result, the country entered the third wave of COVID-19 pandemic this summer unprepared and vulnerable.²¹⁶

213 Andrew Weiss. "New Tools, Old Tricks: Emerging Technologies and Russia's Global Tool Kit", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 29, 2021. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/04/29/new-tools-old-tricks-emerging-technologies-and-russia-s-global-tool-kit-pub-84437>

214 Vera Michlin-Shapir. *Fluid Russia*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (planned publication), December 15, 2021

215 Denis Volkov. "Why Russians don't vaccinate against coronavirus" (in Russian: "Почему россияне не прививаются от коронавируса"). Levada Center, May 18, 2021. <https://www.levada.ru/2021/05/18/pochemu-rossiyane-ne-speshat-privivatsya-ot-kovida/>

216 Elena Barysheva "Russia struggles against third wave of coronavirus pandemic", *Deutsche Welle*, June 25, 2021. <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-struggles-against-third-wave-of-coronavirus-pandemic/a-58047853>

Policy recommendations

Is Russia a global spoiler or a strategic challenge?

Our analysis shows that the Putin regime does present a challenge to the West, but, to a large extent, the main weight of this challenge lies in the political and communication realms. Addressing this problem requires a better understanding of the regime's dual nature and the belief system underpinning its behavior.

As showcased by our analysis of the Sputnik V narratives, the regime's behavior is framed within a contradictory binary optics that presents Russia as destined for greatness—being the first and best in its endeavors—but also as a victim of constant threats, vicious attacks, and smear campaigns coming from the West (whose *modus operandi*, the Kremlin asserts, is information war). Whether the Russian political elite truly believes it or not is a different matter, but this self-image is fueled by selective historical examples emphasizing Russia's sacrifices in “saving” Europe—from the Tatar-Mongol yoke to World War II. By cultivating the nation's sacrificial victimhood, the Putin regime taps a deep national trauma resulting from the Soviet experiment²¹⁷ and post-Soviet collapse,²¹⁸ appropriates and exploits it to legitimize its actions: if Russia is a victim, then someone else (e.g. the West) is to blame for its woes; if someone else is at fault, then Russia, in Dmitriev's words, has done everything right. It is a compensatory defense mechanism that allows the regime to present

itself as the savior of the Russian people and at the same time deny any wrongdoing, avoid responsibility, and deem its behavior as blameless or, if anything, defensive. It also serves as a starting point for, and provides structure to, the regime's information strategies, justifying the use of lies, manipulation, and treachery against the perceived attacker. Such behavior patterns can be defined as “political narcissism,”²¹⁹ a behavioral complex that explains the regime's grandiosity-victimhood duality. In policy terms, this translates into a realization that a constructive dialogue with such a regime is not a feasible option, but owing to Russia's integration into the global economy and its weight in international relations, breaking ties with it would be impossible.

1. Shape the discourse and frame the agenda

The Kremlin's information campaigns might appear loud, overwhelming, and attention-grabby, but they are also blunt, short-lived, and rarely effective. Reacting to provocations (e.g. debunking relentless propaganda claims) is energy-consuming and futile in a fast-paced world. It would be more useful for policymakers to focus on assessing the Kremlin's actual capabilities and addressing real issues, which will allow political resources to be allocated more strategically—creating their own constructive agenda, offering better arguments in support of their policies, and taking the lead in political discussions, instead of focusing on Russian meddling.

217 Sergey Parkhomenko, “Russia has yet to recover from the trauma of the Stalin era.” *Guardian*, March 7, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/07/russia-stalin-putin-guilt-victims>

218 Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (2020) “Constructing the Collective Trauma of the 1990s” in *Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity*. Oxford University Press.

219 Alexander Rubtsov (2020). *Narcissus in armor: Psycho-ideology of the “grandiose I” in politics and power* (in Russian: “Нарцисс в броне. Психоидеология «грандиозного Я» в политике и власти”). Moscow, “Progress-Tradition.”

2. Fix the social media problem

The Putin regime has created the façade of a resurgent, assertive Russia by amplifying the country's strengths and downplaying its vulnerabilities through the use of new digital technologies, the internet, and social media platforms. The growing problems with said social media platforms—from the viral spread of misinformation through privacy concerns to the lack of transparency—allow authoritarian countries, like Putin's Russia, to manipulate the public discourse for short-term gain and project power that the regime doesn't necessarily possess. Big Tech is a problem owned by the United States, and it is up to U.S. policymakers to address these issues instead of blaming Russia and the like for exploiting social media vulnerabilities.

3. Look beyond the smokescreen of Kremlin propaganda

The Putin regime engages in information campaigns to cover its true interests and intentions (the "two-mover" of the Sputnik promotion is a typical example of such operations). Policymakers should take a broader view of the Kremlin's activities around the world to identify what these information campaigns are meant to distract from.

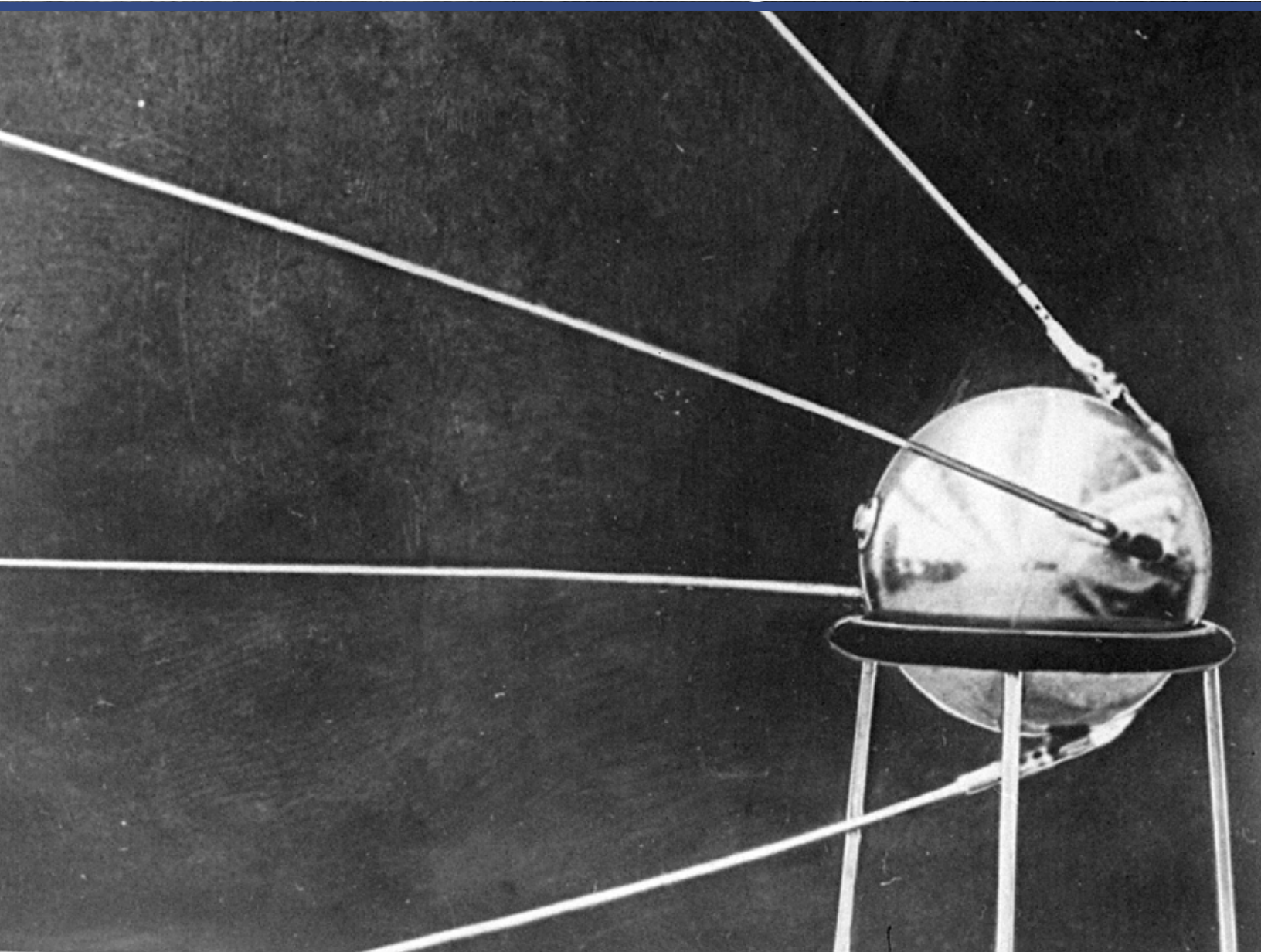
4. Abandon the language of the Cold War

The Putin regime increasingly taps the Soviet nostalgia to legitimize its existence. The same

Cold War discourse is imposed on the West, even if it no longer reflects the reality of international politics. Yet, as we see in the case of Sputnik V, the language of the discursive Cold War is employed by the Kremlin to invoke narratives of great competition between the two systems (Soviet and Western) and thus elevate the current regime's status as a great power, an equal rival to the United States. Departing from the Cold War narratives, metaphors, and clichés would deprive the Putin regime of a powerful influence tool in its confrontation with the West.

5. Remember that Russia is larger than the Putin regime

Given its potential in human capital development, Russia should not be dismissed as a declining backwater. Understanding that the country's population is talented and capable of impressive scientific, technological, and other breakthroughs is crucial to avoid future perplexity over its unexpected achievements. The Putin regime appropriates these achievements, tries to co-opt and corrupt the educated citizenry, and uses Putin's ratings as proof of the regime's mass support. But as the vaccine hesitancy polls reveal, the relationship between the Russian people and the Kremlin is much more complicated than the latter would like to show. More research into Russian society beyond the regime is needed to get a deeper, more nuanced picture of the country's dynamics.



The Space Age began on October 4, 1957, when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik-1, the first man-made satellite, into orbit. The first official picture (above) was issued five days later. Photo: AP / TASS.

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Front cover: Since the early days of the pandemic, the Putin regime tried to frame the COVID-19 vaccine development as a global race, which Russia, according to one of the Kremlin's narratives, has won by registering the first vaccine in the world, Sputnik V. This frame reflects the Russian elite's strategic thinking in terms of the information war and explains why, following a favorable review by the prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet*, the Russian vaccine was described by propagandists as "a painful injection for Europe."
Photo: Pavel Golovkin | AP