THE RISE AND FALL OF SPUTNIK V
How the Kremlin used the coronavirus vaccine as a tool of information warfare

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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 revolution. 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 V<sup>6</sup> 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

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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%,

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. 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. 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.

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 spoiler that needs to be deterred, or as a “strategic challenge” that should be further studied?

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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/teleshow/notes/vlasti_otkazalis_ot_plana_privit_k_oseni_60_vzрослого_naselenija_po_vsej_strane-532844/
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 bypassing the international standards for such procedures, 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

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

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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.”

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.”

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.” 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-


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.

31 Lucas at el., Information Bedlam.
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

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-VacCorona 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 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.

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 person-centred 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. 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 “believes in our science” (italics added for emphasis). 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. Recently, Dmitriev’s name has been floated by the pro-Kremlin outlets as a future deputy prime minister and a potential successor to Putin. 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 nonprofit 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.

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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=OXvLZilwOLB&authuser=0
THE RISE AND FALL OF SPUTNIK V: HOW THE KREMLIN USED THE CORONAVIRUS VACCINE AS A TOOL OF INFORMATION WARFARE

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 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/
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
of clinical trials even for emergency registration. 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. The early registration caused a great stir among scientists, some of whom called this decision “reckless and foolish” 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.” Dmitriev also implied that Sputnik V had been developed using the well-tested adenoviral vaccine technology, while the mRNA technology, employed by Pfizer and Moderna, was allegedly more dangerous—the latter is a baseless and misleading claim. 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, 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 V.
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.” The editors claimed that this piece had been “rejected by all leading Western media” due to a “blockade imposed on positive information about the Russian COVID-19 vaccine.” The article is a classic example of Kremlin propaganda and demagoguery: 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 import). As for Western skepticism, RT reported 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.” 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.

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. It was also reported that Russia’s Association of Clinical Research Organizations, a nonprofit entity, had called


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


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. 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. 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.” 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.”

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, 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. He also claimed on August 16, 2020, that phase III clinical trials of Sputnik V would begin within 7-10 days, but they started only on September 6, 2020, more than two weeks later. While Gintsburg assured that tens of thousands volunteers would participate, Roszdravnadzor misleadingly reported that about...
THE RISE AND FALL OF SPUTNIK V: HOW THE KREMLIN USED THE CORONAVIRUS VACCINE AS A TOOL OF INFORMATION WARFARE

2,000 people were to take part. 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 add 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”. NYT also reported that, despite skepticism over the early registration, U.S. scientists admitted that the Russian vaccine "may work." 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.

Vaccinate!

On December 2, 2020, Vladimir Putin announced the beginning of a “large-scale” vaccination (prioritizing essential workers and the military), 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

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 inoculated compared to other demographic groups. Photo: Alexey Kudenko | Sputnik via AP

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

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-kovid-a-rossii-no-est-problema-farmkompanii-mogut-stabilno-vypuskat-lish
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. 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.”

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 implement 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, 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 mandatory public concerns over Sputnik V’s incomplete trials.

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, while only five regions showed a “high rate” of vaccination. 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.
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
a narrative about Western hypocrisy, incompetence, and weakness. Classic demagoguery manipulations were employed—twisting information by taking it out of context, mocking Western officials, criticizing delayed deliveries of Western vaccines, playing up conspiracy theories, spinning falsehoods, all the while accusing the West of being biased against Russia.

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. Kremlin spokesman 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.

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 effects as well as issues with fast-tracked approval proces-

93 Jonny Tickle. "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
96 Graham Dockery. "Cornell University is so scared of being seen as racist, it makes vaccines mandatory for WHITES ONLY. It’s the perfect solution. Here’s why I don’t buy it.", RT, December 8, 2020. https://www.rt.com/op-ed/509059-cornell-university-vaccine-white-only/
dures. As in other disinformation efforts, RT blend-
ed 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 “un-
dermine trust in vaccines.”102 A different story
covered by RT followed up on a viral video of a
Louisiana-based woman who experienced con-
vulsions after her first Pfizer shot, implying she
might have permanent neurological damage.103
RT spoke with her son, portraying him in sympa-
thetic 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 Politifact104 and other cred-
ible sources.105 Yet another story portrayed Ger-
many as a country badly hit by the pandemic,
forcing the government to introduce strict lock-
down measures, including the placement of repeat
violators in so-called “COVID jails” in Saxony.106
Manipulating a story initially reported by the Ger-
man tabloid Bild, RT reported the defunct idea to
place quarantine rule-breakers in psychiatric in-
stitutions, but noted that “the idea of imprisoning
people in a psychiatric ward appeared Soviet-es-
que 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 pandem-
ic-related restrictions imposed in various coun-
tries.108 According to this index, Russia came up
freer than most of Europe. This fallacy was pre-
sumably concocted to justify Russia’s more re-
laxed 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
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
104 Samantha Putterman and Paul Specht. “The ‘shaking’ COVID-19 vaccine side-effect videos and what we know about them”,
what/
www.wired.co.uk/article/covid-vaccine-misinformation-facebook
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,
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."  

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, but did not refrain from underscoring negative side effects of competing vaccines and publishing op-eds by Western authors critical of the West for overlooking the Russian vaccine. 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. At the same time, Reuters reported that the request was in

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“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. 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. The irony is that among those media that reported on the request’s rejection was Russia’s state-owned news agency TASS—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. 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, but it reconsidered this decision two months later.

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,” 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-

tration. 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 2021). 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.” 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. 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 million were vaccinated worldwide (yet another example of Russia’s prioritizing the vaccine international promotion over the domestic health crisis) were also covered by FT. 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. 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

125 Max Seddon. “Putin orders mass voluntary Covid vaccinations from next week”, Financial Times, December 2, 2020. https://www.ft.com/content/5669c29c-a998-4373-9541-059169b5ccbc (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
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

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promoted the narrative that the Russian vaccine “continues to conquer the world.” 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, 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 elsewhere.

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, Ireland’s Leo Varadkar, and the EU’s Joseph Borrell, 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. This positive spin for Sputnik V was supplemented by negative coverage of the situation in the West: feuds among European...
countries to get ahead in the waiting line for Western vaccines, the vaccines’ downsides, public polls showing vaccine skepticism (Russia, where vaccine skepticism was polled at 54% in December 2020) was not mentioned in the report), and other problems, 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 delays and public frustration.

When it comes to The Lancet’s review, both publications reported accurately on the favorable assessment of the Russian vaccine, 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.

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

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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 PR, 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 developed 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-


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 редакционеры. 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/28/03/2021/606064dc9a794749342b537e4

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.” 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.”

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 Fakty, a popular weekly newspaper, said he expected that Russians would follow the president’s example and start vaccinating more actively. 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

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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. 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. 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 confidence and use it as an influence tool, as well as accusations against the EU for “taking urgent measures to discredit the vaccine created by Russian scientists.” 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.

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. The author also framed the Kremlin’s

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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. 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.” The scope of this massive marketing drive suggests that Putin’s kleptocratic regime is interested in the lucrative opportunities of the vaccine market as much as in geopolitical influence. 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.

While Russia does see a manifold increase of vaccine export sales in 2021 compared to the previous year ($300 million worth of the Sput-
nik V vaccine sold abroad, according to customs data\textsuperscript{173}, 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.\textsuperscript{174} Russia’s 2021 vaccine exports are six times less than those of China.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{176}

Another example: while one of the Kremlin’s narratives promoted the Russian vaccine as humanitarian aid\textsuperscript{177} for low-income countries, Russia didn’t offer discounts to them.\textsuperscript{178} RDIF repeatedly claimed that Sputnik V would cost less than $10 per shot for international markets,\textsuperscript{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 Kazakhstan\textsuperscript{180} or $38 for Ghana.\textsuperscript{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 Novavax (U.S.).\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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-

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\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{175} “Russia Has Earned $300M on Vaccine Exports So Far, Lags China,” Moscow Times.


\textsuperscript{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/


\textsuperscript{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


\textsuperscript{183} Henry Meyer, “Russia Wants to Vaccinate Nearly 1 in 10 Globally This Year.”

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. In July, more countries voiced their frustrations, including Iran, Argentina, and Ghana, all complaining about receiving only a fraction of what they had ordered. In July, Argentina threatened to cancel its Sputnik V order, too. (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 premi-

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. 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.

PART III: THIS IS NOT A RACE

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 War) 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 decision.

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.

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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. As Levada Center sociologists argue, the Soviet “doublethink” remains the main feature of Russian political culture.

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”). 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 horse—an initial show of good will followed by cooption 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

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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,” the Kremlin propaganda started off by denying that Sputnik V was part of any “vaccine race” (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. According to Levada Center, early registration directly contributed to vaccine hesitancy in Russia. Participants in focus groups explained that they were disturbed by "the
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). 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 2020).

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).

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

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 data to maintain the illusion that the situation is under control. 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-

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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.

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. Reports about political controversies caused by Sputnik V purchases in Europe (Slovakia, North Macedonia), worries about vaccine quality assurance, and delivery delays 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. 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. 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

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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

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

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

Source: Bloomberg212

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/](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

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

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

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214 Vera Michlin-Shapir. Fluid Russia, Ithaca: Cornell University Press (planned publication), December 15, 2021
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 experiment and post-Soviet collapse, 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,” 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.

THE RISE AND FALL OF SPUTNIK V: HOW THE KREMLIN USED THE CORONAVIRUS VACCINE AS A TOOL OF INFORMATION WARFARE

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