

## Viewpoint: How Russia teams up with US environmental activists to promote disinformation about the crop biotechnology science

**A**s the now year-old war in Ukraine continues to unravel, so do the stories revealing the ruthlessness with which the Russian state has not only intervened in political discourse, but also in areas of global public debate. There are those untruths that further the interests of the Kremlin in a palpable geopolitical way: think “Ukraine has a Nazi government” or “the Maidan Revolution was a U.S.-backed coup”. These lies created fertile soil for skepticism of the wide-scale Western support of Ukraine’s fight against Russia’s aggression, sowing distrust in the institutions of liberal democracies.

The Russian modus operandi isn’t only direct misinformation but also false equivalencies. Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in particular, Russia Today (RT) all across Europe have overemphasized protests in European capitals and given voice to commentators who believe that elections are rigged or institutions controlled by a deep state. The audience left with a critical takeaway: ‘if our own government cheats on us, how can we trust them when they call Russia authoritarian?’

Fostering mistrust with their governments is one thing, but now they are being led to believe they cannot trust their food either. For decades, the Russian propaganda machine has distorted the views of Americans on GMOs – despite the fact that most scientists agree they are safe for consumption. Research by the Iowa State University Plant Sciences Institute Faculty Scholars Program [found](#) that RT and Russian propaganda outlet Sputnik were the most prolific spreaders of misinformation about transgenic organisms. The extent to which both of these “news” outlets portrayed GM crops in a negative light far outperforms even the coverage of American news organizations traditionally skeptical of genetic engineering. In fact, RT and Sputnik produced more articles containing the word “GMO” than Fox News, CNN, Huffington Post, and Breitbart combined.



Russian leader with Channel One Russia CEO Konstantin Ernst. Ernst's father was a Soviet biologist focused on agriculture. Credit: Kremlin.ru via CC-BY-4.0

In April last year, Russia Today [positively mentioned](#) Trump-backed Pennsylvania Senate candidate Mehmet Oz for “butting heads with Big Pharma and the GMO food lobby”. The site also [regularly hosts](#) conspiracy theorist Vandana Shiva, who denounces how the ‘Poison Cartel’ instigates “totalitarian control over life”. The readers of RT will also hear about how Bill Gates exploits the war in Ukraine to advance genetically modified crops or how ‘gene-edited crops are GMOs with a different name’ (which is scientifically inaccurate).

Russian propagandists are exploiting the fact that agricultural regulations are a highly complex and niche issue that requires sufficient background to fully understand. In fact, those who are the most virulently opposed to GMOs [happen to know the least about them](#).

Americans are split over the benefits of modern agricultural technology. [Half of the country](#) is of the impression that food additives (including the fact that agro-chemicals and conventional processing methods were used), and to an equal extent, half of the population believes that GM crops are worse for one's health than foodstuffs for which no genetic engineering was employed.

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The sowing of distrust in the institutions regulating the farming system, presenting it as being controlled by large corporations, is key to the narrative of disinformation campaigns. That said, Russia also seeks to gain from the specific regulatory implications of those beliefs. While Russia does have laws on the books restricting the use of GMOs, it does not have specific regulations that govern the use of new gene-editing technology. Europe has based its restrictions on gene-editing techniques such as CRISPR-Cas9 dating back to 2001, a decade before this specific technology came into the spotlight. Gene-editing [can be used](#) to enrich crops to give crops the nitrogen they need to grow, thus reducing the amount of synthetic fertilizers.

In 2022, Russia's revenues from fertilizer exports [increased by 70%](#), as they are exempt from Western sanctions imposed since the war in Ukraine began. As the European Union seeks to reduce fertilizer imports from Russia in new sanctions packages, it is also working on a rewrite of the 2001 directive to draw the distinction between GMOs and gene-edited crops.





The EU can drastically reduce the need for inputs with biotechnology. Russian fertilizer producers would probably prefer they didn't. Credit: Cjp24 via CC-BY-SA-1.0

It is important to note that many environmentalists have opposed aspects of modern agricultural practices from ideological perspectives that have little to do with Russian interference. It is ultimately the choice of each consumer to buy organic foodstuffs or locally sourced from agroecological practices if they so choose. A McCarthyist branding of environmentalist reforms as being pro-Russia is neither fair nor productive. Meanwhile, it is equally important to point out that Russia has used some organizations as a vehicle for its economic interests, particularly in energy policy.



According to a letter sent to then-Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin by U.S. representatives Lamar Smith and Randy Weber, Hillary Clinton told a private audience in 2016, “We were even up against phony environmental groups, and I’m a big environmentalist, but these were funded by the Russians ...”. Several elements point in this direction. WWF Germany, BUND (Friends of the Earth), and NABU (Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union), three environmental organizations who were avowed opponents of

Germany's NordStream pipelines with Russia, dropped their opposition after Gazprom promised funding for environmental protection, according to information revealed [in 2011](#). Representatives of European environmental organizations were board members of a multi-million dollar Gazprom-controlled foundation, raising questions about the political objectives of these organizations. France's far-right politician Marine Le Pen – herself having received a \$10 million loan from a Russian bank – [believes](#) that no distinction should be drawn within GM crops, including those derived from gene-editing technology. Other right-wing parties in Europe hold comparably negative views on the authorization of new varieties in Europe. The arrival of new agricultural technology presents the opportunities of addressing food safety, security, affordability, and sustainability. There are political and economic incentives for the Russian state to distort the scientific reality of those innovations, presenting major difficulties. It holds true that it is always more difficult to make a corrected record mainstream than to spread a lie.

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