

# Russia's shadowy disinformation war against the United States and its allies — Here are some of its key targets

Russia's decades-old propaganda machine seeks to damage the health and prosperity of the country's adversaries. Ukraine and the United States are tops on their list of targets.

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his administration's political strategists to use social media and fake news articles to try to create divisions within Ukrainian society, according to a trove of Kremlin documents obtained by a European intelligence service and reviewed and [reported on by the Washington Post](#). The Russian propagandists focused on messages that would destabilize Ukraine by fomenting or exaggerating divisions within the country's leadership, efforts that Moscow calls "information psychological operations."

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This is nothing new for Russia, which maintains a massive propaganda apparatus, manned by bots, trolls, and (pseudo-) journalists. For decades, the U.S. and other Western countries have been the target of such operations, which mushroomed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Anyone active on social media is aware that there is a great deal of passionate but ill-founded opposition to vaccination, especially the COVID-19 vaccines. Some of it was grassroots, but a lot was driven by organized rejectionists, with Russia at its core. As [reported](#) in the science journal *Nature*, they were people "running multi-million-dollar organizations, incorporated mainly in the USA, with as many as 60 staff each."

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## How Russia conducts its campaigns

One example: Russia's [fingerprints](#) were all over a cartoon posted on a far-right discussion forum that suggested the Biden Administration was about to order mandatory vaccinations. It showed police officers wearing bulletproof vests with Biden-Harris campaign logos and battering down a door with a large syringe. A caption read in part, "In Biden's America."

The inflammatory cartoon and similar campaigns were traced to a Russian troll farm whose mission was to stir political trouble in the U.S. It cultivates and exploits foreign anti-vaccine "[useful idiots](#)," causing palpable harm to Americans and citizens of other Western countries.

This is part of a much broader and long-standing pattern of attacks by Russia, which are often spread by politicians the Kremlin views as easy dupes. As journalist and historian Anne Applebaum [wrote](#) in 2021 in *The Atlantic*:

For decades now, Russian security services have studied [a concept called ‘reflexive control’](#) —the science of how to get your enemies to make mistakes. To be successful, practitioners must first analyze their opponents deeply, to understand where they get their information and why they trust it; then they need to find ways of influencing with those trusted sources, in order to insert errors and mistakes.

This sort of manipulation has huge implications for public health; consider how incorrect information might be picked up by crazies — aka “useful idiots,” a term popularized by Vladimir Lenin — in high-level political positions and find its way into policy discussions. Examples include useful idiots *extraordinaire* [Rep. Majorie Taylor Greene](#) (R-Ga), presidential candidate [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#), and [Florida Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo](#).

## **Health propaganda**

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An anonymous letter in Patriot, a small newspaper published in New Delhi that was later revealed to have received Soviet funding. Credit: History, Philosophy, and Newspaper Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

I have [previously described](#) how Russia has long conducted health-related disinformation and propaganda campaigns intended to humiliate or disparage the country's foreign enemies.

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union concocted an elaborate [disinformation scheme](#) to blame the appearance of HIV and AIDS on U.S. military research. They first planted the story in a sympathetic Indian newspaper, then followed it up with other fake stories that cited the initial report.

A 2018 [U.S. Senate-commissioned analysis](#) by New Knowledge, a cybersecurity firm, confirmed that Russia's infamous troll factory, the

[Internet Research Agency](#), conducts “modern information warfare” against its adversaries. Renee DiResta, New Knowledge’s research director, [described the IRA’s battle plan](#) as a “cross-platform attack that made use of numerous features on each social network and that spanned the entire social ecosystem.”

A [study](#) published by academics in 2018, “Weaponized Health Communication: Twitter Bots and Russian Trolls Amplify the Vaccine Debate,” found that thousands of Russian social media accounts were spreading anti-vaccine messaging, even well before COVID.

From an examination of almost two million tweets posted between 2014 and 2017, the researchers found that Russian troll accounts were significantly more likely to tweet about vaccination than were Twitter users generally.

They noted that Russian tweets like, “Apparently only the elite get ‘clean’ #vaccines. And what do we, normal ppl, get?!” seemed intended to exacerbate socioeconomic tensions in the United States.

Russia’s anti-vaccine mischief accelerated during the pandemic. Using online publications to raise concerns about the rapidity of the coronavirus vaccines’ development and their safety, they conducted an aggressive campaign to undermine confidence in the Pfizer-BioNTech and other Western COVID vaccines.

As [reported](#) in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2021:

Russian state media and Russian government [Twitter](#) accounts have made overt efforts to raise concerns about the cost and safety of the Pfizer vaccine in what experts outside the U.S. government say is an effort to promote the sale of Russia’s rival [Sputnik V vaccine](#).

## Disinformation tactics

In the past, the Russian disinformation accounts also posted [pro-vaccine messages, to give the illusion of genuine controversy](#) while attempting to exploit a wedge issue and foment social discord, erode trust in public health institutions, and elicit mistrust of pharmaceutical companies.

Russia has become an expert at leveraging divisive issues to further its trouble-making efforts. In 2017, [tweets](#) from Russian troll accounts created a synergistic link between vaccine denial and U.S. racial divides. For example, “Diseases Expert Calls for White Genocide Since Most Vaccine Deniers are White” was tweeted by several Russian trolls. DiResta [believes](#) the Russians’ motive is “opportunism—opportunistically amplifying controversial topics,” but the bottom line is that Russian agitprop campaigns stoke controversy over vaccination to both divide and injure Americans.

There is also evidence that for decades Russia has attempted to sow distrust and skepticism to undermine key U.S.-dominant industries. Russia’s, propaganda machine feeds disinformation to the well-financed, U.S.-based anti-genetic engineering movement ([here](#) and [here](#)). [U.S. Right to Know](#) (USRTK), the most aggressive of the anti-science environmental groups in the United States, and the outlet RT (formerly “Russia Today”) have the same objective: to undermine support for genetic engineering in

agriculture.

The ideological far left has often been dupes. Consider the bizarre 2017 [story](#) claiming that First Lady Melania Trump banned genetically engineered foods from the White House and favored organic products. Much of the article, including some of the quotes attributed to the first lady, was cribbed verbatim from a 2010 *Yes!* magazine article that had nothing whatever to do with her. *Yes!* is a radical left-wing publication

devoted to “social justice, environment, and health and happiness.”  
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The Melania article originally ran on [Your News Wire](#), another fake news source linked to Russia. The author, “Baxter Dmitry,” has penned pieces for that outlet which allege, among other things, that “  
[Sweden Bans Mandatory Vaccinations Over ‘Serious Health Concerns](#)

” (untrue, but there’s the vaccine connection again) and that a “former Hillary Clinton employee” was “arrested for treason” (untrue). He also [wrote](#) in 2017 that Melania Trump “has credited the healing and nurturing properties of nature for her good health, and urged Americans to stop leaning so heavily on Big Pharma to provide ‘magic potions’ to cure their ills” (untrue).

In 2018, two Iowa State University researchers, Shawn Dorius and Carolyn Lawrence-Dill, [looked at](#) the source of articles containing the word “GMO” (genetically modified organism) and how genetic engineering was portrayed. They found that Russia’s English-language propaganda outlets RT and Sputnik produced more “GMO” articles than five other major news organizations — Huffington Post, Fox News, CNN, Breitbart News, and MSNBC — combined.

The two Russian outlets together accounted for more than half of all the GMO-related articles among the seven sites (RT, 34%; Sputnik, 19%), and “RT and Sputnik overwhelmingly portrayed genetic modification in a negative light,” the researchers wrote. The researchers also found that RT published “nearly all articles in which the term GMO appeared as ‘clickbait.’”



Their efforts to undermine biotechnology innovation have escalated in recent years, taking on a political bent. In 2022, *RT* [favorably mentioned](#) Trump-backed Pennsylvania Senate candidate (and notorious TV quack) Mehmet Oz for “butting heads with Big Pharma and the GMO food lobby.” The site also [promotes](#) conspiracy theorist and genetic engineering antagonist Vandana Shiva and claims, without evidence, that Bill Gates exploits the war in Ukraine to advance genetically modified crops.

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[According to](#) Dorius and Lawrence-Dill,

Russian misinformation attacks reflected the full spectrum of anti-GMO attitudes, covering, for example, environmental concerns (cross-pollination, species loss, chemical pollution), health risks (a cause of cancer, Zika), nutritional deficiencies, political corruption, negative social and economic consequences for developing countries (suicide of Indian farmers), corporate malfeasance (manipulation of facts by Monsanto), and corruption of federal regulatory

agencies. The extensive nature of Russian News portrayal of GMOs reflects a deep understanding of the psychological antecedents of public distrust in bioengineering and an intent to more firmly link these antecedents in the public consciousness.

Why is crop biotechnology such a frequent target? Dorius [explains](#):

GMOs are deeply connected with international trade, environmental and food policy, and the strategically important issue of food security... That we are seeing a pattern of contrast between the U.S. model of agriculture, and what Russian news frames as a cleaner, alternative agriculture system, suggests that there may be different, or additional motivations.

In 2016, Russia placed a [ban](#) on commercial GMOs, making goods produced in Russia more favorable to Yes! magazine-type consumers. But Russia's rejection of genetic engineering and its embrace of "agroecology," a vaguely defined concept that embraces allegedly more natural but lower-yielding agricultural techniques, ultimately dooms it to fall ever-farther behind the modern agriculture of the West. Because Russia lags so far behind, both in sophistication and the amount of genetic engineering research and development it conducts, its government has adopted a strategy of aggressively trying to demean and discredit other countries' higher-tech efforts. By discouraging the acceptance of modern genetic engineering techniques abroad, Russia hopes to prevent the gap between their and others' agriculture from becoming a chasm.

The actions of the Russians and their U.S.-based [useful idiots](#) are a throwback to the malevolence of the Stalin era: promote discord, create mistrust of U.S.-dominant industries, and damage America's health, ability to innovate, and productivity. These attacks are growing in scale, sophistication, and effectiveness. Isn't it time we did something about it?

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