

The Effect of Russian Misinformation and Propaganda

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Motivation

- Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Kremlin has engaged in widespread misinformation dissemination aimed at eroding trust in and destabilizing Western governments in the former Soviet Union.
- Massive misinformation dissemination during the COVID-19 pandemic led to an *infodemic*, which created significant obstacles to the COVID-19 vaccine take-up.
 - The rapid development and novel nature of the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines provided ample opportunities for both the spread of misinformation and grounded skepticism.
 - Fueled by the alleged cases of blood clots caused by the AstraZeneca and Janssen vaccines.
- Exploited by the Kremlin communication apparatus to spread *hybrid warfare* using information (NATO Strat Com).
- Opportunity to assess **the conditions under, and the extent to, which the Russian misinformation machine is effective.**

Context

- The Baltic states, formerly part of the Soviet Union, are strategic areas—within the EU and Russia's spheres of influence.
- Ethnic Russian population is 25% of **Latvia**'s total population.
- **Latvian** Ethnic Russians are particularly susceptible to Russian misinformation.
 - Segmented media space between Latvian and Russian-based media, and lack digital skills.
 - The Latvian government has struggled to integrate ethnic Russians, causing dissatisfaction with the government's policies.
 - Particular **trust deficit** in government, which is absent in Estonia and Lithuania.

Research design and results

- DiD exploiting alleged cases of blood clots of the AZ and Janssen vaccines, the Ukraine war, and differences in ethnic Russian presence.
- Descriptive evidence of Kremlin's misinformation strategy using topic modeling, and ethnic Russians' lack of digital skills.
- Greater drop in vaccination in municipalities with a greater share of ethnic Russians after events.
- The lower vaccination rates in municipalities with more ethnic Russians disappear when the Ukraine war starts.
- No comparable effect in Estonia and Lithuania, where ethnic Russians are much better integrated.
- Effects driven by first doses and those educated during the USSR.
- Greater (lower) traffic towards Russian state-owned and propaganda outlets after vaccines (Ukraine) events.

Contributions

- Extensive qualitative and quantitative descriptive literature on the Kremlin's misinformation strategy.
- Ex-soviet states showed differentially lower COVID-19 vaccination rates in Europe in 2021 (Pronkina et al. 2023).
- Several papers using survey (and, to a lesser extent, field) experiments (and quasi-experimental variation) to show the relationship between misinformation and vaccination intent (Bowles et al., 2020; Carrieri et al., 2019).
- Trust in vaccination campaigns matters for their effectiveness (Martinez-Bravo and Stegmann, 2022).
- We build on these literature to show causal evidence on the effectiveness of the Russian misinformation machine and potential drivers.