

ANALYSIS OF VACCINATION AND COVID-19 NARRATIVES ON LITHUANIAN SOCIAL MEDIA

REPORT NO. 2: NARRATIVES PROPAGATED BY THE MOST INTERACTED-WITH ACTORS ON FACEBOOK

Introduction

As of September 13, around 60.8% of Lithuanians had received one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine and 56.09% had received two. However, the first weeks of September also saw a rise in the median number of positive cases and deaths – an increase of 24.2% positive cases per week. In an effort to curb the rise of positive covid cases the government decided to implement a vaccine pass. The National Certificate (so-called ‘Opportunity passport’ or ‘Freedom ID’) is proof that a person either has a COVID-19 test that is negative, has been vaccinated against COVID-19 or has recovered from COVID-19. Holders of ‘opportunity passports’ are able to go to indoor cafes and bars as well as supermarkets and shops, attend bigger public events, leisure entertainment, private celebrations.

This move was met with distrust from certain society groups spurring a few protests near the parliament and government buildings. During August 10th protest which was mainly organized against the introduction of ‘opportunity passports’ and COVID-19 related restrictions there were cases of violence and rioting.

This report builds on the [previous one](#) examining the underlying narratives pertaining to COVID-19 and Vaccine Pass program of the most interacted with profiles on Facebook to understand the Lithuanian social media scene.

Methodology and research

Using the keyword database of the COVID-19 vaccination process (see Preliminary Report), this second report examines the main narratives of the most common interacted-with actors on Facebook active on the topic. The research period was January 1 to May 1, 2021.

Data was collected using the Pulsar ICT tool which analyses and monitors social network trends using selected keywords and other demographic filters. The data set was narrowed using “Single authors” filter screened the posts published by the ten most interacted-with actors identified in the first report.

The research focused on the narratives that prevail in the posts of aforementioned pages. To group the information acquired, these narratives were grouped into four thematic blocks: a) vaccines and side effects; b) “Sputnik” vaccine; c) “Opportunity passport”, i.e., nation-wide COVID-19 certificate. These topics were selected considering the most relevant controversies arising in the Lithuanian public discourse.

First, regarding vaccines and their potential side effects, it has definitely divided society into two camps, namely of those who support vaccination process and got vaccinated and of those whose stance is rather negative (so-called ‘anti-vaxxers’). Second, as for the “Sputnik” vaccine, despite the fact that it has not been accepted to use neither by the EU or Lithuania, some have raised an idea of buying some batches of “Sputnik” due to its reliability and effectivity. Third, concerning “opportunity passport”, as it has been noted before, several protests have been organized to express disagreement with the newly introduced rules.

Resting on the abovementioned topical blocks narratives are described separately for each author. Notably, not all the topics were present in the posts of every interacted-with actor. For this reason, narrative analysis presented in this report is to some degree individualised.

1.

Lrytas.lt – privately owned Lithuanian media outlet. One of the oldest continuously running newspapers in Lithuania. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 487; Interaction rate – 0.07%; Verified profile;**

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** positive, vaccine shipments arriving in Lithuania are celebrated. This is indicated by adjectives used (“record-setting shipment”, “impressive shipment of vaccines”, “good news” and so on). Politicians who choose to get vaccinated are described as figures who “set an example” (President Gitanas Nausėda, Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonytė). It aims to present factual information (e.g. from medical professionals) about vaccinations, seeks to explain potential side effects to pre-empt and/or counteract disinformation/fears: “No need to panic about the vaccine”, “the benefit of vaccines.”
- **Blood clotting**¹: on one hand, explanations are presented that this is not a dire side-effect of vaccination, while on the other hand, there are speculations about a potential link

¹ A blood clot is a collection of blood cells and coagulation proteins that clump together, forming a gel-like substance in the blood system that can obstruct blood flow. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, blood clotting has been identified as a side effect of SARS-CoV-2 and later as an extremely rare side effect of some COVID-19 vaccines. Here it is presented separately from the category of side effects due to its extremely frequent mention when speaking of complications caused by COVID-19 vaccines.

following news are presented from the USA, a vaccinated man is quoted (“I somehow survived the night”). This points to extremely harsh complications caused by the vaccine.

- **Sputnik V:** Lithuanian politicians are quoted, speaking firmly against the vaccine, news are presented on how Sputnik “doesn’t work.”
- **Passport of opportunities:** on the one hand, its launch was anticipated, on the other hand, it is recognised that it doesn’t really expand the spectrum of opportunities (question to readers “What’s your take?” shows that there is a desire to stimulate discussion as well as to find out different opinions on this issue rather than simply stating whether the ‘opportunity passport’ is good or no).

2.

LRT.It – state-sponsored media outlet. Lithuanian legal code ensures independence and autonomy from any political party or movement. Recently have been accused of left-leaning bias by various right-wing groups; strongly supports governmental vaccination programmes and processes. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 505; Interaction rate – 0.08%; Verified profile;**

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** large quantities of material from medical professionals (interviews, quotes) – the publication aims to present unbiased information from experts; vaccines are perceived as a solution to the crisis (“hopeful news”, “the effectiveness of vaccines is greater than thought before” and so on); it seeks to be a one-stop source for vaccination information, also presenting the composition of the vaccines.

- **Blood clotting:** despite vaccines receiving positive coverage, there is some speculation on potential links between vaccination and the emergence of blood clots (a specialist is quoted).
- **Sputnik V:** Lithuania’s position is presented but no extra descriptors are used (the government ruling that “Lithuania will not use the Russian COVID-19 vaccine”); the explanation is that the effectiveness of the Russian vaccine has not been confirmed due to a failure to suitably perform procedures/experiments.
- **Passport of opportunities:** the certificate is presented as a reasonable measure to fight the pandemic, however no broader narrative on this issue was detected.

3.

DELFI.It – privately owned media outlet, parent company is the Estonian group AS Ekspress Group. Curates various myth and disinformation busting programmes. Publishes various (including right and left leaning authors) opinion pieces. Supports government vaccinations programmes and processes. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 519; Interaction rate – 0.04%; Verified profile;**

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** entirely positive outlook on vaccines, they are perceived as “salvation” (a clear message after Lithuania received a shipment of vaccines: “We will achieve the goal, we will sing the hymn of victory!”). Fake news spreading in the public domain is rejected, for example, on how some vaccines are “more dangerous” than others, there is emphasis on how “This information shouldn’t be trusted.”

- **Blood clotting:** there is emphasis on the European Medicines Agency recognising them as an “especially rare” side effect, but there is also talk about the wide spectrum of problems caused by the vaccines (“From completely no side effects to temperatures reaching 39 degrees [centigrade], which can only be reduced with medicine”).
- **Sputnik V:** only fragmentary information on “Sputnik” is published (i.e. developers, whether it is purchased by foreign countries), no consistent narrative on the topic.
- **Passport of opportunities:** the information about the introduction and use of the national certificate is presented however no broader narrative on this issue was detected.

4.

15min.lt – privately owned media outlet, parent company is the Estonian group MM Group. Curates a fact-checking initiative. Recently accused of left-leaning bias by various right-wing groups. Supports governmental vaccination programmes and processes. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 536; Interaction rate – 0.03%; Verified profile;**

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** entirely positive outlook, expert information is presented. There is more emphasis on the fact of vaccination than potential risks (“outweighs the risk of side effects”, “the benefits of immunisation are far greater than known risks”). The aim is to preserve the ‘middle position’, there is an evaluation of vaccine benefits and negative aspects (“What side effects were experienced and how do the vaccinated feel? A talk with celebrities vaccinated with Astra-

Zeneca”, “What to choose: vaccine against COVID-19 or ‘vaccinate yourself’ – catch the disease and recover?”

- **Blood clotting:** this is covered in a neutral tone, quoting relevant institutions (e.g. the European Medicines Agency).
- **Sputnik V:** only fragmentary information on “Sputnik” (i.e. developers, whether it is purchased by foreign countries) is published, no consistent narrative on the topic.
- **Passport of opportunities:** the information about the introduction and use of the national certificate is presented however no broader narrative on this issue was detected.

5.

TV3 Televizija – privately owned media outlet, parent company is the Lithuanian group All Media Baltics. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 462 Interaction rate – 0.04%; Verified profile;**

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** aims to inform (“We aim to present the most frequently asked questions and answers about COVID-19 vaccination”, “What you need to know about the newest registered vaccine”), but frequently references personalities or their actions without presenting a clear evaluation (“Šimonytė repeats that the benefits of the COVID-19 vaccine are greater and exceed any risks”, “Famous men see no basis to doubt the vaccines”). Doubts can be seen in the effectiveness/necessity of vaccination (“Main arguments: greater risk for young individuals to die from vaccines than the coronavirus”, “Died right after vaccination: feeling weak and infirm”, “This vaccine is typically described as a true terror be-

cause, upon being vaccinated with it, some citizens experienced unwanted responses from their body”).

- **Blood clotting:** presenting quotes from “average” citizens on unwanted effects (“Some teachers are concerned over the vaccine’s side effects”, “I cannot say that these were the experiences I wanted”, etc.).
- **Sputnik V:** only fragmentary information on “Sputnik” (i.e. developers, whether it is purchased by foreign countries) is published, no consistent narrative on the topic.
- **Passport of opportunities:** the information about the introduction and use of the national certificate is presented however no broader narrative on this issue was detected.

6.

Lietuvos Respublikos Sveikatos Apsaugos Ministerija – Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania, a core institution responsible for the implementation of the vaccination process in Lithuania. Provides information about vaccines. **Interaction rate and page follower’s correlate. Total posts – 178 Interaction rate – 0.35%; Verified profile;**

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** the position relayed by the state institution: urging to get vaccinated (advertising the “Petys už Laisvę” [A Shoulder for Freedom] programme). Vaccination described as the only way to return to usual living, while refusing to get vaccinated is to take away opportunities from others (Example with schoolchildren: “It depends solely on our decisions when they will be able to return to school and pursue their dreams”). Information is presented in languages other than the state language (e.g.

Polish and Russian, primarily within the Petys už Laisvę framework, foreign speaking experts consulted).

- No narratives on neither blood clotting, “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

7.

Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos Naujienos – Russian state-sponsored media outlet, designated by Lithuanian and other NATO/EU governments as spreading propaganda or being a “Russian perspective” tool. Numbers indicate aggressive and active attempts to disrupt public opinion. **Interaction rate and page followers do not correlate. Total posts – 6,171; Interaction rate – 0.2%; NOT Verified profile; Anomalies observed** – low number of page followers; disproportionate number of interactions, page followers and total posts.

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** Information is presented on vaccination/testing processes in Lithuania (where and how you can get tested, how many people have gotten vaccinated). Described neither positively nor negatively, “dry” information is presented, but there is a discussion of side effects (“Furthermore, 11 people died after being vaccinated against COVID-19, 5 cases of thromboembolism were recorded, but according to Jurgita Grebenkovienė, the chancellor of the Ministry of Healthcare, this is not tied to the impact of the vaccine”, “The most frequent side effects from the COVID-19 vaccines are pain at the injection location, exhaustion, headaches or muscle pain, some patients experienced allergic reactions”).

- **Sputnik V:** described as “the first in the world”, observations are presented on whether/that the “West” has changed its perception of it.
- No narratives on neither blood clotting or opportunity passport have been detected.

8.

Ciniškas Chirurgas – Facebook public profile owned by a private individual/individuals. Strongly advocates vaccination processes. **Interaction rate and page followers do not correlate. Total posts – 9; Interaction rate – 9.42%; NOT Verified profile; Anomalies observed** – low number of posts with keywords, substantial number of page followers.

Data base could not provide data of Ciniškas Chirurgas to analyse.

9.

Kas Vyksta Kaune – privately owned media company focused on local Kaunas city news. Most often reports news regarding vaccination processes; advocates for vaccination. **Interaction rate and page followers do not correlate. Total posts – 92; Interaction rate – 0.15%; NOT Verified profile; Anomalies observed** – low number of posts, substantial number of page followers.

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** particularly positive and even joyful perspective on vaccinations (“Only one dose needed!”, “We’ve even surpassed the capital in this regard!”). Side effects are described as “minor” (“A few people vaccinated against COVID-19 reported feeling only slight headaches and muscle pain”).

Some criticism of the vaccination process, rather than the vaccines themselves (“While vaccine supplies are low, there is limited room for choosing”, “We now have new vaccines, but can’t use them...”).

- No narratives on neither blood clotting, “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

10.

Respublika.lt – privately owned media company of Lithuanian origin. Most often reports critically on governmental actions, slightly suspicious of the vaccination process in Lithuania. **Interaction rate and page followers do not correlate. Total posts – 83; Interaction rate – 0.58%; NOT Verified profile; Anomalies observed** – low number of posts with keywords, substantial number of page followers.

Narratives:

- **Vaccination:** entirely negative portrayal of vaccines/vaccination process. Vaccines are perceived as dangerous to health, causing not only specific health issues (e.g. blood clotting) but also death (“A woman is convinced that if not for the COVID-19 vaccine, her previously self-sufficient, energetic and independent grandfather could still live long years”, “Elderly Bernadeta Daukantaitė jokes grimly that she will long remember the Saturday when she got vaccinated against COVID-19”). There is little expert commentary presented, mostly “average” people are quoted, with their names typically changed. Links are drawn up between the vaccination of elderly persons and the inability to pay them “dignified” pensions – the construction of a conspiracy theory.

- **Blood clotting:** There is reporting on what countries limit the use of the AstraZeneca vaccine (“The train has departed”). The claim is made that “the danger didn’t disappear anywhere after its name was changed” and so on. It introduces itself as being “near the only news media group daring to unveil those vaccines don’t always, and not necessarily just AstraZeneca, have no side effects” – an element of messianism.
- No narratives on neither “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

Conclusions

The top four of the main and most interacted-with media outlets in Lithuania (Lrytas.lt, LRT.lt, DELFI.lt, 15min.lt) along with the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Lithuania and locally-oriented Kas Vyksta Kaune demonstrated almost entirely positive outlook on the vaccination process and tended to present expert opinions on side effects in order to offer unbiased information. TV3 Televizija, sought to speculate with “mass” opinion on vaccines, quoting “average” people rather than experts while articulating doubts on the necessity or effectiveness of vaccination. Respublika. It stood out as a media outlet presenting an entirely negative stance on processes related to COVID-19 mitigation, criticizing vaccines as well as government actions to the point of verging on mis- or disinformation and propagating conspiracy theories.

TV3 and Respublika are among the most popular media outlets, and thus their participation of spreading doubt on the necessity, effectiveness of vaccines and causes of pandemic is a worrying trend.

With regard to the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, only Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos Naujienos (Russian state-sponsored media outlet) praised the drug as being “the first in the world” as well as

criticizing Western countries of not recognizing it. Also, Sputnik is highly critical of the legality of efforts of the Lithuanian government to curb the spread of COVID-19 while praising the efforts of the Russian government. Thus, Sputnik is set to create doubt of abilities of western governments and create positive image of Russian government.

The mainstream media such as LRT.lt, lrytas.lt, delfi.lt and 15min.lt are strongly aligned to positive narrative about vaccination and the Vaccine Pass program. Meanwhile TV3, Respublika had more of negative and suspicious narratives. Sputnik represented negative and distrustful narrative about vaccination efforts of the Lithuanian government but praised Russian-made vaccine. These trends coincide with descriptions of the first report.