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COVID-19 SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES IN LITHUANIA

Introduction

Russia continues to use disinformation and fake news in an attempt to destabilize the societies of the Baltic states. Due to the vulnerability of some ethnic minorities in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Russian propaganda finds fertile ground in these countries. A high proportion of Russian speaking minorities in the Baltics, as well as the native Baltic nations and the local inhabitants who possess Russian language skills, are often the target of disinformation. Russification of the Baltic states during the Soviet period was not limited to introducing greater Russian language use, but also included settling ethnic Russians in the Baltics. As of 2020, the largest Russian ethnic minority resides in Latvia and accounts for 27% of the population; 24% in Estonia, and only 6% in Lithuania. Combining Belarusian, Ukrainian, Polish and other ethnic minorities that have a good grasp of the Russian language, the percentage of native Russian speakers reaches 32.7% in Latvia, 27.5% in Estonia, and 12% in Lithuania. Moreover, Russian remains the best-known foreign language within the Baltic states. Based on the latest survey in 2020, more than 79% of Lithuanians still speak Russian or at least to a certain extent understand the Russian language.¹ It is widely used by those over 40, while the younger population has better English language skills; 71% of Latvians speak Russian.² This has a direct impact on media consumption habits that in turn influences views on the foreign policy of Russia. Finally, during the last few years, immigration to Lithuania from Belarus and Ukraine is rapidly increasing. This immigration includes both regular workers and political asylum seekers, specifically from Belarus.

The previously conducted studies also identified the most vulnerable groups in Lithuanian society. These include national minorities, people with comparatively low income as well as those who use Russian media sources on a regular basis by choice without any alternative Lithuanian or Western media sources. However, the latest surveys indicate that television remains the main source of information for the majority of the population. In the Baltic states, access to Russian media can create an echo chamber that results in their audience living a separate reality. In addition to this being a risk for the ethnic Russian minorities, it is a problem that extends to other groups that also consume Russian media content, in particular the Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Polish minorities; and as such is a potential significant danger to the wider democratic processes. In these countries, many Russian speaking minorities prefer to get their news in Russian, through the broadcasts of Russian state TV and websites that support the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns (e.g. Vesti, rubaltic.ru, and Segodnia). Considering that Russian speakers constitute a significant portion of Estonian, Latvian as well as Lithuanian societies (including the Russian speaking Polish and Belarussian minorities in Lithuania), Russian disinformation has the potential to impact a considerable proportion of the population.

The EESC regularly conducts Lithuanian public opinion surveys on the most important issues concerning the development of Lithuanian democracy, international politics and media usage habits, to assess the scope of the disinformation challenges facing Lithuania, their effect on individual social groups, as well as possible countermeasures and the effectiveness thereof. The aim of these methodologically comparable surveys conducted in 2017, 2018 and 2020 is to carry out consistent observations and assess the trends in public opinion, analyse and present them to the public and the

responsible authorities, as well as to provide decision-makers with threat assessments and potential countermeasures.

A link between the information, cultural environment and personal attitude was discovered. For example, the people who do not see Russia as a threat are more likely to choose to watch Russian films and read Russian newspapers, as well as to attend popular Russian music concerts more frequently. Moreover, more pro-Russian attitudes (for example, the belief that Russia is friendly and does not pose a threat to Lithuania) are typical of the groups that often watch Russian TV channels and point to the Russian media as their main source of information about Russia.

Ethnic communities tend to regard Russia, its leader, and its relationship with this state more favourably than the rest of the Lithuanian population. Assessing media usage habits and ethnic communities that are in the Russian media information space, at the time of the research, more than half of Russian- and Polish-speakers watched Russian channels daily or several times a week, while there was a similar situation with regard to the radio and online publications. However, national minorities should not be treated as a completely homogeneous group when assessing their attitudes towards Russia. For example, representatives of ethnic communities who have a lower income and do not live in Vilnius, regardless of their nationality, were more often in favour of Russia.

Although the phenomenon of Russian propaganda has been talked about intensively in recent years, it is not a new phenomenon in Lithuania. Propaganda and disinformation activities from Russia have been observed with different intensities since the restoration of independence of Lithuania. For example, one historical trope used by the propagandist is to label perceived opposition forces as "fascists". This technique is familiar to many citizens liv-

ing in the former Soviet Union as it was also commonly used in an attempt to suppress resistance to the Soviet government and continues to be used to characterize actions by the Baltic states and the Ukrainian government. In general, contemporary Russian propaganda has adopted many elements of Soviet propaganda. Although we can analyse its changing forms, such as using new technologies to create distribution channels, monitoring propaganda in Lithuania in the short term allows to draw broader conclusions.

Through the distortion of reality, the Kremlin historically aspired to convince Baltic societies – and mainly the younger generations that did not experience the Soviet regime – that reconciliation with Russia is necessary for the socio-economic development of their countries. To accomplish this goal, Russian propaganda uses two main strategies. On the one hand, it spreads articles and disinformation about how, during Soviet rule, living conditions were better than the present day, and that Russian help is fundamental to bolster a country's growth.³ On the other hand, it distorts past facts in order to show that when the Soviet Union occupied the Baltics, it acted with local consent.

However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there are noticeable changes in the narratives of disinformation that are being spread. In the Baltic region, as well as specifically in Lithuania, the hostile narratives and malign information have usually sought to undermine the image of the Lithuanian state both in the eyes of the local population and the international arena or in other words, to portray Lithuania as a failed state.

In part due to the complex nature of viruses and ambiguity over how the pandemic started, the COVID-19 pandemic created new fertile ground for disinformation. The onset of the pandemic saw an increased flow of disinfor-

mation regarding the vaccination process and the vaccines. Firstly, by undermining the usefulness of vaccines and secondly, by advocating for the efficiency of vaccines produced in Russia, such as the "Sputnik V" vaccine. It is important to note that false narratives and disinformation often target the most sensitive and vulnerable groups in society, thus creating even greater cleavages internally within the country and making it more difficult for the State to effectively reach them. In the context of the pandemic, this might affect the ongoing vaccination process in Lithuania as the Department of Statistics of Lithuania reports that the vaccination rate in the areas inhabited by ethnic minorities currently is twice as slow as in the other regions of Lithuania. Furthermore, the national media reports that these regions express higher trust in the Russian Sputnik vaccine rather than in vaccines approved by the European Union and Lithuania. Social networks (Facebook in particular) and other platforms or sources in the Russian language might also play a role in spreading distrust among ethnic minorities and thus creating deeper cleavages in society. This claim is also supported by the fact that ethnic minority areas in Lithuania at the municipal level are mostly represented only by one Polish minority party, which creates the lack of alternatives in terms of information campaigns and decision making on the municipal level.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has created a perfect setting for spreading malign and deliberate misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda from various hostile actors, the Lithuanian State Security Department, in its annual threat assessment review for 2021, noted that disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination process is being used by authoritarian regimes to pursue their own agenda. This is perceived as a national security threat. Since the beginning of the global pandemic, Russia and China continuously employed various disinformation tactics

and campaigns to spread COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, contradictory narratives about Western failures in the fight against a pandemic and try to curtail Western vaccine effectiveness. The aim of these attacks is two-fold – to improve their image and attempt to tarnish that of European and NATO states in an effort to destabilize them.

Disinformation campaigns and narratives are often specifically tailored to various social groups, such as ethnic minorities, and other socially and economically vulnerable groups of society. Research done by EESC in 2020 shows that the Lithuanian public's trust in state institutions and the government is low with only 43% trusting their government while even less (24%) trust the parliament or the political parties (8%). This has made the State's vaccination efforts especially fragile and sensitive to any doubt that may be cast by external or internal meddling. A combination of these factors suggests that the Lithuanian population could be potentially targets for information campaigns hostile to the vaccination process.

As of October 14, around 58.7% of Lithuanians had received two doses of the COVID-19 vaccine. Meanwhile the Šalčininkai district, where over 70% identify themselves as Polish according to 2011 census figures, has a substantially lower vaccination rate at only 37.7% of the local population. The numbers were even lower in the first half of the year when the vaccination rate varied from 20% up to 25%, while other municipalities reached more than 50%. The question of why people in more pronounced minority districts like Šalčininkai are especially unwilling to get COVID-19 vaccine is the question this research seeks to address.

Based on the factors of past Russian disinformation campaigns, the potential susceptibility of ethnic minority groups, and the pronounced difference in vaccination rates in the predominantly Polish minority district of Šalčininkai

the researchers reviewed available Facebook data to assess the presence and prominence of hostile narratives that may have impacted the State's vaccination efforts. To do this a sample of significant public Facebook pages relevant to Lithuania were analysed to identify potential disinformation narratives.

This paper consists of three parts. The first introduces the top 10 most interacted with pages on Facebook. The second presents the narratives present on those pages. The third provides an overview of the pages and narratives that are more likely to be relevant to the Polish ethnic minority in Lithuania. This paper is based on reports that were compiled with support from the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project.

1. MOST COMMON INTERACTED-WITH ACTORS ON "FACEBOOK" REPORTING ON THE VACCINATION PROCESS

Methodology

The research was conducted using the Pulsar and CrowdTangle tools, which monitor and track social network data. The examined data was pulled for a research period of January 1 to July 1, 2021, to enable medium-to-long term dynamics and trends. The first part focused on the 10 most interacted-with actors on Facebook who were reporting on COVID-19 vaccination processes in Lithuania.⁴ This was done using the CrowdTangle tool, and the data set was narrowed using the main keywords (see Keywords used below). The keywords were selected to ensure their relevance to the topic of the vaccination process in Lithuania, while also seeking to minimise the presence of irrelevant data (*noise*).

This initial part includes the topmost interacted-with profiles – a short description of the profile (major stakeholder; if applicable – bias;), whether the profile supports the vaccination process, total post count, post-interaction percentage, the correlation between interaction rate and page followers, profile verification by Facebook administrators. The researchers ranked the pages based on the Total Interactions variable, which is the sum of all *interactions*. Different ranking metrics could have been used and would likely result in a different top ten list; however, total interactions was deemed to be the most relevant for this research as it is one of indicators that the post was actually engaged with.

The keywords used to filter for relevant posts were the names of the most common vaccines and pharmaceutical companies used in the Lithuanian language media environment; localized variations of “covid” and of the so-called “opportunity passport”:

AstraZeneca OR Vaxzevria OR Zeneca OR Zeneka OR “AZ vakcina” OR CanSino OR Convidecia OR Ad5-nCoV OR Covaxin OR BBV152 OR “Bharat Biotech” OR CureVac OR CVnCoV OR Johnson&Johnson OR Janssen OR Moderna OR mRNA-1273 OR Modernos OR Moderna OR Pfizer OR BioNTech OR BioNTech-Pfizer OR BNT162 OR Comirnaty OR Pfizerio OR Pfizeris OR Sinopharm OR Vero OR Sinovac OR CoronaVac OR SputnikV OR Sputnik OR sputnikas OR sputniko OR sputniku OR sputniką OR vakcina OR astrutė OR “galibybės pasas” OR “avių pasas” OR “avinų pasas” OR kovidas OR covidas OR kovidotai OR covidotai OR covidotas OR “Galimybės pasas” OR “kovido pasas”

Most interacted-with actors on Facebook

This report presents the top 10 most interacted-with profiles on Facebook; information includes their ties to the government, ownership, anomalies with interactions, page likes/followers and post interactions, etc. These profiles were compiled by searching for the above-mentioned keywords in all public posts collected by CrowdTangle.⁵











1. **Lrytas.lt** – privately-owned media outlet of Lithuanian origin. One of the oldest continuously running newspapers in Lithuania. Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 487; Interaction rate – 0.07%; Verified profile;
2. **LRT.lt** – 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. Interaction rate and page followers correlate which indicates that information circles within the constant subscribers. Total posts – 505; Interaction rate – 0.08%; Verified profile;
3. **DELFI.lt** – privately-owned media outlet, the 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 governmental vaccinations programmes and processes. Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 519; Interaction rate – 0.04%; Verified profile;
4. **15min.lt** – privately-owned media outlet, the 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;











5. **TV3 Televizija** – privately-owned media outlet, the parent company is the Lithuanian group All Media Baltics. Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 462 Interaction rate – 0.04%; Verified profile;
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;
7. **Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos Naujienos** – Russian state-sponsored media outlet, designed 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; a disproportionate number of interactions, page followers and total posts.

8. **Ciniškas Chirurgas** – Facebook public profile owned by a private individual. 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, a substantial number of page followers.

Page Name	Total Interactions	Interaction Rate	Total Posts	Video Views	Post Performance	Page Followers
 lrytas.lt	168,592	0.07%	487	242,462	2.2x	531,453
 IRT	166,030	0.08%	505	152,632	1.8x	416,526
 DELFI.lt	134,842	0.04%	519	257,814	1.8x	590,649
 15min	118,039	0.03%	536	628,388	2.1x	629,829
 TV3 televizija	84,102	0.04%	462	500,965	1.8x	433,593
 Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija	51,092	0.35%	178	325,803	2.0x	83,147
 Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos naujienos	45,972	0.2%	6,171	639	-3.7x	3,477
 Ciniškas Chirurgas	41,540	9.42%	9	—	19.5x	48,969
 Kas vyksta Kaune	34,809	0.15%	92	11,541	1.5x	248,797
 Respublika.lt	26,462	0.58%	83	—	1.8x	54,886

Anomalies of Interaction Rates per Facebook Page

	Page Name	Total Interactions	Page Followers	Proportion of 'Followers' that 'Interact' with posts (interactions/followers)
	Lrytas.lt	168592	531453	0.32
	LRT	166030	416526	0.40
	DELFI.lt	134842	590649	0.23
	15min	118039	629829	0.19
	TV3 televizija	84102	433593	0.19
	Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija	51092	83147	0.61
	Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos naujienos	45972	3477	13.22
	Ciniškas Chirurgas	41540	48969	0.85
	Kas vyksta Kaune	34609	248797	0.14
	Respublika.lt	26462	54886	0.48

9. **Kas Vyksta Kaune** – a 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, a substantial number of page followers.
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, a substantial number of page followers.

The above tables shows the overview of page stats at time of research. Of note is the difference between the number of Followers a page has and the number of Interactions it receives. Sputnik Lietuva represents the only page that receives more interactions than it has followers representing a 13x increase in the number of interactions compared to followers. This is particularly interesting considering that it does not appear to be running ads on Facebook. Although it is unclear from this initial analysis it may be an indication of inauthentic behaviour and this page may be used as one of the main sources of information in the private groups.

2. NARRATIVES PROPAGATED BY THE MOST INTERACTED-WITH ACTORS ON FACEBOOK

In an effort to curb the rise of positive COVID-19 cases, the Lithuanian government decided to implement a vaccine pass. The National Certificate (so-called 'Opportunity passport' or 'Freedom ID') is proof that a person is less likely to transmit COVID-19 due to being vaccinated, recently recovered from, or tested negative to 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, and private celebrations. This move was met with distrust from certain social groups spurring a few protests near the parliament and government buildings. 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

Using the COVID-19 related keywords from the first part of the research, the second part of the research examines the main narratives of the most interacted-with relevant actors on Facebook. The research period was from **January 1 to May 1, 2021**. Just as in the first part of the research the data was collected using Pulsar media monitoring tool. The data was further narrowed by filtering content based on the author of the post to limit it to posts published by the ten most interacted-with actors from the first part of the research. Significant narratives were identified from these posts and grouped in to four themes: a) general vaccines; b) Blood clotting as one of the most

resonant COVID-19 vaccine side effects; c) the “Sputnik V” vaccine; and d) the so-called “Opportunity passport”.

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 the vaccination process and got vaccinated and of those whose stance is rather negative (so-called ‘anti-vaxxers’). Second, some have raised the idea of buying and using the “Sputnik V” vaccine in the country despite it not being approved for use by either the EU or Lithuania due to the opaqueness of its supporting data and questions of its reliability and effectiveness. Third, concerning “opportunity passport”, as it has been noted before, several protests have been organized to express disagreement with the newly introduced rules. Narratives based on the abovementioned themes are described separately for each author. However, not all the themes were present in the posts of all the selected actors. For this reason, the narrative analysis presented in this report is to some degree individualised.

Narratives of the most common actors:

1. **Lrytas.lt:**

- **Vaccination:** 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 dis-information/ fears: “No need to panic about the vaccine”, “the benefit of vaccines.”
- **Blood clotting⁶:** on the 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 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, the news is presented on how Sputnik “doesn’t work.”
- **Passport of opportunities:** on the one hand, its launch was anticipated, on the other, it is thought that it doesn’t really expand the spectrum of opportunities.

2. **LRT.lt:**

- **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.lt:**
- **Vaccination:** 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 an emphasis on how “This information shouldn’t be trusted.”
 - **Blood clotting:** there is an 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 39C degrees, 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:**
- **Vaccination:** 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:**
- **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 because, 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:**
- **Vaccination:** the position relayed by the state institution: urging to get vaccinated (advertising the “Petys už Laisvę” [A Shoulder for Freedom] programme). Vaccination is described as the only way to return to the 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:**
- **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 Grebenkoviënė, 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 nor opportunity passport have been detected.
8. **Ciniškas Chirurgas:**
- Database could not provide data of Ciniškas Chirurgas to analyse. This particular page has been found in the CrowdTangle database, but it was not discovered by the Pulsar analysis tool, presumably due to page privacy settings.
9. **Kas Vyksta Kaune:**
- **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:**
- **Vaccination:** an 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 the “Sputnik V” vaccine nor opportunity passport have been detected.

Findings

In general, the most interacted with Pages being monitored presented an almost entirely positive narratives on the vaccines and vaccination process. These pages largely represented sources that could be described as responsible media outlets with robust journalistic standards (such as Irytas.lt, LRT, DELFI.lt, 15min, and Kas Vyksta Kaune) and also include the official page of the Ministry of Health so it is not surprising that the vaccines were discussed in a largely positive and fact-based manner. This included presenting the views of experts and discussions of side effects in an unbiased manner. This also reflects what is known about the information these sources publish via their other channels such as websites, TV, and radio and likely represents a significant proportion of the information Lithuanian speakers receive in the country. However, other pages, such as TV3 televizija which has the fourth highest number of followers on Facebook and is affiliated with the TV network with one of the largest reaches in Lithuania were less fact based in their presentation of the narratives. 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. Given the known levels of distrust toward official state institutions, it is likely a number of people would be more receptive to the more populist narratives presented on TV3 and represents a potential risk to the pro-vaccination messaging reaching the average citizen.

More alarming, however, was how 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. Despite the fact that Respublika’s Facebook Page ranks near the bottom of the selected pages for follow-

ers and last in terms of interaction rates, it is the official page of one of the country's leading newspapers. This represents a potentially serious risk to the quality of information that members of the public are receiving and would likely have adverse impacts on their audience's willingness to respect the vaccination process.

The only monitored page which presented significant positive narratives on the "Sputnik V" vaccine was Sputnik Lietuva: Baltijos Naujienos. This is not at all surprising given that the page is the local affiliate of the Russian state-sponsored media outlet, Sputnik. This page often presented known Russian government narratives such as praising the Russian vaccine as being "the first in the world" and criticizing Western countries for largely not approving its use in their countries. Furthermore, Sputnik is highly critical of the legality of the Lithuanian government efforts to curb the spread of COVID-19 while praising the response by the Russian government to the pandemic. Although Sputnik provides content that could increase doubt of western governments responses to the virus, its links to the Kremlin are well known in the region and the majority of Lithuanians are not likely to take it seriously. However, given the increased scepticism of the Russian speaking minorities toward the Lithuanian state and the smaller number of quality Russian language media options in the country, there is a risk that content from Sputnik may be reproduced in other sources that are not as well known to produce the Kremlin's narrative and may be more persuasive.

3. Narratives Propagated by the Most Interacted with Facebook Pages relevant to the Polish minority

Methodology

As with the other aspects of this research, to focus the monitoring on pages related to Polish speaking audiences in Lithuania the COVID-19 keywords used previously were adapted to Polish language and were categorized using the four aforementioned themes. Again the top 10 most interacted-with Pages on Facebook were examined.

Polish Keywords: szczepionka, szczepionki, szczepionce, szczepionkę, szczepionki, szczepionek, szczepionkom, szczepionkami, szczepionkach, szczepienie, szczepienia, szczepieniu, szczepieniem, szczepienia, szczepień, szczepieniom, szczepieniach, szczepieniami, paszport możliwości, przeciwwskazania, geny, czipowanie, czipowania, odporność, imunitet, imunitet, dawka, dawki, dawce, dawką, priorytetowa, priorytetowej, Sputnik, Sputnika

Using Pulsar and CrowdTangle data was collected from **January 1 to July 1, 2021**. After identifying the 10 most interacted-with public pages, their posts are analysed for the four previously identified themes: a) general vaccines; b) Blood clotting as one of the most resonant COVID-19 vaccine side effects; c) the "Sputnik V" vaccine; and d) the so-called "Opportunity passport". Despite the fact that

Polish minority in Lithuania also possesses good Russian language skills, the pool of keywords was narrowed only to the Polish language only due to excessive data noise and the need to narrow the field of investigation to the case of Lithuania.

Polish-language Actors:

1. **Radio Znad Wilii** – privately owned Polish-speaking media. Once founded as a radio station, now it is one of the most popular news sites among Poles in Lithuania. **The interaction rate considerably exceeds the number of page followers. Total posts – 268; Interaction rate – 0.08%;**
 - **Vaccination:** vaccine shipments arriving in Lithuania are celebrated, information on vaccination opportunities in Vilnius and Šalčininkai district, the region most densely populated by Poles, is presented. The problem of relatively low rates of the population vaccinated in the Vilnius region is explained by the popularity of Russian media there (an expert is quoted: “There are probably several reasons why people in the Vilnius region are afraid of vaccinations. At least some of these people live in a somewhat strange information space - not entirely Lithuanian and not entirely Polish. We are talking about the Russian information space, which, unfortunately, is full of propaganda and disinformation”).
 - **Blood clotting:** explanations are presented that blood clots are not a direct side-effect of vaccination (“Blood clots as linked to the vaccine are not fully proven, it’s a matter of presumption”), however, side effects of the vaccines, in general, are not ignored (“vaccinated individuals will be informed of symptoms to watch for and will need to see a doctor if necessary”).
 2. **TVP Wilno** – a media outlet sponsored by the Polish government, was established only in 2019. **The interaction rate slightly exceeds the number of page followers. Total posts – 115; Interaction rate – 0.07%;**
 - **Vaccination:** the most detailed information on the vaccination process concerns the possibility of getting the vaccine in the Vilnius and Šalčininkai regions (information regarding the opening time of vaccination centres, etc.) It is highlighted that the districts densely populated by Poles are trailing behind the bigger cities when speaking about the vaccination rate (“While there are queues at vaccination centres in Vilnius, the vaccination process is not as smooth in the surrounding municipalities”).
 - **Blood clotting:** no narratives on blood clotting have been detected.
 - **Sputnik V:** Lithuanian politicians are quoted, speaking firmly against the vaccine.
 - **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.
- **Sputnik V:** no normative position on whether Lithuania should buy Sputnik V vaccines or accept the certificates from the individuals who got a Russian jab. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin is quoted when speaking about Sputnik V (“During a meeting with government officials on Monday, Putin said he would receive the vaccine “tomorrow”).
 - **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.

3. **Wilnoteka.lt** – Polish-speaking media outlet owned by TVP, Polish national broadcaster. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 227; Interaction rate – 0.03%;**

The database could not provide data of Wilnoteka.lt to analyse.

4. **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 in the Lithuanian language, occasionally also in English, Russian, and Polish. **Page followers extremely exceed the interaction rate. Total posts – 8, Interaction rate – 0.97%; Verified profile;**

- **Vaccination:** information is presented in Polish and Russian languages, primarily within the Petys už Laisvę [A Shoulder for Freedom] framework, foreign-speaking experts are quoted. The position relayed by the state institution is presented: urging to get vaccinated, vaccination described as the only way to return to the usual living, while refusing to get vaccinated is to take away opportunities from others.
- No narratives on neither blood clotting, “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

5. **Kurier Wileński** – one of the oldest continuously-running Lithuanian newspapers in the Polish language. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 148; Interaction rate – 0.02%;**

- **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, only the Astra Zeneca vaccine is sometimes described as being “scandalous”.
- **Passport of opportunities:** information about the introduction and use of the national certificate is presented. Nevertheless, it is noted that the introduction of COVID-19 certificates can cause some kind of discrimination within the society (“EU countries note that without adequate access to vaccines, such a passport would create a two-tiered society”).
- No narratives on neither blood clotting or Sputnik V have been detected.

6. **Vilniaus rajono savivaldybė/Samorząd Rejonu Wileńskiego** – Vilnius district municipality, one of the main institutions responsible for the realization of the vaccination process in the Vilnius region. Provides information about vaccines in the Lithuanian language, occasionally also in English, Russian, and Polish. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 34; Interaction rate – 0.18%;**

- **Vaccination:** information is presented in Lithuania, Polish, and Russian languages, the Petys už Laisvę [A Shoulder for Freedom] advertising campaign is promoted, the information on how, where and when one can get a vaccine is provided.
- No narratives on neither blood clotting, “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

7. Šalčininkų rajono savivaldybė – Šalčininkai district municipality, reports on what is happening in the region as well as provides administrative information. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 9; Interaction rate – 0.25%;**

- **Vaccination:** information is presented in Lithuania, Polish, and Russian languages, the Petys už Laisvę [A Shoulder for Freedom] advertising campaign is promoted, the information on how, where and when one can get a vaccine is provided.
- No narratives on neither blood clotting, “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

8. Zbigniew Jedziński – a member of Electoral Action of Poles in Lithuania – Christian Families Alliance, previously a member of Lithuanian Parliament. **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 10; Interaction rate 0.49%;**

- **Vaccination:** an entirely negative portrayal of vaccines/vaccination process. It is stated that both COVID-19 virus and vaccine come from the same source, that vaccine was developed in a fast-track way, without the third test (and now it is being “tested on the old people”). Moreover, the vaccination process is described as “poisoning” of the nation conducted by the Conservative Party [the one that has won the 2020 parliamentary elections and together with liberals formed the current government].
- **Blood clotting:** blood clots are presented as the main and lethal side effect of the vaccine. Due to this, “numerous” countries have refused from using specifically Astra Zeneca vaccine. Side effects are listed: “most commonly reported side effects were

injection site pain, swelling, redness, arm pain, chills, headache, rash, and fever. The most common of these reactions were mild to moderate in severity and resolved within a few days”.

- **Sputnik V:** although the Sputnik V vaccine is not seen as absolutely effective, “only mentally handicapped or those who support Landsbergis [Conservative Party leader] can speak of it as a Russian weapon”. State officials are being criticised for not including the Russian jab in the list of vaccines recognized in Lithuania (the country should seek the example of others: “The Russian vaccine has been registered in 55 countries, including Hungary and Slovakia”).
- No narratives on either blood clotting, “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

9. Kochamy Druskienniki – blog which presents the touristic side of life of Druskininkai (city not densely inhabited by Poles, but run in the Polish language). **Interaction rate and page followers correlate. Total posts – 1; Interaction rate – 1,6%;**

The database could not provide data of Kochamy Druskienniki to analyse.

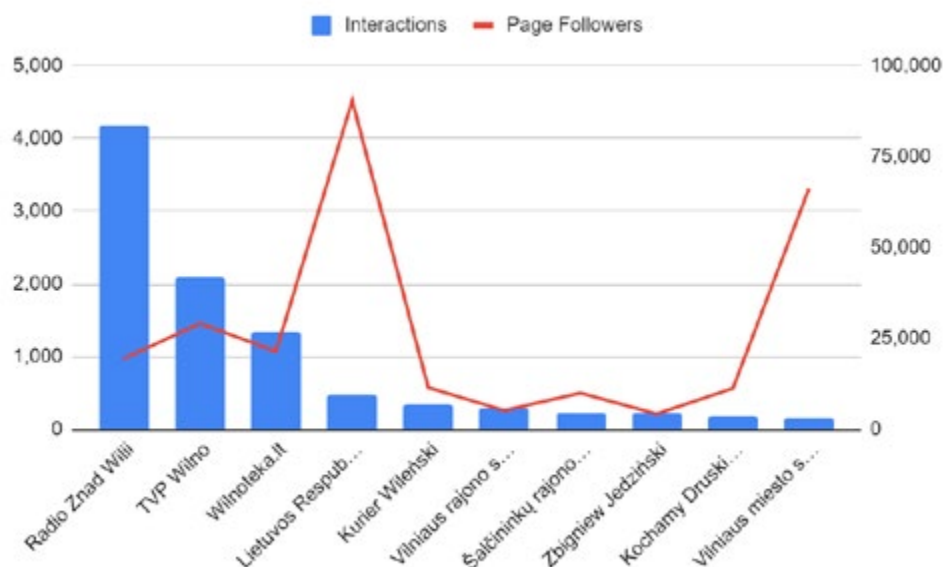
10. Vilniaus miesto savivaldybė – Vilnius city municipality, one of the main institutions responsible for the realization of the vaccination process in the Vilnius region. Provides information about vaccines in the Lithuanian language, occasionally also in English, Russian, and Polish. **Page followers extremely exceed the interaction rate. Total posts – 1, Interaction rate – 0.25%; Verified profile;**

- **Vaccination:** information is presented mainly in the Lithuanian language with rare exceptions of Polish and Russian, primarily about the main information about how and when one can get a jab, which age groups are allowed.
- No narratives on neither blood clotting, “Sputnik V” vaccine or opportunity passport have been detected.

All Pages ▾ Custom Date Range ▾

01/01/2021 - 07/01/2021 **Go**

Page Name	Total Interactions	Interaction Rate	Total Posts	Videos Views	Post Performance	Page Followers
Radio Znad Wilii	4,345	0.08%	268	—	-2.3x	19,387
TVP Wilno	2,345	0.07%	115	7,354	-4.1x	29,050
Wilnoteka.lt	1,363	0.03%	227	—	-4.8x	21,449
Lietuvos Respublikos sveikatos apsaugos ministerija	501	0.07%	8	38,451	-2.1x	89,888
Kurier Wileński	364	0.02%	148	—	-10.6x	11,518
Vilniaus rajono savivaldybė/Samorząd Rejonu Wileńskiego	332	0.18%	34	932	-2.0x	5,102
Šaltinėlių rajono savivaldybė	227	0.25%	9	—	-3.0x	10,000
Zbigniew Jedziński	219	0.49%	10	1,679	-2.0x	4,265
Kochamy Druskienniki	180	1.6%	1	—	3.8x	11,218
Vilniaus miesto savivaldybė	165	0.25%	1	—	1.3x	66,164



Findings

Lithuanian-based Polish-language pages are predominately concentrated on providing informative content rather than on forming any kind of specific narrative on vaccines and COVID-19, either positive or negative. With a focus on Vilnius and Šalčininkai districts, however, the problem of low rates of the Polish-speaking population is recognized as well as addressed, primarily by the most interacted-with actor, Radio Znad Wilii. Noticeably, the notion of blood clotting as the main and often lethal effect of vaccines is rather absent in the posts of the pages analysed. Except for Zbigniew Jedziński, no mis- or disinformation is spread.

Sputnik V, however, is being seen as one more option when choosing which vaccine to get, and Lithuanian state officials are creating unnecessary barriers to obtaining it. Nevertheless, there was no narrative regarding the effectiveness or superiority of the Russian vaccine to those invented in the West.

Governmental pages, i.e. Vilniaus rajono savivaldybė/Samorząd Rejonu Wileńskiego, Šalčininkų rajono savivaldybė, and Vilniaus miesto savivaldybė (all these are municipal Facebook profiles) provide information on possibilities of getting the vaccine as well as promote state-run vaccination campaigns. No narratives on either side effects, Sputnik V or opportunity passport have been detected in this regard.

A strikingly different narrative was formed by Zbigniew Jedziński, a page of Lithuanian MP. Vaccination process was portrayed through the lenses of conspiracy theories, the best illustration of which is the statement that “COVID-19 virus and vaccine come from the same source”. However, the interaction rate for this page was relatively low (8th place on the leader board).

Conclusion

In general, the Polish-language Facebook Pages analysed were concentrated on providing informative content rather than on forming any kind of specific narrative on vaccines and COVID-19, either positive or negative.

Noticeably absent from the Polish language content were references to major side effects, such as blood clotting. While references to side effects would be expected to reduce the interest in the vaccines, it appears this was not a significant factor in the apparent reluctance of the Polish minority. However, there were other narratives that challenged the Lithuanian vaccination process. This primarily came in the form of doubt being cast on the Western vaccines by former Polish-Lithuanian MP, Zbigniew Jedziński, posting conspiracy theories suggesting the vaccines originated in the same place as the virus. When combined with the more general content promoting the “Sputnik V” vaccine as a more reliable alternative to the approved vaccines by Western companies there is a potential that this has had an adverse impact on the vaccination rates amongst the audiences of these Pages.

Overall the top interacted-with actors on Facebook to a large extent did not spread or contain misinformation about the vaccination process. However, lesser-known and less mainstream profiles did spread malign narratives. This phenomenon can be attributed to the fact, that most interacted-with actors are mainstream media and news outlets that position themselves as an independent. Malign disinformation, as this research shows is most probably circulating in smaller, less known profiles that operate in various non-public groups on Facebook.

The list of the most popular social network Facebook reflects the perspective of all Lithuanian media consumption. Surprisingly, as

many as 8 out of 10 listed media sources can be considered objective and do not disseminate misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic or vaccination. These results are somewhat unexpected, as communication plays a major role in shaping the population's perception, and communication has been one of the key emphases in shaping the Lithuanian government's policy for managing COVID-19. Unfortunately, the communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was considered a weak point of the Lithuanian government and the Ministry of Health. For example, in the spring of 2021, the Lithuanian government announced that vaccination with AstraZeneca was being suspended for safety and reliability reasons, but just one day after the ban, the Lithuanian government reversed its decision, causing reputational damage not only to this vaccine but to all other vaccines. After noticing that the vaccination rate of national minority regions is much slower than in other regions of Lithuania, the Lithuanian government decided to change its communication strategy and paid additional attention to the regions of national minorities by addressing them directly in Russian. However, vaccination rates suggest that this strategy has not worked. In addition, in the autumn of 2021, the Lithuanian government is still criticized for not communicating well about the additional booster vaccine.

The EESC data indicates that the majority of Lithuanians (66%) still use television daily to find out news about the political, economic issues in Lithuania and the world. In the second place they use news portals (58%), and in the third place, they use social networking sites on the Internet (Facebook, etc.) (48%). Although radio is used less frequently compared to social networks (37%), the scale of its use is generally larger. Such data on media consumption

data suggest that social networks may be one of the factors that may determine the attitudes of the target audience towards the vaccination process. However, according to research, disloyalty to public order is often related not only to the media sources used and their diversity but also to the economic situation of the population. With lower incomes, there is a greater nostalgia for the Soviet era and less trust in the Lithuanian state, so the most sensitive group can be associated with the elderly, who use social networks less often and give priority to television or other information platforms. In this case, the impact of social networks on the target and most sensitive audience is reduced.

However, these results can be explained by other reasons as well. Although the misinformation on the social network Facebook is noticeable, it is fragmented. It is often distributed to individuals who do not have a significant number of followers, or the potential have not been reached due to the limitations of their privacy settings and research tool. There is also a tendency for pre-vaccination populations to form private groups, which prevents them from being properly and fully assessed.

The resistance of the Lithuanian society to disinformation has also played a role and it is also shown by the fact that the latter has been facing disinformation or even entire disinformation campaigns for quite some time. This allows for some resilience to develop, as the public first perceives the very existence of propaganda and is better able to distinguish it from objective information. About 68% of the respondents believe they are faced with fake news. More than half (52%) of them believe that Lithuania is successfully fighting against hostile propaganda.

Endnotes

- ¹ Eastern Europe Studies Centre, Research on the Assessment of the Geopolitical Situation and Perception of Threats. https://www.eesc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/v02-web_Research-of-Perception-of-Threats_paper_A4.pdf
- ² Latviešu valodas sociolingvistiskā situācija <http://www.vvk.lv/index.php?sadala=129&id=389>
- ³ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/debunked-the-myth-of-the-golden-age-of-the-baltics-in-the-soviet-union/?highlight=latvia> [November, 2019]
- ⁴ And 'Interaction' is defined as being a *comment, share, like* or other emoticon response available on Facebook (e.g. *heart, sad, angry, haha, wow, or care emoji*) see: [CrowdTangle Term Glossary](#) for more information.
- ⁵ For further information see: [CrowdTangle About Us](#)
- ⁶ 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.