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**Russian Disinformation: A Threat to Unity in America**

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## **Abstract**

This research analysis focuses on the ongoing issue of Russian interference within US internal affairs, specifically discussing the use of social media and hacking during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Kremlin is using disinformation campaigns to promote party polarization and division within the American populace, posing a major threat to American national security from within. This paper seeks to prove that if the strategies of Russian disinformation and espionage in recent history are analyzed and compared, then a visible goal of American party polarization and domestic unrest will be found. Using official reports from government agencies, examples of social media campaigns and websites, in addition to other reputable secondary sources, this hypothesis was supported with overwhelming evidence. Since the Cold War it has been in the Russians best interest to keep America divided, thus decreasing American power on the international scale. In order to achieve this goal, Russian associated sites have recently been planting disinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic, especially against the Pfizer BioN-Tech, Moderna, and Johnson and Johnson vaccines. Inciting division and preventing the vaccination of Americans is beneficial to the international status of Russia and Communism as a whole. There are many other forms of disinformation campaigns and espionage efforts that will be further discussed. Overall, the United States needs to recognize the hidden threat of Russian disinformation on the internet in order to best combat it.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Russia, COVID-19, Disinformation, Polarization

## Introduction

Tensions between Russia and the United States are nothing new to the international community. Since the end of WWII, the two powers, who emerged victorious against the Nazis, turned against each other as competitors and eventually enemies. The race to become the greatest international power grew increasingly volatile within the 20th century. Fear of nuclear war became a reality for both Russians and Americans alike, especially during the Cuban Missile crisis. Hatred for communists and paranoia of war led to a hunt for Russian spies. Eventually, under the leadership of President Ronald Reagan, the Berlin wall was removed, soon to be followed by the Soviet Union itself. Although the American populace is still suspicious of Russia to this day, the average citizen often does not fully understand the depth of a threat Russia still poses against democracy. Many Americans are still looking to the skies for missiles without even realizing that the real threat has been waiting in their back pocket the whole time. Misinformation is the new nuclear warhead, and the full arsenal has been launched on social media. Two of the most significant examples that can be seen in modern American media are COVID-19 disinformation campaigns as well as the Solarwinds hack. In both situations, the Russian government employed a great effort to push American internal affairs in their favor. The Soviet Union may have fallen in 1991, but the threat of communism still lives on.

## History of US Russian Relations

Before the current relationship between Russia and the United States can be fully understood, one must first examine their complicated history. After the end of WWII, the division of territory caused conflict between Stalin's communist Soviet Union and the other three Allied powers, Great Britain, France, and the United States. Stalin wanted to maintain control of Eastern Europe, imposing his communist type of government on East Germany, East Berlin, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Poland. On the other hand, the United States was determined to progress the cause of democracy in the postwar world. This conflict of ideology caused the US and Soviet Union to support opposing nations, such as North and South Korea.<sup>1</sup>

Eventually, supporting enemies resulted in the two superpowers becoming enemies themselves. The race to develop a nuclear arsenal resulted in Soviet espionage efforts to leak top-secret nuclear engineering to the Kremlin. In 1949 the Soviet Union tested their first missile, Semipalatinsk, in modern-day Kazakhstan, causing fears in the United States to continue to rise.<sup>2</sup> Schools were conducting air raid drills regularly, forcing kids to duck under their desks and cover their heads. In reality, if an atomic bomb were to be dropped, no desk would serve as sufficient cover. The truth was, there was little the American public could do to protect themselves, and the reality of nuclear war was always looming. Fears increased in 1962 when President Kennedy was informed that a US U2 spy plane observed that Soviet Premier Nikita

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<sup>1</sup>“Cold War,” June 21, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cold-War>.

<sup>2</sup>“RDS-1' Test on 29 August 1949, Semipalatinsk,” <https://www.ctbto.org/specials/testing-times/29-august-1949-first-soviet-nuclear-test#:~:text=On%2029%20August%201949%2C%20the,a%20yield%20of%2022%20kilotons.>

Kruschev had been setting up medium-range ballistic missiles and intermediate-range ballistic missiles on the island of Cuba.

The US government knew that an alliance was forming between Fidel Castro and Kruschev. Kennedy warned them that if nuclear weapons were brought to Cuba, which is only 90 miles off the coast of Key West, Florida, there would be retaliation on the part of the United States. The National Security Council gathered to decide what to do about the threat of Soviet aggression so close to the Continental United States. Many advisors told the President to destroy the missiles with an air raid followed by a full-scale invasion of Cuba. Kennedy opted for a different route. Kennedy employed a “quarantine” against Cuba, followed up with a letter to Kruschev demanding that he deconstruct the missile base immediately. According to the US Department of State Office of the Historian “the use of “quarantine” legally distinguished this action from a blockade, which assumed a state of war existed; the use of “quarantine” instead of “blockade” also enabled the United States to receive the support of the Organization of American States”.<sup>3</sup>

Eventually, Kruschev heeded Kennedy’s warnings, and the Russians that were on their way to Cuba, turned around, making back to the Soviet Union. The two nations agreed that the Soviet Union would remove their missile base in Cuba if, in return, the United States agreed not to invade Cuba. On October 28th, 1962, thirteen days after the crisis began, the government announced this agreement to the public. What they did not share for another twenty-five years, however, was the fact that the US government also agreed to remove the US nuclear missile base from Turkey, which at the time was the closest base to the Soviet Union. The immediate threat of the missile crisis had been skillfully avoided, and the looming fear of the ever-growing arms race was intensified by the experience.<sup>4</sup> In his official statement announcing the end of the crisis, President Kennedy acknowledged the continued threat, stating “It is my earnest hope that the governments of the world can, with the solution of the Cuban missile crisis, turn their attention to the compelling necessity for ending the arms race and reducing world tensions”.<sup>5</sup>

Even before the Cuban Missile Crisis, the American people were experiencing a growing paranoia about Russian covert operations. The media fueled this fire by promoting a constant fear that communists were hiding everywhere in American society. This “trust no one” mentality was especially focused on Hollywood and multiple departments of the US government. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin led the witch hunt for communists in America. Senator McCarthy was famous for saying “Any man who has been named by either a senator or a committee or a congressman as dangerous to the welfare of this nation, his name should be submitted to the various intelligence units, and they should conduct a complete check upon him. It’s not too much to ask”.<sup>6</sup> The House Committee on Un-American Activities, led by Martin Dies,

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<sup>3</sup>“The Cuban Missile Crisis,” <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>.

<sup>4</sup>“Cuban Missile Crisis,” <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/jfk-in-history/cuban-missile-crisis>.

<sup>5</sup>J.F. Kennedy, “Statement by the President”, October 28, 1962, <https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct28/>.

<sup>6</sup> “McCarthyism and the Red Scare,” March 3, 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/age-of-eisenhower/mccarthyism-red-scare>.

encouraged Americans to report suspicious behavior to the local authorities.<sup>7</sup> Once a suspect was on trial, they were then pushed by the members of the committee to report the names of other communists. Turning others in and cooperating with the government could potentially result in a more favorable outcome. Whether the accusation was reputable or not, if an individual was accused of being a communist, they would be tried before the committee. If found guilty of being a communist sympathizer or member of the communist party, an individual could be arrested, or fired and put on a communist “blacklist”. Once on the blacklist, it became extremely difficult to find new employment.<sup>8</sup>

Many individuals during the Red Scare were falsely accused of being communists, however, there were many rightful convictions of Soviet spies as well. The whole reason the Soviet Union had nuclear capability was a result of espionage efforts that leaked nuclear secrets of the Manhattan Project during WWII. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, two of the most well-known spies, were responsible for the leak of this information. The US Army Signal Intelligence Agency discovered the proof that Julius Rosenberg, along with other engineers on the project, had reported classified information to the Russian authorities, giving them the ability to develop their weapons of mass destruction without having to make the scientific discoveries for themselves. When questioned about their crimes against the US government, both husband and wife plead the fifth amendment, which during the Red Scare, made the defendant look even more guilty. After their trial, Julius and his wife Ethel, whose brother David Greenglass was also a convicted Soviet spy, were sentenced to death by the electric chair. There was no denying that Julius had been heavily involved with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, however, there was some dispute about whether or not Ethel was involved in the espionage.<sup>9</sup> Despite some pushback against Ethel’s conviction, President Dwight D. Eisenhower did not once consider exonerating her.<sup>10</sup>

The Rosenbergs were not the only members of the US government that ended up being members of the communist parties. Many Soviet spies were able to rise through the ranks. The presence of the Soviets in such high positions of power increased the feelings of paranoia and vulnerability among Americans. The consequences of such infiltration had been very costly to US national security, and the idea of further espionage struck fear into the lives of many citizens. The Soviets would stop at nothing to beat the Americans in the arms race, and likewise, the US was firing on all cylinders to pass the Soviets. This process continued for forty-five years.

Eventually, after years of constant tension, the communist Soviet Union fell in 1991. In the years prior, the influence of communism began to decrease as many nations replaced their communist governments with a democratically elected alternative. Much to the chagrin of President Reagan, the United States did not have to compromise its tough stance on communism for the Soviet Union to crumble. In the end, it was the fall from economic prowess that eventually cut the legs out from under the former superpower. In 1989, President Reagan famously called on Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall, separating communist-ruled East Berlin, from democratic ruled West Berlin. The East Berliners who had

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<sup>7</sup> Maren Goldberg, “House Un-American Activities Committee,” 2009, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/House-Un-American-Activities-Committee>.

<sup>8</sup> “McCarthyism and the Red Scare,”

<sup>9</sup> “The Rosenberg Trial,” April 25, 2018, <https://www.atomicheritage.org/history/rosenberg-trial>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 8

not been fortunate enough to escape to West Berlin had not seen the outside world since the construction of the wall.<sup>11</sup> When the wall fell, hope not only reentered their lives, but also the lives of many who had been living in fear of the threat of communism. Americans were finally able to take a deep breath, no longer worrying about the constant potential for all-out nuclear destruction. For once since the end of WWII, the world was a safer place.

Although the arms race was over, and the United States emerged victorious without the use of nuclear weapons, distrust for the Russians has been maintained. The Soviet Union had lost much of its power and money upon its dissolution, however, Russia still maintained its nuclear capability enough to be a threat. In addition, although most nations in Eastern Europe had veered away from a communist form of government, Russia, China, and North Korea all maintained their political structure.<sup>12</sup> Communism and democracy remained two opposing political views, and although the power had shifted to the side of the United States, there was no doubt that Russia would still try to purport their way of thinking on the international scale. To this day, Americans as a society do not trust the Russians, just as Russians do not trust Americans. The two nations may no longer be at war, but they will forever have warring ideologies that put their national interest on opposing sides. The Cold War had made enemies out of former allies, a process that would set a precedent for continued relations into the twenty-first century. While fear of Russian spies rising through the ranks of the US Department of State may no longer be a pressing concern, covert operations between the two nations are far from over. The threat of Russian infiltration is a pressing issue of today's society, but in a new far more complex format: the internet.

Propaganda has historically been a major strategy of the Soviet Union, especially during the Cold War. Domestically, the Soviet government used posters, radio, and television programming to promote the cause of communism. They would go to any length to convince their populace that Soviet Communism is the best way to live, pushing anti-capitalist and anti-United States rhetoric along with it. The worse the democratic system looked in the eyes of the public, the easier it would be to maintain and spread communistic rule. As the two main superpowers at the time, it was to the Soviet's benefit to weaken and undermine the United States in the eyes of US citizens. As a result, they launched a campaign to broadcast anti-capitalist radio content within the United States. This effort was eventually determined to be against International Law, however this desire to undermine the US from within is something that remains in the modern-day.<sup>13</sup>

### Modern Espionage

The media efforts of the Soviet Union were not able to save them from demise during the Cold War, however, posters and radio broadcasts were only the beginning of an ongoing and elaborate system of Russian media strategy. No longer limited by geographical and technological

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<sup>11</sup> History.com Editors, "Cold War History", October 27, 2009, [https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cold-war-history#section\\_6](https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cold-war-history#section_6).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 11

<sup>13</sup>John B. Whitton, "Cold War Propaganda," *American Journal of International Law* 45, no. 1 (January 1951), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2194791>.

barriers, the age of social media has opened doors for the Russians to plant information in the pockets of Americans without them even knowing it. Using advertisements on search engines like Google and Bing, misinformation media websites, and social media platforms, the Russian Government had conducted a full-force invasion of the American cell phone. The American Security Project found that one troll farm, the Internet Research Agency, designated a 90 person staff with the specific job of planting misinformation online to be fed to the American public during the 2016 presidential election. As of 2017, it was believed that at least fifty of these employees are still assigned to the American task force.<sup>14</sup> Their main focus is to spread stories, posts, and other information that will continue to polarize Republicans and Democrats against one another. The constant disagreement between opposing parties that have deeply torn through America has drawn the attention of enemies. As President Lincoln once declared over a warring nation, “a house divided against itself cannot stand”. The Kremlin has identified this weakness and has taken deliberate lengths to use it to their advantage. By enticing this division they are attacking America without even needing to draw a weapon. Why wage military war against a foreign power when one can instead provoke her to attack herself.

The US government has conducted extensive investigations to expose and remove Russian interference on the internet. The State Department released a special report in August 2020 explaining their findings regarding Russian propaganda and disinformation strategy. The report gives five main pillars of the Russian propaganda ecosystem: “official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation” (US Department of State, 2020).<sup>15</sup> Official government communication, such as a social media post made by the Kremlin or an official statement made by a government official, is an effort that is visibly connected to Russian authorities. This is not the case for all of the pillars. Russia denies its connection to many of its cyberattacks and social media interference. Nonetheless, there is overwhelming proof of a Russian presence on Google, Facebook, Twitter, and more.<sup>16</sup>

Facebook has served as a major platform for Russian propaganda, especially through advertisement. In the 2016 election alone, over 3,000 Russian purchased ads ran on Facebook, which was then turned in to Congress for investigation. Additionally, the Kremlin spent \$100,000 on politically charged ads purchased by the Internet Research Agency, a “troll factory” based in St.Petersburg.<sup>17</sup> According to the North Atlantic Trade Organization (NATO), “a troll factory is an entity conducting disinformation propaganda activities on the Internet”.<sup>18</sup> Like the

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick Savage, “Russian Social Media Information Operations: How Russia Has Used Social Media to Influence US Politics,” *American Security Project*, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06042>.

<sup>15</sup>*Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem* . US Department of State , 2020

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Savage, “Russian Social Media Information Operations: How Russia Has Used Social Media to Influence US Politics,”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 16

<sup>18</sup>“Media – (Dis)Information – Security - NATO”, North Atlantic Trade Organization, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/5/pdf/2005-deepportal2-troll-factories.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/5/pdf/2005-deepportal2-troll-factories.pdf).

Internet Research Agency, most troll farms operate under a name that makes them sound like a reputable resource when in reality it is simply a facade.

One of the main ways the Russian government purports this information across the internet is through the mobilization of proxy resources. According to the official Department of State report, the GRU will utilize the following types of proxy outlets and institutions; “Russian aligned outlets with global outreach, local language-specific outlets, witting proliferators of Russian narratives, unwitting proliferators of Russian narratives, and foreign state narrative amplification”. Some of these sites are more openly associated with the Kremlin, however, others prefer to keep this connection more hidden from the public eye. Whether or not they are openly working with the Russian government, all of these sites and organizations exist to promote the agenda of the Kremlin. They do this by publishing content that makes Russia look good, as well as stories that besmirch the name of the United States and other democracies. In the eyes of the Russian government, what is bad for America is good for Russia, therefore hurting America through the media is just as important as strengthening Russia (US Department of State, 2020).<sup>19</sup>

Considering the rocky past between the two nations, it is not surprising that the majority of the American population has an unfavorable view of Russia. As of 2018, only 21% of the United States citizens have a favorable view of Russia.<sup>20</sup> In many ways, the one thing the US population can agree on is that the Kremlin is untrustworthy. This being said, most Americans would not be willing to read articles matriculated from Russia. So how do the proxy sites achieve their goal? The answer is simple; most of the time they do not know. There are many strategies in place to make the Russian websites look reputable in the eyes of foreign nationals. For one, many of these institutions have English names that sound like a scholarly resource one could find on a university database. For example, *The Strategic Culture Foundation*, *New Eastern Outlook*, and *SouthFront: Analysis and Intelligence*, are all names that, at first glance, cast the image of being a reputable news outlet, when they are sources of Russian propaganda. Americans may not click on an article published by the Russian government, however, an intriguing headline on Facebook from any one of the above websites may cause them to explore further.<sup>21</sup>

Russian trolls know how to word their articles to draw people in. They use an individual's internet profile to find those most accepting and susceptible to conspiracy clickbait. Ads are then planted for that individual to see. For example, if an individual is vocally against the Coronavirus vaccine, titles such as *Bill Gates, Vaccinations, Microchips, and Patent Number 060606*, may show up as they are using the internet. If they click on this link, they will be brought to a website where they will be fed disinformation as truth. They will then use this information to confirm predispositions that they already believed. Seeking proof to confirm their presuppositions that the vaccine is wrong, they may then use this information to attempt to sway others to their anti-vax field of thought.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, a targeted individual may also send the articles to others that already agree with them, confirming their thoughts and preconceived notions even more than they already had.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid 15

<sup>20</sup> Jacob Poushter, “6 Charts on How Russians, Americans See Each Other,” August 27, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/04/6-charts-on-how-russians-and-americans-see-each-other/>

<sup>21</sup>*Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, 2020

<sup>22</sup> Ibid 21



This is a psychologically proven concept referred to as confirmation bias, which the American Psychology Association defines as “the tendency to look for information that supports, rather than rejects, one’s preconceptions, typically by interpreting evidence to confirm existing beliefs while rejecting or ignoring any conflicting data”.<sup>23</sup> Following this continuous pattern, information that began on a Russian proxy website gains traction and becomes a topic of discussion on a larger scale. This is how rumors spread and conspiracy theories gain a following. All it takes is for one person to believe a source to spread it.

Once an individual comes across a disinformation website, there are many tactics employed to make the site seem trustworthy. Firstly, Russian proxy sites are available in multiple languages, making them directly accessible to Americans as well as citizens of other countries. Seeing an article written in English often does not set off any red flags that a site may have origins outside of the US. They also recruit fringe thinkers from western nations, attempting to establish credibility among citizens. Often these news sources are referred to as “alternative news outlets”, claiming to offer a different opinion than mainstream media. This is enticing to those who already disagree with the opinions expressed by the main media outlets, especially in recent years when the news has grown more polarized. For example, according to the US Department of State, the *Strategic Culture Foundation* hires conspirators from western nations to obscure any connection to Russia. By gathering more voices within the western nations themselves, the Kremlin hopes that the site will be “an organic voice within its target audience of westerners”. Other sources, such as the Canadian site *Global Research*, serve Russian motives in a broader sense. While not directly created and run by the Kremlin, *Global Research* is a hub for writers and conspirators that both the Russians and Chinese then recruit to write and contribute to their disinformation ecosystems.<sup>24</sup>

The main purpose of all proxy sites is to promote pro-Russian media, however, some platforms choose a specific topic to focus on. They then develop a mission statement that frames their platform to be a quality source, providing a new perspective on the topic of choice. For example, Russian “think-tank” *Katehon* claims to be an independent analysis dedicated to the creation and defense of a secure, democratic, and just international system’ (US Department of State, 2020).<sup>25</sup> In reality, their main goal is to undermine democratic efforts through their media publication. Their very existence is not protecting the international system, rather it is obstructing justice and endangering global security. Other sites, such as SouthFront, tailor their content to discuss and target specific issues and audiences. SouthFront focuses on issues of military and national security, trying to appeal to veterans with detailed knowledge and graphics to support their Kremlin-based claims and beliefs.<sup>26</sup>

An issue that has been a recent target of Russian conspiracy theories is the COVID 19 pandemic. Miriam Webster’s dictionary defines a conspiracy theory as “a theory that explains an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators” and

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<sup>23</sup>Iqra Noor, “Confirmation Bias” June 10, 2020, <https://www.simplypsychology.org/confirmation-bias.html>

<sup>24</sup>*Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, 2020

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, 24

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 24

“a theory asserting that a secret of great importance is being kept from the public”.<sup>27</sup> Russian disinformation surrounding the topic of COVID fits both of these definitions perfectly. An excellent example, which most Americans have heard, is the Bill Gates Microsoft microchip conspiracy theory. Many Americans have heard the theory that Bill Gates and Microsoft Corporation invented the coronavirus so that they could then develop the vaccine to implant microchip trackers into the entire population. What they may not know is that the claim originated not among American skeptics as sources may claim, but from Russian affiliated website *Geopolitica.ru*. The article continued to discourage the vaccine by planting the idea that the vaccine is the mark of the antichrist found in the book of Revelation because the patent number of Microsoft is 060606.<sup>28</sup> This story causes alarm by blaming the pandemic on an individual corporation, and perhaps even more so by claiming that the government is keeping major secrets from the population at large. It paints the entire government vaccination effort as a facade and coverup for a scheme to invade the privacy of citizens.

Already skeptical of the government's handling of the global health crisis, some Americans have taken this theory and ran with it. With regards to COVID, so little is known that Americans seem to be willing to believe anything. Vaccine conspiracies about the Microsoft corporation gained traction across social media, from Facebook to Instagram and everywhere in between. Kids on Tiktok filmed videos supposedly sticking a magnet to the site of their vaccine, some even claiming that something in their arm had the power to charge a Juul vaping device. Seeing the effect it was having in the American media, other Russian sources began to purport the same message. *Strategic Culture Foundation* published their article entitled “Is It Time to Launch an Investigation Into the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for Possible ‘Crimes Against Humanity?’”, which was tweeted over 400 times.<sup>29</sup> Scientists have come out against these claims, describing that the vaccine has no metal components, therefore there is no ingredient capable of tracking or attracting a magnet.<sup>30</sup>

The Bill Gates *Geopolitica.ru* article is far from the only COVID conspiracy strategically planted by the Kremlin in the American media. Another popular story, targeting those already skeptical of the government, is that the United States government is responsible for the COVID 19 outbreak. More extreme authors such as *New Eastern Outlook* writer Peter Koenig, claim that the virus was invented in American biowarfare to control the world population and specifically target Chinese DNA. They use facts, such as the presence of over 400 American biowarfare labs, to back up their otherwise baseless claim. *New Eastern Outlook* was a very popular source among conspiracy theorists, with almost 400,000 views on Youtube before their social media was removed from the internet. Despite the shutdown of NEO social media, the theory claiming

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<sup>27</sup>“Conspiracy Theory.” Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster.  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conspiracy%20theory>.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 24

<sup>29</sup>*Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem*, 2020

<sup>30</sup>“These Are False’: Chicago's Top Doc Debunks Viral Vaccine Magnet Social Media Videos,” June 11, 2021,  
<https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/coronavirus/these-are-false-chicagos-top-doc-debunks-viral-vaccine-magnet-social-media-videos/2529790/>.

a US origin of the coronavirus lives on through many other news sources (US Department of State, 2020).<sup>31</sup> Similar to the Bill Gates theory *Global Research* claims that the virus was designed and released by a group of global elites to subjugate private citizens and take over the world. Overall, the constant bombardment of different conspiracy theories is designed to promote distrust in the government. The inconsistency of the stories, while it is disorganized, works in favor of the Russian agenda as well. Different claims about a single issue can create a great deal of confusion. Unsure what to believe, the reader develops a general level of distrust in authorities and powerful individuals. In addition, with no single clear and specific agenda coming out of Russia, it is harder for Americans to identify and trace a source back to the Kremlin. This distrust of the US government as well as the division of the American government is the only consistent agenda that can be traced across all sources and platforms. Nonetheless, this goal poses a great threat to American society.<sup>32</sup>

Since March of 2020, the American people have grown increasingly divided on how to deal with the global pandemic. Some believe that lockdowns and restrictions are the answer, while others are fighting against these new laws, saying that restrictions infringe on their liberties and are affecting their jobs. Governor Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan, one of the most extreme democratic governors in the union, enforced a strict lockdown that shut down the majority of businesses unless they were considered essential by strict state standards. The unemployment rate in Michigan went up from 4.2 percent in May of 2019, to 22.6 percent a year later in May 2020.<sup>33</sup> A similar increase in unemployment was found in most other states. Some believed that these restrictions were necessary and that the loss of jobs was an unfortunate sacrifice made in the name of public safety. Others disagreed, stating that the restrictions were unconstitutional and that the suffering that resulted from unemployment was a greater danger to the everyday American than the coronavirus itself. These clashing views exponentially escalated political party polarization.

On top of the division caused by the coronavirus, the American political party system grew even more polarized during the 2020 election between incumbent Republican Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden. According to the Pew Research Center, the greatest point gap in political values is found between political parties, more so than members of different genders, races, and religions.<sup>34</sup> The Kremlin has recognized this division as a weakness within the American government and has thus used COVID-related conspiracy theories to exploit this. They have used the media to create distrust in the American government as well as other

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid, 29

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 29

<sup>33</sup> Mike Patton, "Pre and Post Coronavirus Unemployment Rates by State, Industry, Age Group, and Race", June 28, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mikepatton/2020/06/28/pre-and-post-coronavirus-unemployment-rates-by-state-industry-age-group-and-race/?sh=1062cdfc555e>.

<sup>34</sup>"In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions," May 30, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/12/17/in-a-politically-polarized-era-sharp-divides-in-both-partisan-coalitions/>.

powerful members of American society. The Kremlin targeted the American population warning against the vaccine, however, they are developing and distributing a vaccine of their own.

In late 2020, the US and Russian engaged in a new kind of innovation race; the race to develop the vaccine. Unlike the nuclear arms race and the space race that took place during the Cold War, the development of the COVID-19 vaccine was a race not to prove which is the superior nation, rather a desperate attempt for all parties to bring an end to the global health crisis. The Kremlin, however, would attempt to use the vaccine as an opportunity to promote themselves and put down the west. In August of 2020, only five months after the original coronavirus lockdown, Russia announced that they had developed a two-dose vaccine that would effectively prevent infection. They named the vaccine the Sputnik V, after the first satellite ever to enter space, launched by the Soviets in 1957. Russian rhetoric framed the vaccine development as a victory over the west, saying that other countries, such as the United States, would follow suit in lieu of Russian success. Similar to the original Sputnik, the Sputnik V vaccine may have been the first step, but the United States would still win the race. Many other countries have chosen to halt the use of the Russian vaccine due to concerns over its speedy development.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, the Kremlin refuses to acknowledge the US success and its shortcomings. Instead, they have chosen to slander western vaccines, attempting to keep the vaccination levels in the US as low as possible. Instead of undermining the US vaccination rate, which will have a negative ripple effect across the world, the Russians should focus on their vaccination rate, which is dangerously less than that of the United States. Their focus on speed over efficacy as well as delayed approval by the WHO and EU have caused Russia's people to grow skeptical of the safety of the Sputnik V vaccine. As of November 3rd, 2021, only 39% of the Russian population is fully vaccinated, despite them having been the first nation to release their vaccine.<sup>36</sup> The United States, which has also struggled with citizens resisting vaccination, has a vaccination rate of 58.8%.<sup>37</sup> The Kremlin has worked hard on internet espionage to keep this rate down, making the American vaccines look worse in the eyes of the public and dividing the nation on a polarizing issue.

The United States is not the only victim of Russian social media disinformation regarding the COVID-19 vaccines. Many nations that border Russia are struggling with Russian propaganda discouraging the use of western vaccines. For example, the nation of Latvia offers the Moderna, Johnson and Johnson, Pfizer, and AstraZeneca vaccines, not the Sputnik V. The Kremlin has targeted Latvia, especially the rural areas closer to the Russian border, with media and radio campaigns, warning against the western vaccines, claiming that the Sputnik is the only

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<sup>35</sup>Grace Kier and Paul Stronski, "Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Is Mostly Smoke and Mirrors," August 3, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/03/russia-s-vaccine-diplomacy-is-mostly-smoke-and-mirrors-pub-85074>.

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Ritchie et. al., "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations - Statistics and Research," March 5, 2020, [https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID\\_WRL](https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=OWID_WRL).

<sup>37</sup>"U.S. COVID-19 Vaccine Tracker: See Your State's Progress," 2021, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/coronavirus-covid-19/vaccine-tracker>.

vaccine that is safe to get. As a result, Latvia has struggled with vaccine acceptance. Since some citizens are listening to and believing the propaganda, they will only accept Sputnik. However, since Sputnik is not accepted in Latvia, they decide not to get the vaccine at all. Not only does this disinformation cripple Latvia, which the US has supported as a democratic ally, but it develops a general distrust of America and its medical advancements among the Baltic States. The Baltic states are important allies for the United States in keeping the power of Russia in check.<sup>38</sup>

If the Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson and Johnson vaccines are rejected by the American people, then the nation will continue to be weakened by COVID and by political division. A divided nation dealing with internal crises is much more vulnerable to external forces. This is precisely the Kremlin's goal. On the other hand, they have strategically employed marketing and media techniques to fix the international public image of the Sputnik V. Kremlin official Kirill Dmitriev was hand-selected to give a series of interviews about the vaccine targeted at the English speaking international population. Dmitriev was given this position due to his experience in the Kremlin as well as his high fluency in English and his education from Stanford and Harvard, both highly respected American universities. By developing a level of credibility for Dmitriev, the Russians hope that more nations will listen to and believe his message, thus increasing the use of the Sputnik V vaccine and improving the overall image of the Russian government amidst the pandemic.<sup>39</sup>

### Hacking

The US Department of State listed five pillars of Russian disinformation in their official brief. The fifth of these, which is even more dangerous than the previously listed pillars; cultivation of proxy sources and weaponization of social media, is cyber-enabled disinformation, more specifically hack and release. The biggest and perhaps the most influential Russian hack was the Solarwinds hack, which occurred back in 2020. Solarwinds is a US information technology firm used by the US government and major private companies to store and analyze high-profile information.<sup>40</sup> US government officials believe that the Russians hacked into the company's IT resource management software system called "Orion", sending out a hacked software update to 33,000 customers. Unknowingly, when users updated their information system, they also subjected their information to hacked code that would create a backdoor into their IT system. The hackers then installed malware which allowed them to leak even more information. In the months before the hack was discovered, the Russians were able to breach information from multiple US government agencies, such as the Pentagon, the Department of

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<sup>38</sup>Jędrzej Duszyński, "Russian Disinformation in Latvia," December 11, 2020, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russian-disinformation-latvia/>.

<sup>39</sup>Grace Kier and Paul Stronski, "Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy Is Mostly Smoke and Mirrors,"

<sup>40</sup>Marcus Willett, "Lessons of the Solarwinds Hack," *Survival* 63, no. 2 (2021) 8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2021.1906001>.

State, and the Department of Homeland Security, in addition to major US private innovators such as Microsoft and Intel.<sup>41</sup>

The results of the Solarwinds hack have posed major issues for US government agencies. Firstly, knowing that the Russian Intelligence Agency was able to infiltrate information that had been considered impenetrable served as a major wake-up call for government officials. On top of all of the private sector information that they gained access to, the Russians were also able to obtain the scientific information behind the American vaccines. With that information, they could potentially engage in biowarfare and create and release an antivirus that would be resistant to the vaccine. Not only did the findings spread alarm about the information that was leaked, but they also raised fears about the potential for current and future undetected hacks. In addition to having access to top-secret US information, the Russians were also able to change the information in the Orion data system, planting misinformation within the US government itself. Now officials in both the public and the private sector are struggling with resecuring reams of information while at the same time trying to decipher if that information is true or false. This process takes a considerable amount of time and effort. The United States will need to focus more funding on preventing foreign hacks to avoid future misinformation from infiltrating information systems.<sup>42</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, due to their multi-platformed espionage efforts, Russia has become an internal threat to the United States. Beginning during the Cold War, the Kremlin has stopped at nothing to infiltrate and steal top secret information from the US Government. During the development of the Manhattan Project, many Russian spies were found to be leaking US information that could lead to the development of Russian nuclear missiles. While the two nations are no longer racing to assert nuclear dominance, the threat of the Russians is still something that is still a very pressing concern. Now their efforts have expanded from simply stealing US information, to planting incorrect information on the internet for Americans to see. By planting conspiracies designed to weaken and divide America, the Kremlin has discovered a method to take America down by turning her against herself. As President Lincoln once said at another divided time in American history, “a house divided against itself cannot stand”. Now, generations later, these sentiments are more true than ever. The Kremlin officials know that if America is fighting in an internal war, it will be much more difficult to stand against an external threat to her power. They have identified our greatest weakness; ourselves.

The US must focus more time and energy on combating social media disinformation if there is any hope that we will emerge victorious from this cyberwar. Fortunately, since the issues with the Russian government are often targeted at individual people, we can each fight back against misinformation efforts as citizens. As members of the online community, it is our responsibility to check that each source we reference or share is from a reputable outlet, not one that is secretly sourced by Russian intelligence. Once an individual shares a piece of

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<sup>41</sup>Isabella Jibilian, “The US Is Ready to Sanction Russia over the SolarWinds Cyber Attack,” April 15, 2021  
<https://www.businessinsider.com/solarwinds-hack-explained-government-agencies-cyber-security-2020-12>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid 40

misinformation with others, it can spread like wildfire. We must consciously choose to not spread any information that we are not certain is true, thus protecting our fellow citizens as opposed to leaving them vulnerable. The only way to hold ourselves accountable is if the citizenry understands the issue at hand. Perhaps the most dangerous part of the Russian disinformation campaign in America is that most Americans do not know about it. It is thus important for the US government to educate the general public about the risk, what to look for, and how to report a website or account that seems to come from an untrustworthy source. It is likewise essential for the government to increase efforts to track down and expose any Russian site or account on social media, publishing their findings as much as is safe for national security. Learning this information will help the American people to realize the gravity of the situation at hand and help shift the general understanding of Russia as being an outside nuclear threat to one that is waiting for each person in their back pocket.

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