

# Covid-19

## Disinformation

### and social media manipulation

Elise Thomas, Albert Zhang and Emilia Currey

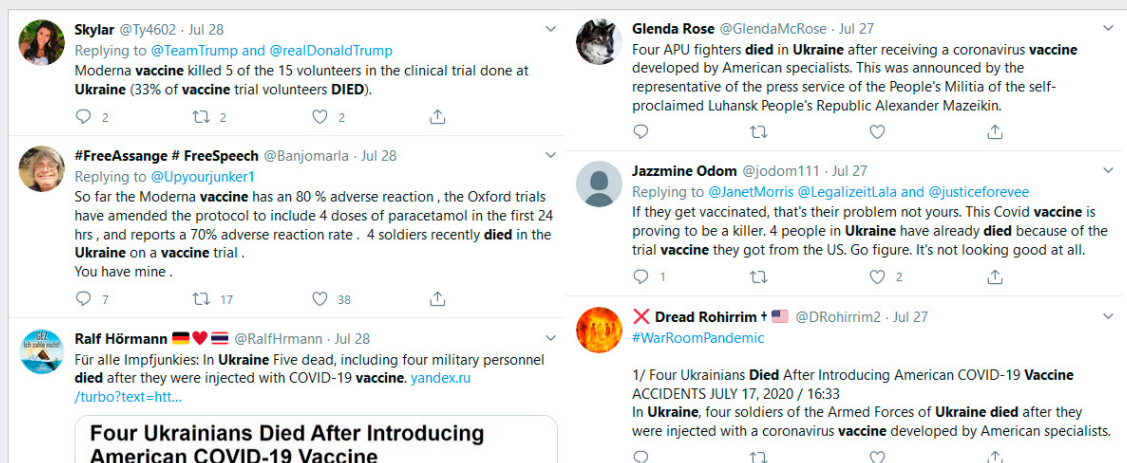
## Pro-Russian vaccine politics drives new disinformation narratives

### Introduction

On 17 July, a press release was posted to the websites of the Luhansk People's Republic, the pro-Russian self-declared state in Luhansk, Eastern Ukraine. The press release related to a supposed US Covid-19 vaccine trial that had been conducted on Ukrainian volunteers, including soldiers, in Kharkiv (which is controlled by the Ukrainian Government). According to the press release, of the 15 patients who received the trial vaccine, five were killed, including four Ukrainian soldiers. The press release was published the day after [Russia announced plans](#) to mass-produce its own vaccine in a matter of weeks.

The Ukrainian vaccine trial [never happened](#). However, this disinformation narrative—which has clear political, anti-American and anti-Ukrainian Government undertones—has achieved widespread dissemination in multiple languages and across multiple communities, including into a prominent Australian anti-vaccination Facebook group (Figure 1). It has been effectively laundered from a fringe propaganda site associated with a separatist government, backed by pro-Russian militia, into the international information ecosystem, despite a multitude of attempts by legitimate media in multiple languages, including [English](#), [Spanish](#), [Italian](#), [Romanian](#) and [Czech](#), to fact-check it.

Figure 1: Tweets repeating the disinformation narrative



The success of this completely fictional narrative reflects a broader shift across the disinformation space. As the world's focus moves from the initial response to the coronavirus crisis towards the race to a vaccine, with all of the complex geopolitical interests that entails, political disinformation is also moving on from the origins of the virus to the vaccine race.

This report uses the US–Ukrainian vaccine narrative as a case study to examine how political disinformation about Covid-19 vaccines is being laundered into the international information ecosystem.

## Timeline of key events

### 17 JULY 2020

Lugansk People's Militia site publishes comments on a vaccine trial linked to American scientists resulting in the death of four Ukrainian soldiers.

[Luhansk Media Center](#) publishes press releases in English and Russian about the alleged vaccine trial by American virologists.

[News.ru](#) adds a paragraph linking vaccine deaths to American biotech company Moderna.

### 18 JULY 2020

[News Front](#) publishes its own version.

Earliest English-language link share in a Facebook group by Russia Insider writer Yana Dianova.

### 19 JULY 2020

Earliest English-language link share on Twitter from Russian author at pro-Russian media platform thesaker.is.

### 21 JULY 2020

Italian conspiracy website [Rassengna Stampa 2.0](#) reports on vaccine trials

### 24 JULY 2020

Screenshots of an auto-translation of [Rassengna Stampa 2.0](#) article go viral.

Articles from Luhansk Media Center and [Stalkerzone](#) start to trend, peaking on July 27th

### 29 JULY 2020

Shares of English-language articles abruptly halted, plummeting on August 1st.

## Seeding and initial propagation

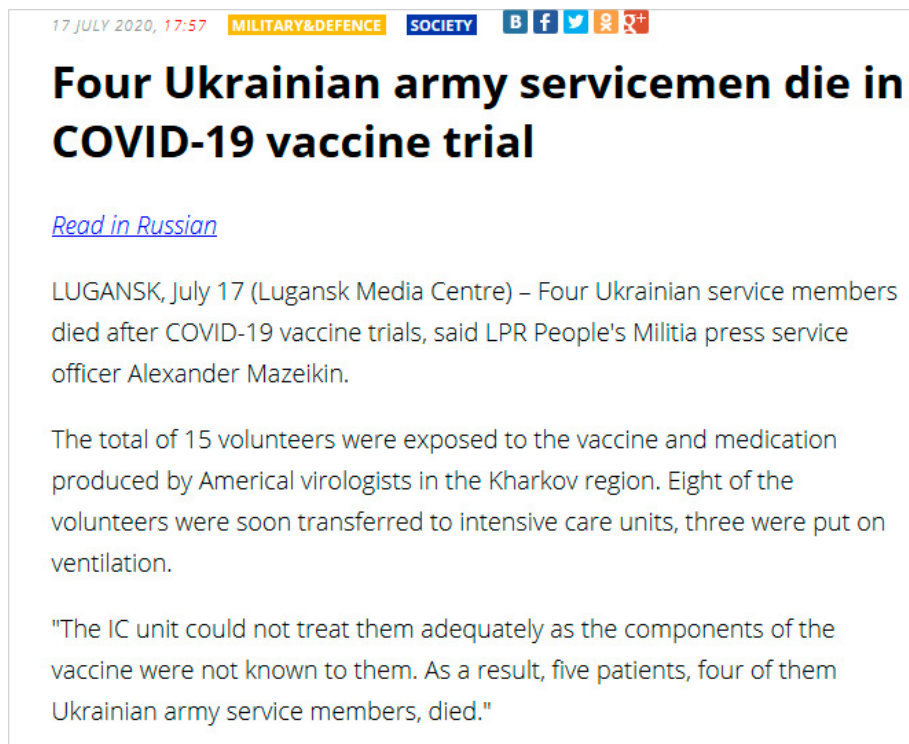
The Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) is a self-declared state formed by pro-Russian militia in the Luhansk region of Eastern Ukraine in 2014. The LPR, and its neighbouring separatist group the Donetsk People's Republic, operate a number of propaganda media platforms, providing news and updates about the LPR's activities and the situation in Luhansk in multiple languages.

Those media platforms regularly promote politically slanted narratives and outright disinformation that supports the interests of the separatist group and of broader pro-Russian interests. These sites are ordinarily extremely fringe and receive very low traffic or engagement.

On 17 July, LPR propaganda sites, including the [Lugansk People's Militia site](#), and [Lugansk Life](#) published a regular briefing from LPR spokesperson Alexander Mazeikin that included comments about a supposed vaccine trial linked to US scientists in Ukrainian Government-controlled Kharkiv. According to Mazeikin, the trial had led to the deaths of five volunteers, including four Ukrainian soldiers.

One propaganda site, the [Luhansk Media Centre](#) (LMC), went further and published stand-alone press releases in English and Russian about the alleged vaccine trial by 'Americal [sic] virologists' (Figure 2). This is the initial source of the disinformation narrative.

Figure 2: *Luhansk Media Centre* press release



This story is entirely fictitious. There was no such vaccine trial. The political dimensions of this narrative are clear: irresponsible Ukrainian Government authorities are endangering Ukrainians, including soldiers, at the request of Americans who don't want to test their vaccines on their own citizens and don't value Ukrainian lives.

There are differences between the English- and Russian-language versions of the story. The Russian version is more detailed and expands Mazeikin's quote by adding: 'From unconfirmed data, the use of experimental vaccines in medical institutions of the Kharkiv region is known to have caused a bad reaction in patients with weak immunity and sent more than 110 vaccinated residents of the region to medical institutions' [Translated from Russian].

## Narrative variants

Various narrative twists were added as, over the next 48 hours, the story was picked up by multiple Russian-language media platforms, as well as by English-language, pro-Russian conspiracy media platforms, such as [Stalkerzone](#), and by known disinformation and propaganda outlets.

For example, the story appears to have travelled through Russian-language media [MK.ru](#) (which also shared the story to its [own Twitter account](#), gaining a much higher level of engagement than its usual tweets) to *News Front*, a Crimean-based multilingual media organisation with a long history of spreading disinformation. *News Front* was included in a [recent report](#) by the US State Department on Russia's disinformation ecosystem.

*News Front* [published its own version of the story](#), adapted from *MK.ru*, on 18 July. Its English-language editors seem to have felt the anti-American undertones in the narrative were too subtle. They added a sentence to the story, turning the undertones into overtones: 'In Kharkiv, people are testing an anticoid [*sic*] vaccine from the United States; the American authorities did not conduct tests on citizens of the United States.'

Another Russian media outlet took even more creative licence. The Russian-language [News.ru version](#) of the story, published on 17 July, added a paragraph linking the fictional vaccine deaths to the real American biotech company Moderna, which is [developing a vaccine candidate](#):

The drug was created by the American biotechnology company Moderna. In clinical trials, patients received two doses of a potential vaccine, and all volunteers developed antibodies. The trials involved 45 healthy people aged 18 to 55 years. Each of the three groups received mRNA-1273 vaccine at different dosages twice with an interval of 28 days. [Translated from Russian]

This has led to alternative versions of the narrative: one is more generically focused on the idea of an American vaccine trial, and one is very specifically focused on Moderna's mRNA-1273 vaccine candidate.

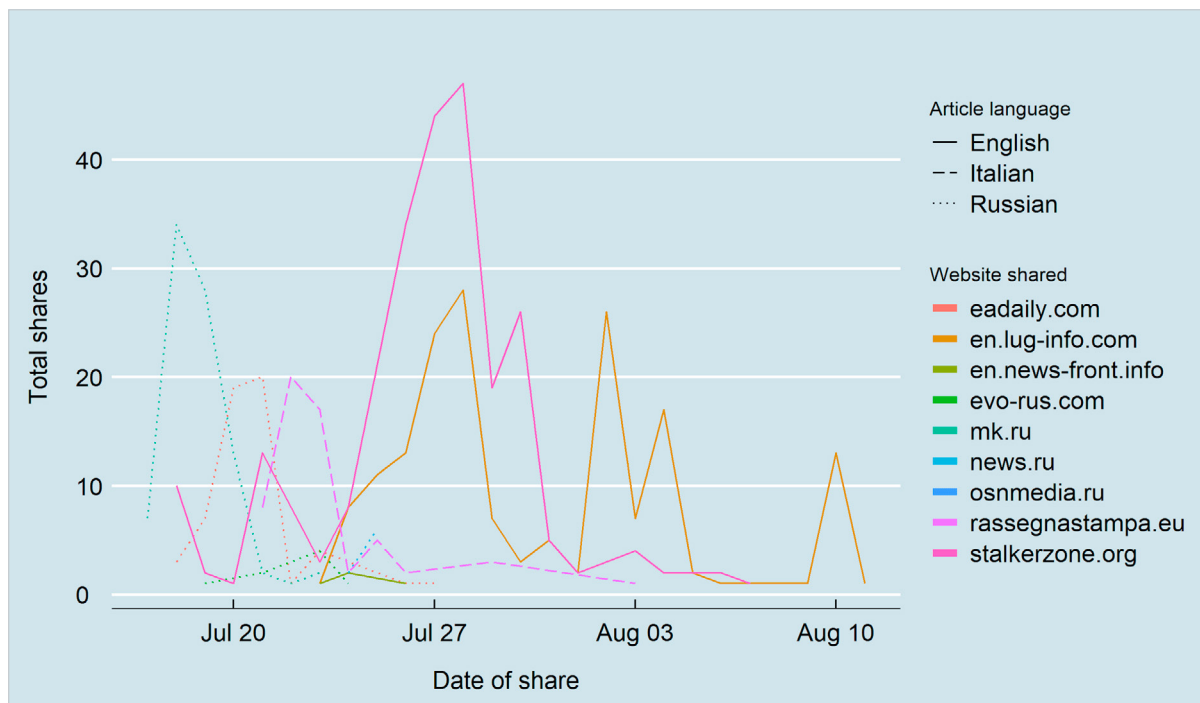
Intentionally or not, this had the effect of broadening the combined audiences that the narratives might appeal to, offering both a politically charged angle and a more conspiratorial lens for anti-vaxxers suspicious of 'Big Pharma' and antagonistic towards the concept of vaccines in general and mRNA vaccines in particular. These narratives are mutually reinforcing, and both versions have gone on to gain significant traction, as is discussed below.

## Multilingual spread

Between 17 July and 11 August 2020, the narrative began to spread in multiple languages, including Italian, Spanish, German and Czech. For this report, we focused on 14 of the sites that reported in English, Russian and Italian on the fictional US Covid-19 vaccine deaths.

On Facebook, those articles were shared into Facebook groups at least 621 times, reaching a potential audience of 14 million people and receiving a total of 19,365 interactions (likes, comments, shares; Figure 3). The total number of shares is likely to be significantly higher for several reasons: Facebook has been actively deleting many posts sharing these links, distorting the available data, and URL redirections and shares on personal timelines aren't captured in CrowdTangle data.

**Figure 3: Facebook shares of articles on the Ukrainian vaccine deaths**



Source: CrowdTangle.

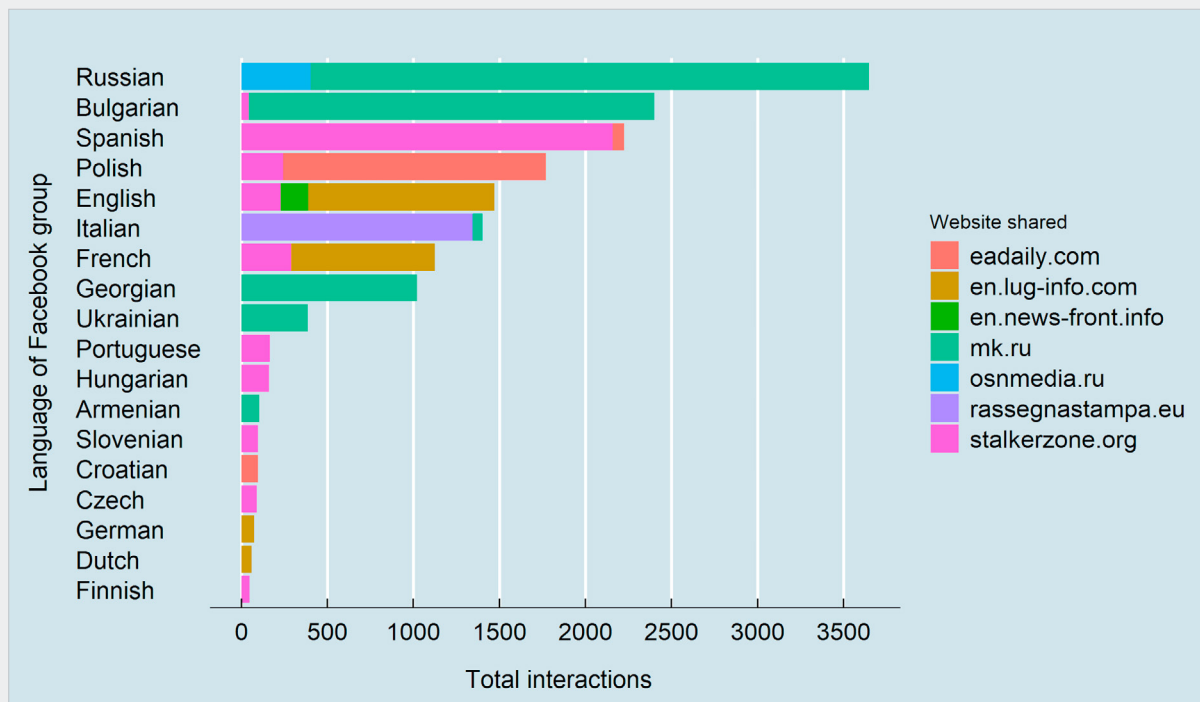
Initially, most shares were linked to the Russian/Ukrainian-language narrative spread in Facebook groups, posting articles from *mk.ru* and *eadaily.com*. The English-language versions of the narrative appeared shortly after. Both the *Stalkerzone* and English-language LMC press release spiked more or less simultaneously on 24 July, rising sharply for several days before a steep drop-off.

Our analysis of the top 100 Facebook group shares with the most interactions showed that the majority of interactions were in Facebook groups that spoke languages other than English. We analysed the top 100 most interacted shares, which accounted for 84.4% of the total number of interactions in our dataset. These articles received the most engagement in Russian and Bulgarian Facebook groups.

The Facebook group [post](#) with the most interactions in English was in an Australian anti-vaccination group, receiving 164 reactions, 56 comments and 113 shares. It's no surprise that English-speaking groups tended to share the *en.lug-info.com* English article, too.

Our data suggests that the most widely shared article was the English-language *Stalkerzone* article, which had the most interactions in Spanish-speaking Facebook groups (Figure 4). Those groups were mostly based in South American countries (rather than in Spain) and were strongly associated with anti-vaccine and QAnon conspiracy groups. The primary pick-up by international QAnon communities appears to have occurred around 26 July.

**Figure 4: Total number of interactions, by predominant language of Facebook group**



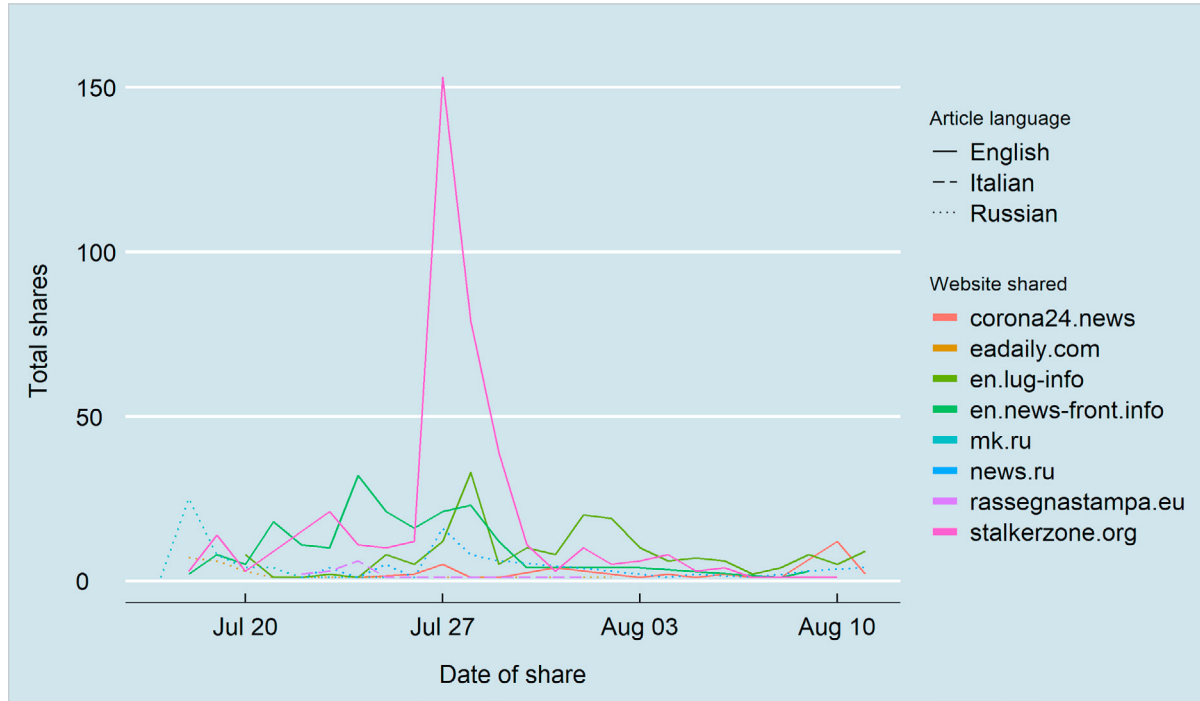
Note: Three articles considered in this data were in Russian; three were in English; one was in Italian.

Source: CrowdTangle.

On Twitter, there were at least 976 tweets containing URLs for articles relating to the Ukrainian vaccine deaths in Russian, Italian and English. Those posts received a total of 13,821 interactions (replies, likes and retweets) and potentially reached up to 15 million followers.

Like the spread on Facebook, tweets were initially sharing the Russian/Ukrainian-language narratives before tweets sharing the English-language *Stalkerzone* article took off on 26 July—notably, two days *after* the take-off on Facebook (Figure 5). On 27 July, posts sharing the *Stalkerzone* narrative peaked on both Twitter and Facebook, but since articles started to trend on Facebook initially, this suggests that the spread first began on Facebook before moving to Twitter.

Figure 5: Tweets containing URLs of articles on the Ukrainian vaccine deaths



## Viral post

The data reflects a significant spike in Facebook shares of English-language articles, in particular the *Stalkerzone* article, on 24 July. The Twitter spike followed on 26 July, suggesting that the sudden growth began on Facebook and was later reflected on Twitter. On 29 July, that spike abruptly halted, and shares of the articles plummeted on 1 August.

It's difficult to reconstruct this sequence in our investigative timeline, as much of the necessary data has been deleted by Facebook. However, it appears that part of the spike that occurred on or just before 24 July may have been linked to an unusual viral post that began to circulate in a multitude of Facebook groups.

That post (Figure 6) has been uncommonly well scrubbed by Facebook's moderators. However, it appears to have survived long enough in some of the more obscure Facebook groups (perhaps because of their very obscurity) to be captured by Google's cache. Interestingly, in addition to deleting the post, many of the accounts sharing it *also* appear to have been deleted by Facebook.



Figure 6: Screenshot of unusual viral post



Note: This example was shared into a Filipino QAnon group on 24 July. Both the post and the user have now been deleted, but were captured by Google cache.

This post is interesting for several reasons. It was initially quite difficult to find the original source of the screenshotted article. The screenshot was eventually discovered to be the mobile version of an auto-translation of an article (based on the *MK.ru* article) posted on 21 July to an Italian conspiracy website, in which the auto-translation had also changed the name of the website from *Rassegna Stampa 2.0* to *Press Review 2.0* (Figure 7).

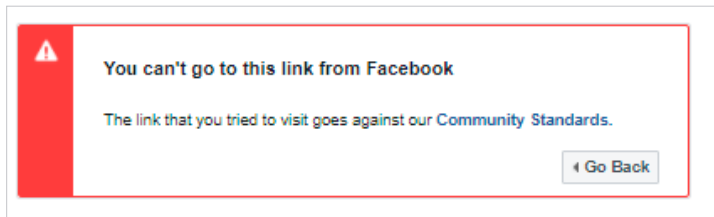
Figure 7: Original Italian-language article





The post was also unusual for its use of link shorteners. The shortened links aren't in the *Rassegna Stampa 2.0* article; nor do they redirect back to *Rassegna Stampa 2.0*. Interestingly, Facebook is now completely blocking users from visiting the first shortened link, which redirects to the English-language version of the *News Front* article (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Facebook message after attempting to visit <https://cutt.ly/Za6pIix>, which redirects to the *News Front* article**



The other two shortened links redirect to the Russian-language *News.ru* article and a user-submitted post on the English-language *BeforeItsNews* conspiracy site. This post was submitted on 22 July by a regular user, 'bananaman', and appears to be the English auto-translate of the *Rassegna Stampa* article (it repeats the same spelling confusion over the name of the Ukrainian city, using both 'Kharkiv' and 'Kharkov' in the same article).

There are two plausible explanations for the use of link shorteners in this context. One is to mask the link destination, particularly from Facebook's automated content moderation algorithms and from human moderators. Another is that whoever created the post and link shorteners is interested in tracking how much traffic their posts have generated, potentially as a metric for how well the disinformation contained in the post has performed. Some combination of the two motives is also a possibility.

The viral post remained up for several days, with identical content being posted by multiple Facebook user accounts, until at least 26 July and probably until 29 July. Widespread deletions by Facebook make it very difficult to establish how far it spread, how many user accounts were involved in disseminating it, or how authentic those accounts may have been.

While we can't track how much traffic engaged with the post directly (because of the combinations of data deletion and the limitations of CrowdTangle, as mentioned above), we can clearly see that other English-language articles sharing the narrative spiked significantly over the period during which the post was circulating. This suggests that Facebook users were searching for, reading about and engaging with the fictional vaccine trial story.

It should also be emphasised again that the CrowdTangle data only tracks shares into Facebook groups (Figure 9); it doesn't capture the activity of users sharing the articles on their own personal timelines, which appears to have been substantial. The true number of Facebook users reached by this disinformation is therefore likely to be significantly higher than the reach based on CrowdTangle data alone.

Figure 9: Facebook users sharing the LMC press release into their personal timelines (captured 26 July)



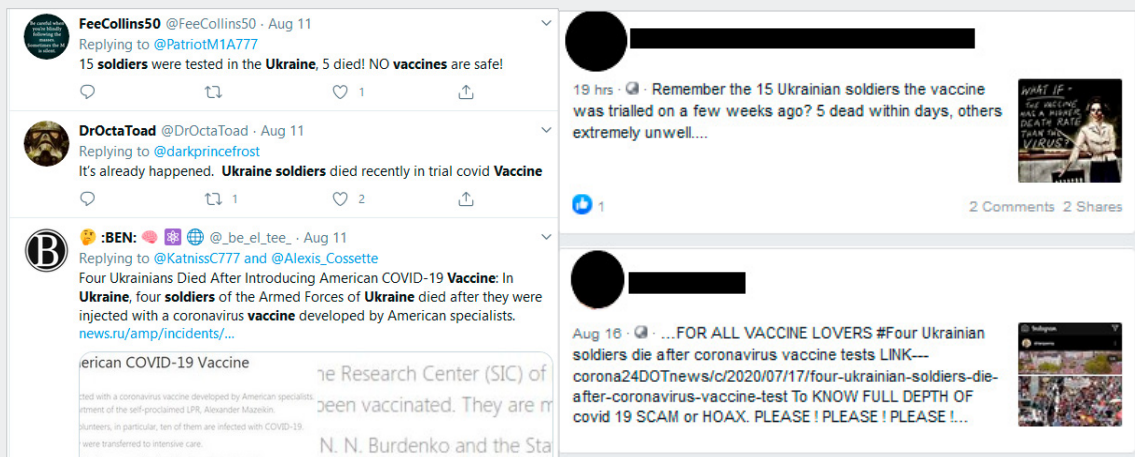
## Decontextualisation

Based on the data, it seems reasonable to assume that Facebook's crackdown on the narrative began on or around 29 July, when the rise in traffic to the English-language articles abruptly reversed and dropped off to very low levels on 1 August. The secondary spike for the LMC press release may have been a reaction to Facebook beginning to block access to other links.

These developments came too late, however, as it's clear that the narrative successfully reached the final stage of the information laundering cycle: 'decontextualisation'.

That's the stage in which the narrative is simply 'out there'; it exists in the information ecosystem completely disconnected from its original source with a pro-Russian militia (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Twitter and Facebook posts repeating the decontextualised disinformation



The narrative that an American vaccine killed Ukrainian soldiers is now being used as fuel for a range of other conspiracies and mis- or disinformation narratives. Those include feeding into narratives about [supposed US biolabs](#) published in *New Eastern Outlook* (which, like *News Front*, also earned a mention in the US State Department's [recent report](#) on pro-Russian disinformation) and into anti-vaccine, in particular anti-Moderna and anti-mRNA vaccine, conspiracies (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Post on 16 August linking fictional Moderna vaccine trial-related deaths in Ukraine to Canadian deals with Moderna and Pfizer**

2d · 🌐

IF YOU DONT KNOW NOW YOU KNOW - PFIZER / MODERNA (B1ll G@tes Company) This is the V@x that killed 5 people in the Ukraine post injection and 8 went into ICU. Also NIH - F@uci / Mòderna - G@tes share this V@x Patent 50/50. IT WAS ALWAYS GOING TO BE THIS V@X. This was always the Plan. This has been in the works since 2015. I've told you all I have the Patents for it and the V@x was approved for use on JUNE 27th, 2019. And they've now confirmed MILLIONS OF DOSES BOUGHT FOR CANADIANS  
<http://www.bbc.com/.../story/20200621-will-travel-be-safer-by...>

**You can now apologise to all the "Conspiracy Theorists" who told you Bill Gates was putting microchips or 'Digital Tattoos' in the vaxines to track us.**

Researcher: Several experts say needles to inject mRNA vaccines and their mRNA vaccine (mRNA). Courtesy of Ben-Gurion University.

Micro needles: don't leave scars and are less than the regular needles - it's like putting an ant bite. Jallat said. That subdermal needle is like a simple scanner, she added. "It can even be used with a modified phone."

ported by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, technology was aimed to help in the development of where paper or electronic records aren't always able. The goal is to try it on humans with a measles vaccine, but the tech may come handy for other kinds of immunizations - for example at the

Travelers would present the customs officers with a entrance visa and a vaccination record. That could be a paper card - or a tiny tattoo on their arm, invisible to the naked eye but readable by an infrared scanner. This technology already exists and has been used on live animals and human cadaver skin, said researchers. Ana Jallat of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Their method uses micro-needle patches that can deliver both the vaccine and a report of an invisible ink under the person's skin, storing the vaccination record.

**Canada signs deals with Pfizer, Moderna to get doses of COVID-19 vaccines**  
 August 5, 2020, 8:48 AM

**OTTAWA — Canada is negotiating deals with pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and U.S.-based Moderna to get doses of COVID-19 vaccines**

11 Comments 86 Shares

## Discussion

This report provides a case study showing how disinformation about vaccines and vaccine trials can be laundered through the information ecosystem. Our research demonstrates how narratives can move from fringe and questionable sources, such as a media outlet for a pro-Russian separatist enclave in Eastern Ukraine, through a multitude of multilingual platforms to become decontextualised ‘facts’ that are simply asserted or incorporated into other narratives with no reference to their origin. Significant questions remain about the nature of the viral *Press Review 2.0* post on 24 July, and whether that was authentic or, potentially, coordinated inauthentic behaviour.

From the beginning, this was a deeply political narrative, as the initial disinformation from the LPR was published the day after [Russia announced plans](#) to mass-produce its own vaccine in a matter of weeks. The likely goal of this effort was to smear both the US and Ukrainian governments by suggesting that they didn’t care about the lives of Ukrainian soldiers. This initial focus was swiftly augmented by Russian-language media to add a focus on Moderna and to undermine confidence in Moderna’s mRNA-1273 vaccine candidate.

What this case study highlights is the shift away from disinformation and geopolitical battles over the origin of the virus and the entry into a new phase of the fight to control the narrative: politicised disinformation and conspiracies around the hopes for a Covid-19 vaccine.

## Acronyms and abbreviations

LMC	Luhansk Media Centre
LPR	Luhansk People’s Republic

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## Acknowledgements

ASPI's International Cyber Policy Centre receives funding from a variety of sources including sponsorship, research and project support from across governments, industry and civil society. ASPI is grateful to the US State Department for providing funding for this research project.

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First published August 2020.

ISSN 2209-9689 (online), ISSN 2209-9670 (print)



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