

# fr.sputniknews.com

The French-language website of Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik. The site does not reveal its government ownership and publishes disinformation and propaganda in line with Russian interests.



**Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards.**

**Score: 10/100**

## Ownership and Financing

Fr.SputnikNews.com is owned by Rossiya Segodnya, a Russian state-owned international news agency based in Moscow. Rossiya Segodnya was set up by decree of Russian President Vladimir Putin in December 2013 as a replacement for Russia's previous state-run international news agency, RIA Novosti, and its international radio service, Voice of Russia. In a report on its own closure, RIA Novosti characterized the change as "the latest in a series of shifts in Russia's news landscape, which appear to point toward a tightening of state control in the already heavily regulated media sector."

In a separate decree the same day as RIA Novosti's closure, Putin appointed pro-Kremlin newscaster Dmitry Kiselyov as head of the replacement agency. Rossiya Segodnya launched the radio network Sputnik in November 2014.

Fr.SputnikNews.com runs advertisements and sponsored content.

-  Does not repeatedly publish false content (22points)
-  Gathers and presents information responsibly (18)
-  Regularly corrects or clarifies errors (12.5)
-  Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly (12.5)
-  Avoids deceptive headlines (10)
-  Website discloses ownership and financing (7.5)
-  Clearly labels advertising (7.5)
-  Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest (5)
-  The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information (5)

## Content

Fr.Sputniknews.com is the French-language website of Sputnik, which describes itself on its About Us page as an agency that "covers global political and economic news targeting an international audience." The site's homepage provides links to approximately 30 editions of Sputnik in other languages, including German, Arabic, English, and Italian.

Sputnik France publishes news and opinion, with a focus on breaking national news, crime, and politics. The site also covers international news, featuring sections devoted to Russia and Africa. Popular topics also include military defense, culture, sports, and the

*Criteria are listed in order of importance.*

[More information.](#)

economy. The site regularly runs content defending Russian state interests and allies of President Putin, and attacking Russia's rivals.

Youri Apreleff, Sputnik France's editor-in-chief, said in an October 2020 email to NewsGuard: "Indeed, we share statements by Russian officials, or even political commentators, because they are systematically ignored by the French press. But in the same way, we share statements by American, French, German, Chinese, Saudi, Qatari officials... This isn't a question of defending or attacking, it's a question of journalism."

("Nous relayons effectivement les déclarations d'officiels russes, ou encore de politologues, car celles-ci sont systématiquement ignorées par la presse française. Mais de la même manière, nous relayons les déclarations d'officiels américains, français, allemands, chinois, saoudiens, qataris... Ce n'est pas une question de défense ou d'attaque, simplement une question de journalisme.")

Typical articles have run under headlines including "Beheading threats against French ministers increase on social networks" ("Les menaces de décapitation de ministres français se multiplient sur les réseaux sociaux"); "How the government is preparing the anti-COVID vaccine campaign in France" ("Comment le gouvernement prépare la campagne de vaccination anti-Covid en France"); and "New secret anti-aircraft missile successfully tested by Russian military - video" ("Un nouveau missile secret antiaérien testé avec succès par l'armée russe – vidéo").

The site also links to podcasts of its radio programming in French. It sometimes runs translations of articles from the English-language edition of Sputnik.

Sputnik's propagandistic mission has been well-documented by numerous governments and organizations. In January 2017, a U.S. intelligence report called Sputnik and RT part of a "Russia's state-run propaganda machine" that was used to benefit Donald Trump ahead of the 2016 presidential elections. In April 2017, President Emmanuel Macron banned

Sputnik and RT from his campaign events, claiming the outlets had a “systematic desire to issue fake news and false information.”

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Credibility

Fr.SputnikNews.com features original reporting, in text, photo and video, produced by Sputnik staff. Some articles are based on information provided by other news organizations or from social media. However, Sputnik France, similar to its editions in other languages, has repeatedly disseminated propaganda and false information on behalf of the Russian government, and it has published false or misleading information on many topics, including COVID-19 and the U.S. presidential elections.

For example, a November 2020 article titled “Did ‘dead souls’ vote in Michigan?” (“Des ‘âmes mortes’ ont-elles voté dans le Michigan?”) claimed that ballots were cast on behalf of dead people in Michigan during the U.S. presidential election. The article named one such supposedly dead voter, William Bradley, who died in 1984. “Some web users claim that the votes of dead people were counted there,” the article stated.

Citing a tweet by pro-Trump activist Austin Fletcher, who tweets under the handle Essential Fleccas, the article stated that “several people, ages 118, 119 and even 120, are said to have voted by mail in the U.S. presidential elections in the key state of Michigan, according to the Essential Fleccas Twitter account.” (“Certains internautes affirment que les voix de personnes décédées y auraient été comptabilisées... Plusieurs personnes ‘âgées’ de 118, 119 et même 120 ans auraient voté par correspondance aux élections présidentielles américaines dans l’État clé du Michigan, à en croire le compte Essential Fleccas sur Twitter.”)

There is no evidence that anyone tried to fraudulently vote on behalf of Bradley or other dead people in Michigan. After this claim spread on social media and some conservative sites, The New York Times reported that there had apparently been an administrative error. According to the Times, William T. Bradley, the son of the man who died in 1984, said that he returned an absentee ballot. However, Michigan’s voting database

shows that the younger Bradley had not voted, but that his dead father had. “The city appeared to have mistakenly recorded the vote of William T. Bradley under his dead father, who had the same name and ZIP code,” the Times reported.

In a statement that did not specifically mention Bradley, the Michigan Secretary of State’s Office said it is possible that the state’s voter registry will link a ballot to a deceased family member with the same name. “On rare occasions, a ballot received for a living voter may be recorded in a way that makes it appear as if the voter is dead,” said the statement from the Secretary of State. “This can be because of voters with similar names, where the ballot is accidentally recorded as voted by John Smith Sr when it was actually voted by John Smith Jr; or because of inaccurately recorded birth dates in the qualified voter file; for example, someone born in 1990 accidentally recorded as born in 1890.”

A January 2020 article titled “Scientists promote a Chinese medicine that could stop the coronavirus” (“Des scientifiques mettent en avant un médicament chinois qui pourrait enrayer le coronavirus”) stated that “scientists from the Pharmacological Institute of Shanghai at the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Wuhan Virology Institute have discovered that the Chinese medicine Shuanghuanglian Koufuye can inhibit the coronavirus.” (“Des scientifiques de l’Institut pharmacologique de Shanghai de l’Académie chinoise des sciences et de l’Institut de virologie de Wuhan ont découvert que le médicament chinois Shuanghuanglian Koufuye peut inhiber le coronavirus”).

Although clinical trials of this herbal remedy were underway at the time the article was published, the site did not report that its effectiveness as a treatment for COVID-19 had not been established. The U.S. National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health has said that there is currently no evidence that herbal therapies can cure or prevent COVID-19. According to an article in Foreign Policy, “As with most such practices, the clinical evidence is highly inconclusive; there is some suggestion shuanghuanglian may aid in

respiratory tract illnesses, but there is no evidence it can achieve success in the treatment of bacterial and viral infections, especially at scale.”

In his email to NewsGuard, Apreleff stated: “Besides the fact that this story was written in the conditional tense, precisely because the [herbal remedy’s] effectiveness was not proven, the very principle of these articles is that they are designed in the form of a wire story, not a feature article.” (“Outre le fait que cet article a été écrit au conditionnel, justement car l’efficacité n’était pas prouvée, le texte reprend simplement une étude publiée par des scientifiques dans une revue sérieuse. Le principe même de ces articles est d’être construit sous forme de dépêche, et non d’article de fond.”)

Fr.SputnikNews.com has repeatedly promoted conspiracy theories about 9/11 and other terrorist attacks. For instance, a July 2018 article titled “‘Fake terrorism’ and conspiracy: are special services behind many attacks?” (“‘Faux terrorisme’ et conspiration: les services spéciaux derrière de nombreux attentats?”) suggested that terrorist attacks in European capitals are “often plotted by special services” (“souvent tramés par les services spéciaux”). The article was based on claims made by Elias Davidsson, an activist from Iceland who has spread 9/11 conspiracy theories. Without offering any evidence, the article stated Davidsson’s theory that the attack against the World Trade Center in New York was a state-sponsored operation planned by the Pentagon. The article includes one sentence at the end stating that experts are skeptical about these claims, but Sputnik lays them out without evidence nonetheless.

The site has also repeatedly denied that Russia was responsible for the crash of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17, which killed 298 people in eastern Ukraine in July 2014, despite evidence from an independent international criminal investigation.

For example, a March 2019 article titled “The opening of Ukrainian airspace is the main reason for the MH17 crash” (“L’ouverture de l’espace aérien ukrainien serait la principale cause du crash du MH17”) claimed that

“the fact that Ukrainian airspace was left open, when it should have been closed, was found to be the main reason for the crash of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17,” quoting an unnamed source. (“Le fait d'avoir laissé ouvert l'espace aérien ukrainien, qui aurait dû être fermé à l'époque, a été défini comme la raison principale du crash du Boeing 777 de la Malaysia Airlines.”)

In June 2020, the site published an article about the crash stating that “Almost immediately after the tragedy, the United States and its European allies claimed, without offering any evidence, that Russia supplied the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) with the weapon used to bring down the plane.... According to Russian Deputy Prosecutor General Nikolay Vinnichenko, Moscow gave the Netherlands documents proving that the missile belonged to Ukraine and that it was fired from an area controlled by the Ukrainian army.”

(“Presque immédiatement après la tragédie, les États-Unis et leurs alliés européens ont affirmé, sans présenter la moindre preuve, que la Russie avait fourni à la république populaire autoproclamée du Donetsk (RPD) l'arme utilisée pour abattre l'avion et s'en sont servis comme prétexte pour adopter de nouvelles sanctions... Selon le substitut du procureur général russe, Nikolaï Vinnitchenko, Moscou a remis aux Pays-Bas des documents prouvant que le missile appartenait à l'Ukraine et qu'il avait été tiré depuis une zone contrôlée par l'armée ukrainienne.”).

In fact, in May 2018, a joint investigation team comprised of Dutch, Australian, Belgian, Malaysian, and Ukrainian authorities concluded that the Buk missile system responsible for the Flight MH17 crash belonged to the Russian army. The report confirmed a 2017 open-source investigation by the enterprise reporting website Bellingcat, which compiled available evidence about the Buk missile system that caused the Flight MH17 crash, tracking its route from Russia's 53rd anti-aircraft brigade in Kursk across the Ukraine border to territory controlled by Russian-backed separatists. The Netherlands and Australia announced in May 2018

that based on the conclusions of the joint investigation team, investigators were “convinced that Russia is responsible for the deployment of the Buk installation that was used to down MH17” and would “hold Russia responsible for its part in the downing of flight MH17.”

Sputnik has also repeatedly advanced the false narrative of the Russian government that Syrian government forces under Russian-backed President Bashar al-Assad did not carry out a chemical attack against civilians on April 7, 2018, in the town of Douma.

For example, a January 2020 article titled “Alleged chemical attack in Douma, Syria: Why are the facts always overlooked?” (“Attaque chimique présumée à Douma, en Syrie: Pourquoi les faits sont-ils toujours négligés?”) dismissed a report by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), which found evidence of chemical use in Douma. Citing a member of the Syrian parliament, Sputnik wrote that “OPCW representatives took note only of the testimony of witnesses from the [Al-Qaeda affiliate] Al-Nusra Front and the White Helmets.”

The article also suggested that the Syrian government was not responsible for the incident, stating that “Russian diplomats described this information as ‘fake news.’ The Department added that the White Helmets, cited as one of the sources for this claim, ‘have been repeatedly exposed for their links with terrorists.’”

In November 2019, the site published a story headlined “Russia warns of upcoming staging of chemical attack on Idlib” (“La Russie met en garde contre une mise en scène prochaine d’attaque chimique à Idlib”), which said that the White Helmets and the Islamist militant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham were going to stage a fake chemical attack in the Idlib province of northwest Syria, citing as a source Russia's Defense Ministry. The article stated that “According to the Russian military, the terrorists pick locals to participate in the film shoot, showing damage caused by air strikes and the use of chemicals.” (“Selon les militaires russes, les terroristes sélectionnent des locaux pour participer au tournage, en montrant des dégâts causés par des frappes aériennes et un usage de substances chimiques.”)

The White Helmets, also known as the Syria Civil Defence, is a volunteer non-governmental group that primarily conducts search-and-rescue operations to help victims of Syria's civil war. There is no evidence for the claim that they have staged chemical attacks in Syria. In December 2018, the Britain-based investigative group Bellingcat and the U.S. news network Newsy released a joint report titled “Chemical Weapons and Absurdity: The Disinformation Campaign Against the White Helmets,” which found that “despite claiming to have ‘irrefutable information’ neither the Russian nor Syrian governments appear to have produced any verifiable evidence that actually supports their accusations” against the White Helmets.

According to anti-desinformation site EUvsDisinfo.eu, which is run by the European Union's East StratCom Task Force, these claims against the White Helmets are part of an ongoing Kremlin campaign to portray the group “as a Western-backed terrorist proxy and, implicitly, denying the responsibility of the Assad regime for chemical attacks perpetrated during the Syrian civil war.” Similarly, a 2017 Guardian investigation found that this counter-narrative was propagated online by a network of “activists, conspiracy theorists and trolls with the support of the Russian government.”

Because Sputnik France regularly publishes false claims — often parroting official Russian positions without providing other views or facts that call those claims into question — NewsGuard has determined that the site repeatedly publishes false content and deceptive headlines, and does not gather and present information responsibly.

Commenting on NewsGuard’s review of the site, Apreleff, Sputnik France’s editor-in-chief, told NewsGuard in an email: “You assume that Russian official statements are propaganda and false news. However, as you point out in many ‘nutrition labels,’ you have no evidence that this information is false. It’s one thing that they do not fit your assessment of the world and your view of reality, it’s another to call them fake... This is bias on your part, which is notably regrettable given that you present yourself as the guarantors of

neutrality. The stated objective of your project is to provide truthful information, not information in line with your political ideas. Relaying statements from Russian officials, like relaying statements from Chinese, American or European officials, is the basis of journalism, even though many of our colleagues have forgotten that."

("Vous partez du principe que les déclarations d'officiels russes sont de la propagande et des fausses informations. Pourtant, comme vous le soulignez dans de nombreuses 'étiquettes nutritionnelles', vous n'avez aucune preuve que ces informations soient fausses. Qu'elles ne correspondent pas à votre lecture du monde et votre point de vue de la réalité est une chose, les qualifier de fausses en est une autre... C'est un parti-pris de votre part, qui est particulièrement regrettable sachant que vous vous présentez comme des garants de la neutralité. L'objectif affiché de votre projet est de permettre une information véridique, pas une information propre à vos idées politiques. Relayer des déclarations d'officiels russes, tout comme relayer les déclarations d'officiels chinois, américains ou encore européens est la base du journalisme, quand bien même nombre de nos confrères l'aient oublié.")

Sputnik France does not publish a corrections policy, although the site occasionally publishes corrections. Nevertheless, because the site has not corrected multiple false stories, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not have effective corrections policies.

Apreleff said that the site has run corrections and, as noted above, he disagreed with NewsGuard's determination that the site has published false information.

The site includes a dedicated section for opinion. However, its news coverage frequently cherry-picks or distorts facts to advance an undisclosed pro-Russian political agenda.

For example, a May 2020 article published in the site's International section described the European Union as an "anti-democratic" organization, an opinion that mirrors Russian state views. "Will the coronavirus

incident show their true colours? As the European Union sinks into paralysis, its undemocratic - not to say oligarchic - nature emerges,” the article stated. (“L’épisode du coronavirus aura-t-il fini de faire tomber les masques? À mesure que l’Union européenne s’enfonce dans la paralysie, sa nature antidémocratique –pour ne pas dire oligarchique– apparaît.”).

At the same time, the site consistently publishes flattering stories about Putin, under news headlines such as “What qualities helped Putin succeed?” (“Quelles sont les qualités qui ont aidé Poutine à enregistrer ses succès?”); “Putin is a strong political figure’ for everyone ‘except a few fools,’ Czech President says” (“Poutine est ‘une figure politique forte’ pour tous ‘sauf quelques imbéciles’, déclare le Président tchèque”); and “Swiss journalist explains why Putin seduces his interlocutors” (“Un journaliste suisse explique pourquoi Poutine séduit ses interlocuteurs”).

Because Fr.SputnikNews.com uses news coverage to advance an undisclosed agenda, NewsGuard has concluded that the site does not handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

Apreleff did not respond to NewsGuard’s question about the site’s undisclosed agenda.

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#### Transparency

The About Us page of Fr.SputnikNews.com states that Sputnik “was registered by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media” and was created by the “Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency”. However, the site does not clearly indicate that Rossiya Segodnya is owned and funded by the Russian government, which does not meet NewsGuard’s standard for ownership disclosure.

The About Us page names the site’s editor-in-chief and provides Sputnik’s phone number and general email address. Readers can also use an online form to contact the site.

Articles generally include author names and link to profile pages that include the writer's photo and biography, sometimes along with social media links. The About Us page also links to an authors section, which lists the names of Sputnik France journalists, and frequent contributors and commentators, and which provides links to their individual profile page.

Some sponsored articles, which are provided by content-sharing company Taboola, are not clearly labelled. They appear on the site under headings such as "More to discover" ("A découvrir également"), which does not meet NewsGuard's standard for clearly labeling advertising.

Apreleff did not respond to NewsGuard's questions about the site's lack of disclosure regarding ownership and its labeling of sponsored content.

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## History

Rossiia Segodnya's predecessor, RIA Novosti, was founded in 1941 as the Soviet Information Bureau. Voice of Russia, the forerunner to Sputnik's radio programming arm, was founded in 1929 as Radio Moscow. While Rossiia Segodnya translates to "Russia Today," it is a separate entity from the Russian state-controlled television network RT (formerly known as Russia Today). However, Rossiia Segodnya and RT share an editor-in-chief.

Sputnik France launched in January 2015. It is named after the world's first satellite, launched by the Soviet Union in 1957. "I thought that's the only Russian word that has a positive connotation, and the whole world knows it," Margarita Simonyan, Sputnik's editor in chief, told The New York Times in 2017.

In January 2019, Facebook announced that the platform removed 364 Russian-linked Facebook pages and accounts for engaging in "coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook and Instagram." Although these pages primarily represented themselves as independent news or general interest pages, Facebook said they were linked to employees of Sputnik and "frequently posted about topics like anti-NATO sentiment, protest movements, and anti-corruption."

In June 2020, Facebook announced that it would start labelling media outlets that are partially or wholly under the editorial control of a state. This label was immediately applied to Sputnik, China's Xinhua News, and Iran's Press TV. "The concern for us is state media combines the agenda setting power of a media entity with the strategic backing of a state," Nathaniel Gleicher, head of security policy at Facebook, told CNN. "If you're reading coverage of a protest, it's really important you know who is writing that coverage and what motivation they have. The goal of this is to ensure the public will see and understand who is behind it."

In August 2020, Twitter also started labelling Sputnik and other media organizations affiliated with foreign governments. Twitter explained that the new label applies to "outlets where the state exercises control over editorial content through financial resources, direct or indirect political pressures, and/or control over production and distribution."

*Editor's Note: This Nutrition Label was last updated on Nov. 21, 2020, to include new comments from the site's editor-in-chief and to reflect NewsGuard's determination that Fr.SputnikNews.com now meets NewsGuard's standard for providing information about content creators. The criteria checklist was adjusted accordingly.*

Written by: [Sophia Tewa](#)

Edited by: [John Gregory](#), [Eric Efron](#), [Kendrick McDonald](#), [Chine Labbe](#)

Send feedback to NewsGuard: [Click Here](#)

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Ownership and  
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