

sputniknews.com

The website for Sputnik News, a news agency that does not reveal its ownership by the Russian government and publishes false information to advance Russian interests and disparage its rivals.

 **20 / 100**

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

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

Criteria are listed in order of importance. [Learn More.](#)

Ownership and Financing

Sputnik is a subsidiary of Rossiya Segodnya, a Russian state-owned international news agency. Rossiya Segodnya was set up by 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 an article reporting 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 Sputnik in November 2014.

The site runs advertisements.

Content

Russian state-owned television network RT described Sputnik as targeting “global audiences with its non-mainstream take on world events.” SputnikNews.com’s About Us page describes the site as “a modern news agency whose products include newsfeeds, websites, social networks, mobile apps, radio broadcasts and multimedia press centers.”

Sputnik maintains multiple international offices, produces original reporting with a global focus, and is available in over 30 languages. Site sections include World, Business, Opinion, Viral, and Multimedia. The site regularly runs stories and opinion articles defending Russian state interests and attacking those of its rivals.

Typical stories have run headlines including “Explosion Occurs at Federal Gas Pipeline in Russia's Orenburg Region, Local Government Says,” “Armenia Not Ruling Out Joint Arms Production With Russia,” and “Biden's CIA Director Pick Sees China as 'Biggest Geopolitical Test.'”

SputnikNews.com hosts an extensive amount of radio content, with shows such as “The Mother of All Talk Shows,” “The Critical Hour,” and “Shooting From the Lip.”

Credibility

Sputnik, along with Russian government-owned outlet RT (formerly Russia Today), has repeatedly disseminated propaganda and false information on behalf of the Russian government.

As tensions escalated over Russia’s buildup of troops on its border with Ukraine at the end of 2021 and in early 2022, Sputnik published numerous articles advancing government disinformation about the actions of the Kiev government.

For example. In February 2022, Sputnik published an article titled, “Putin Calls Ongoing Events in Donbass Genocide.” The article said tha according to Putin, “Kiev systematically violates human rights, including by legalising the discrimination of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine.” That statement was not challenged in the article.

In fact, there is no evidence supporting the claim that a genocide is taking place in Ukraine’s eastern region of Donbas, as often is claimed by Russian-state media.

Reports by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Amnesty International, and the International Criminal Court have found no evidence of genocide. A 2021 report from Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights blamed the authorities of the Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk republics for various abuses, including severe restrictions on the freedom of movement, forcing Russian citizenship, refusing expert access to detainees, and arbitrary arrests. At the same time, the UN reported three cases of arbitrary detainment and ill-treatment carried out by Ukraine’s SBU (secret service), and 13 such cases in the self-proclaimed republics, which the UN said were “usually” carried out by the ‘ministry of state security’ officers, known as MGB. No evidence of genocide was cited.

Another February 2022 article, titled “Russia: If NATO Refuses to Publicly Reject Ukraine as Member, Kiev Should Declare Itself Non-Aligned,” claimed that the Ukrainian government came to power as the result of a “West-backed coup.”

Yet, there is no evidence supporting the idea that the 2014 Maidan revolution in Ukraine that led to the ouster of then-president Viktor Yanukovich was a coup orchestrated by Western countries, as frequently said by Russian state-sponsored media.

In November 2013, thousands of Ukrainians flocked to Kyiv's Independence Square ("Maidan Nezalezhnosti") to protest then-President Victor Yanukovich's decision to suspend preparations for the signing of an association and free-trade agreement with the European Union, scheduled for the following week. Over the following months, the protests, often referred to as "Euromaidan" after the square where they took place, grew in size. Negotiations between the Ukrainian government and the pro-European Union opposition, mediated by the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Poland, led to an agreement signed on Feb. 21, 2014, giving more power to Ukraine's parliament and planning for a presidential election by the end of the year.

However, angry protesters demanded Yanukovich's immediate resignation, and hundreds of police officers guarding government buildings abandoned their posts. Yanukovich fled the same day the agreement was signed, and protesters took control of several government buildings the next day. The Ukrainian parliament then voted 328-0 to remove Yanukovich from office and scheduled early presidential elections the following May, the BBC reported.

These events — which contradict claims that the so-called "Maidan revolution" was in fact a Western-backed "coup" — were extensively covered by international media organizations with correspondents in Ukraine, including the BBC, the Associated Press, and The New York Times.

Sputnik could not be immediately reached for a comment on the above two articles.

In January 2017, the Swedish Institute of International Affairs accused Sputnik of running misleading reports in a deliberate bid to influence Swedish public opinion. In April 2017, then-French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron's campaign team banned Sputnik and RT from his campaign events, claiming the outlets had a "systematic desire to issue fake news and false information."

In November 2017, Alphabet chairman Eric Schmidt announced Google News would be "deranking" Sputnik and RT — making them appear lower down on search results — because, he said, they had

encouraged the “spread of misinformation — or worse.”

Many articles run on Sputnik feature original reporting, while others are attributed to other media sources, such as the BBC and The New York Times. However, the site does not disclose that Sputnik’s editorial agenda is to advance the Kremlin’s positions, instead noting that “Sputnik International’s predecessors are the state-run news agency RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia radio service, which were disbanded in 2013.” The About Us page states that Sputnik “covers global political and economic news targeting an international audience.”

Nevertheless, the outlet has repeatedly published dubiously sourced stories and false or misleading claims that make Russia’s rivals look bad and advance Russia’s perspective.

For example, in September 2021, the site published an article titled, “Moscow Blasts Britain’s Effort to Blame Russia for 2018 Poisonings as UK Charges Third Suspect.” Referring to the March 2018 poisoning of former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal, Sputnik reported that “On 4 March 2018, Sergei and Yulia Skripal were discovered unconscious on a park bench outside a Salisbury shopping centre. UK authorities suspected that they had been poisoned, and then-British Prime Minister Theresa May almost immediately blamed Moscow before any formal investigation began.”

This is false. As reported by TASS, itself a Russian state-owned news agency, May publicly accused Russia of the poisoning on March 12, 2018, in a speech made to Parliament. It is unclear what Sputnik meant when saying no “formal investigation” had begun. The BBC reported on the March 9, 2018, that “About 180 military personnel have been deployed to Salisbury to help in the investigation into the attempted murder.”

May also talked in her speech about what investigative steps had already been taken. For example, she said that the determination that the Russian government oversaw the poisoning was “based on the positive identification of this chemical agent by world-leading experts at [chemical laboratory] Porton Down; our knowledge that Russia has previously produced this agent and would still be capable of doing so; Russia’s record of conducting state-sponsored assassinations; and our assessment that Russia views some defectors as legitimate targets for assassinations.”

In August 2021, the site published an article titled, “As Pfizer’s Jab Efficacy Against Delta Variant Drops Below 50%, Russia’s Sputnik V Offers a Solution.” Reporting on the Russian Sputnik V COVID-

19 vaccine, SputnikNews.com stated that, “After new data showed that Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is losing its grip on the Delta variant, Russia’s jab manufacturers have suggested launching joint trials to tackle the problem.”

According to the site, the Mayo Clinic had published a study showing that “the effectiveness of Moderna [against the Delta variant of the COVID-19 virus] has dropped from 86 percent to 76 percent, and Pfizer’s effectiveness has fallen even more sharply – from 76 percent to 42 percent.” In contrast, Sputnik reported, “Russia’s Health Ministry has announced that Sputnik V is around 83 percent effective against the Delta variant,” and the Russian Direct Investment Fund which financed Sputnik V “has offered Pfizer the chance to start joint Sputnik V/Pfizer trials using one-shot Sputnik Light jab as a third booster jab.”

However, the comparisons between the different vaccines was misleading, because the article never defined what it meant when claiming a vaccine was “effective” against the Delta variant. For its part, the Mayo Clinic figures cited by Sputnik referred to “effectiveness against infection,” not against hospitalization or death. The study itself stated that, “Importantly, the effectiveness of [the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines] against COVID-19 associated hospitalization has remained more consistently high,” something not mentioned in Sputnik’s article.

The “83 percent effective” figure cited by SputnikNews.com in support of the Sputnik V vaccine’s efficacy against delta came from a study published in July in the scientific journal *Vaccines*. However, that study — unlike the Mayo study, which was not peer-reviewed — did not look at the real-world rates at which vaccinated people acquired infection. Instead, the Sputnik V trial looked at “Neutralizing Activity of Sera” from people who had been vaccinated with Sputnik V. The *Vaccines* study did indeed conclude that the decrease in the capacity to neutralize COVID-19 variants “in Sputnik V vaccinated sera is not as significant as for other vaccines described above,” but then immediately noted that “in order to make a final conclusion, it is necessary to conduct a direct comparative study.”

A Russian Direct Investment Fund press release, linked to by SputnikNews.com’s own article, stated that “Virus neutralizing activity assay is not directly related to effectiveness of a vaccine.”

SputnikNews.com has published numerous articles disputing Russia's involvement in the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. A January 2021 opinion article, "West's Navalny Hypocrisy a Gas," claimed that Navalny "spent most of his sojourn orchestrating a false-flag media operation making sensational claim after sensational claim of Russian government evil-doing." The article continued: "Not only that but he was assisted in his provocation by Western governments, intelligence and corporate media in spinning the story that he was poisoned with a chemical weapon. No evidence has ever been presented to verify such a claim."

In fact, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons stated in October 2020 that blood samples taken from Navalny showed a Novichok-type nerve agent had been used in the August 2020 attack — contrary to the story's claim that "no evidence has ever been presented to verify such a claim."

In December 2020, CNN and investigative journalism outlet Bellingcat reported that operatives from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) had followed Navalny on his trips since 2017. Bellingcat's report said that some of the operatives were "in the vicinity" of Navalny at the time of his poisoning. Navalny released a recording of a telephone call that he said indicated that a government operative had been sent to remove traces of the nerve agent from Navalny's clothes.

Because SputnikNews.com regularly publishes poorly sourced or debunked claims and does not disclose its ownership by Russia or its pro-Russia agenda, NewsGuard has determined that the site repeatedly publishes false content and does not gather and present information responsibly, and does not responsibly handle the difference between news and opinion.

Headlines often echo or outright express the view of the Russian government, as in the headlines cited above. However, the false claims are typically attributed as such, so in that sense, are technically accurate. Because of this, and because headlines generally match the content of the article, NewsGuard has determined that SputnikNews.com does not fail the standard for avoiding misleading headlines.

Although Sputnik does not articulate a corrections policy, the site issues corrections, which are noted in italics at the bottom of stories. However, as described above, the site regularly publishes falsehoods on topics of interest to the Russian government long after the contradictory facts on those topics have been clear. It has also failed to correct multiple false claims. NewsGuard emailed

Sputnik twice in July 2018, seeking comment on articles that promoted false or unsubstantiated information, but the articles remained online, unchanged as of September 2021.

For example, in June 2017, Sputnik ran a story in its Politics section headlined “Unresolved Murder: Why Seth Rich’s Case is Key to #TrumpRussia Investigation.” In the article, Sputnik treated as credible a commentator’s unfounded comments suggesting Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich was murdered for passing confidential DNC information to WikiLeaks. In addition to uncritically carrying the claim that “Rich's death could have been part of a massive conspiracy aimed at appointing Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton as successor to Barack Obama,” the website also used the theory to refute allegations that the Russian government meddled in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. The site wrote, “Back in August 2016, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange dropped a hint that Rich could have been behind the leak. If that is true, the Democrats' narrative that Russia had ‘meddled’ in the US 2016 presidential election will fall apart like a house of cards.”

Because Sputnik continues to publish false claims long after information debunk them has been publicized, and because the site has failed to take action on significantly false information that has been flagged to it, NewsGuard has determined that SputnikNews.com does not effectively publish corrections.

Sputnik News did not respond to two NewsGuard’s emails in 2018 inquiring about its editorial standards, including its publishing of false news and its mixing of news and opinion. Another email sent through the site’s general Contact form in September 2021, as well as two addressed to Nikolai Gorshkov, the head of Sputnik’s UK operation, also did not draw a response.

In August 2017, Politico ran an article titled “My Life at a Russian Propaganda Network” about former Sputnik White House correspondent Andrew Feinberg’s experience working for the outlet. Feinberg claimed in the article that his work for Sputnik was censored if it suggested anything negative about the Russian government, that he was fed questions for the White House by his editors, and that he was ultimately fired for refusing to “start asking about the Seth Rich case.” Sputnik responded that Feinberg was let go for “performance related issues.” Sputnik also pointed to tweets Feinberg made during his tenure at Sputnik defending the outlet’s reliability.

Transparency

The site does not disclose that it is owned and funded by the Russian government. Sputnik notes on its About page only that “The SPUTNIK online media outlet was registered by the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor) on November 17, 2014.” It further describes on its Privacy Policy page that it is controlled by “Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency” (Rossiya Segodnya), without clarifying that Rossiya Segodnya is owned by the Russian government.

The website names its editor-in-chief on its About page, along with contact information and a contact form for the site. Articles typically include the names of authors and link to a page with their biographical and contact information.

Although some paid content on the site is labeled as “sponsored,” many paid articles are not properly labeled. For example, during NewsGuard’s September 2021 review, a sidebar appearing on the right of articles on Sputnik was labeled at the top as “From Our Partners.” Only after scrolling through four of the paid articles did a small note appear disclosing that the content was “Sponsored by Taboola.” Moreover, it is unclear whether that note applied to the entire sidebar or just the content above, or perhaps below, the label. This does not meet NewsGuard’s standard for clearly labeling advertising.

Sputnik News did not respond to two NewsGuard emails in 2018 inquiring about its lack of disclosure about its ownership. Another email sent through the site’s general Contact form in September 2021, as well as two emails addressed to Nikolai Gorshkov, the head of Sputnik’s UK operation, also failed to draw a response.

History

Rossiya 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. Rossiya Segodnya, which translates to “Russia Today,” says it is a separate entity from the Russian state-controlled television network RT (formerly known as Russia Today), although Rossiya Segodnya and RT share an editor-in-chief.

In April 2021, Sputnik announced that it was closing its UK offices in London and Edinburgh. The Times newspaper reported that month that “One person familiar with the situation in the UK

indicated there had been concerns raised about the ‘increasingly hostile’ political environment in the UK” toward Russian media outlets.

Corrections: An earlier version of this Nutrition Label cited three examples of non-labeled opinion articles that in fact were labeled. NewsGuard apologizes for the error. However, because the site tailors its coverage to promote the interests of the Russian government without disclosing its agenda, the site continues to fail NewsGuard’s standard for handling the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

Also, an earlier version of this label had determined that because Sputnik regularly published corrections, it met NewsGuard’s standard for “effectively publishing corrections.” However, this determination overlooked the site’s failure to correct false information that had been flagged to it, as well as its tendency to continue publishing false claims on a topic long after a debunk had become public. In addition, the earlier label inaccurately stated that NewsGuard had sent two emails to Sputnik “in 2018 and 2019.” In fact, NewsGuard had emailed Sputnik twice in 2018, but not in 2019. NewsGuard apologizes for these errors.

Editor’s Note: This Nutrition Label was updated on Feb. 19, 2022. The label was previously updated on Sep. 29, 2021, on March 31, 2021, and in July 2019.

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