

RUSSIAN SOURCES TARGET THE U.S. PHARMACEUTICAL INDUSTRY IN ACCUSATIONS OF POLITICIZATION AND CORRUPTION

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alethea.com

SUMMARY

Alethea has identified instances of content targeting U.S.-based pharmaceutical companies.

During its [investigation](#) of a long-standing Russian state-backed information operation and ongoing monitoring of Russian state media, Alethea has identified instances of content targeting U.S.-based pharmaceutical companies—including Pfizer, Moderna, Merck, Gilead, Abbvie, and Emergent Biosolutions. This content alleged that the aforementioned companies were engaged in politicized or nefarious activity in concert with the U.S. government as part of a corruption scheme to enrich the industry.

Alethea identified videos posted by inauthentic accounts assessed with high confidence to be part of the campaign known as “Matryoshka” or “Operation Overload”. The campaign’s hallmark is shared multimedia content containing watermarks of news outlets, government agencies, or other institutions to lend credibility to their claims.

The videos targeting pharmaceutical companies were primarily shared on X, but also occasionally appeared on Telegram. The videos attempted to impersonate legitimate Western news outlets, such as the BBC, or government agencies, such as the FBI or CIA, that explicitly implicated various U.S.-based pharmaceutical companies in disparaging claims about their products, their leadership, or their ethics.

In addition to this content, Alethea regularly observes references to the U.S. pharmaceutical

industry in content shared by Russian state media claiming that the U.S. is developing bioweapons in Ukraine. While these allegations have long served as a means of denigrating the Ukrainian government and eroding American support for Ukraine, their impact may no longer be strictly geopolitical if they become the basis of investigations into the pharmaceutical industry.



Why it Matters

RISK OF GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT AND REGULATION

Two nominees for high-level political appointments for the incoming Trump administration—RFK Jr. and Tulsi Gabbard—have stated their intent to investigate or overhaul regulation of the U.S. pharmaceutical industry. If these nominees are confirmed, there is a higher likelihood of increased scrutiny of the pharmaceutical industry and potential for government regulatory action based on the alleged corruption narratives created and amplified by these actors.

REPUTATION AND BRAND THEFT

The content shared by this network attempted to exploit major pharmaceutical brands by spreading misleading narratives around alleged corruption and political associations or endorsements. As is commonly seen with Russian influence operations, individual brands are used to support the underlying anti-Western claims being made, and, in this case, as part of their broader influence efforts in the leadup to the 2024 US Presidential Election.

This type of brand theft can significantly impact a company's ability to effectively communicate and resonate with their customers, investors, workforce, and other important stakeholders. Russian-backed accounts consistently target corporations in an attempt to politicize their products, leadership, or stances on hot-button issues. These attacks can provoke significant online and offline reactions, ranging from reputation damage to threats of violence against employees.

As foreign state actors increasingly target private sector companies, the need for robust risk management plans and advanced threat detection capabilities has never been higher. Conducting proactive monitoring, anticipating threats, and intervening early to address disinformation campaigns and other forms of online risk are the only ways organizations can mitigate potential harm to corporate reputation, stakeholder trust, and business continuity.

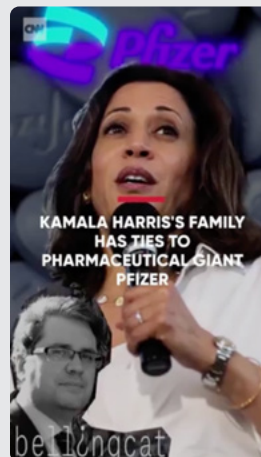
Content/Narrative Analysis

Below are examples of content shared by the covert Russian information operation assets on X. These posts consistently accused pharmaceutical companies of corrupt activities and politicization. In these examples, the videos contain watermarks for news outlet BBC and investigative journalism group Bellingcat, presumably to lend credibility to the claims stated within them. In general, this content received low engagement and was often amplified only by other network assets within the campaign, but these claims attract high engagement when posted by other actors elsewhere online.

PFIZER

The network alleged that Pfizer was able to evade legal action taken against the company due to a purported conflict of interest between Vice President Kamala Harris's family and the courts.

Alethea identified a video making false claims that the investigative group Bellingcat had uncovered significant financial ties between Kamala Harris's family and Pfizer. It alleged that past civil lawsuits against Pfizer were dismissed because of this relationship.



<https://x.com/Julianyjhongmai/status/1835702806419779596>



ABBVIE INC.

The network attempted to politicize a prescription drug produced by AbbVie, claiming that Vice President Kamala Harris's policies in support of the LGBTQIA community were driven by financial incentives.

Alethea identified a video making false claims that the Harris family has strong financial ties to AbbVie, thereby incentivizing them to push the company's puberty blocker drugs. The video also claims that AbbVie aggressively promotes its hormone therapy drug, Lupron Depot, for children as young as 8 years old.



<https://x.com/WeeklyCrunch/status/1843200534670680460>



EMERGENT BIOSOLUTIONS INC.

The network attempted to politicize the prescription drug Narcan produced by Emergent BioSolutions Inc., claiming that Doug Emhoff, Second Gentleman to Vice President Kamala Harris, promoted the company and drug for financial gain and that the drug lowered the barrier to drug addiction.

Alethea identified a video that falsely claimed that Doug Emhoff, Second Gentleman to Vice President Kamala Harris, acquired a stake in Emergent BioSolutions Inc. and promoted the interests of this company for financial gain. The video also falsely claims that Narcan, a “magic pill,” only lowers the barrier for drug addiction and in July of 2024 became the drug of choice for all U.S. high schoolers.

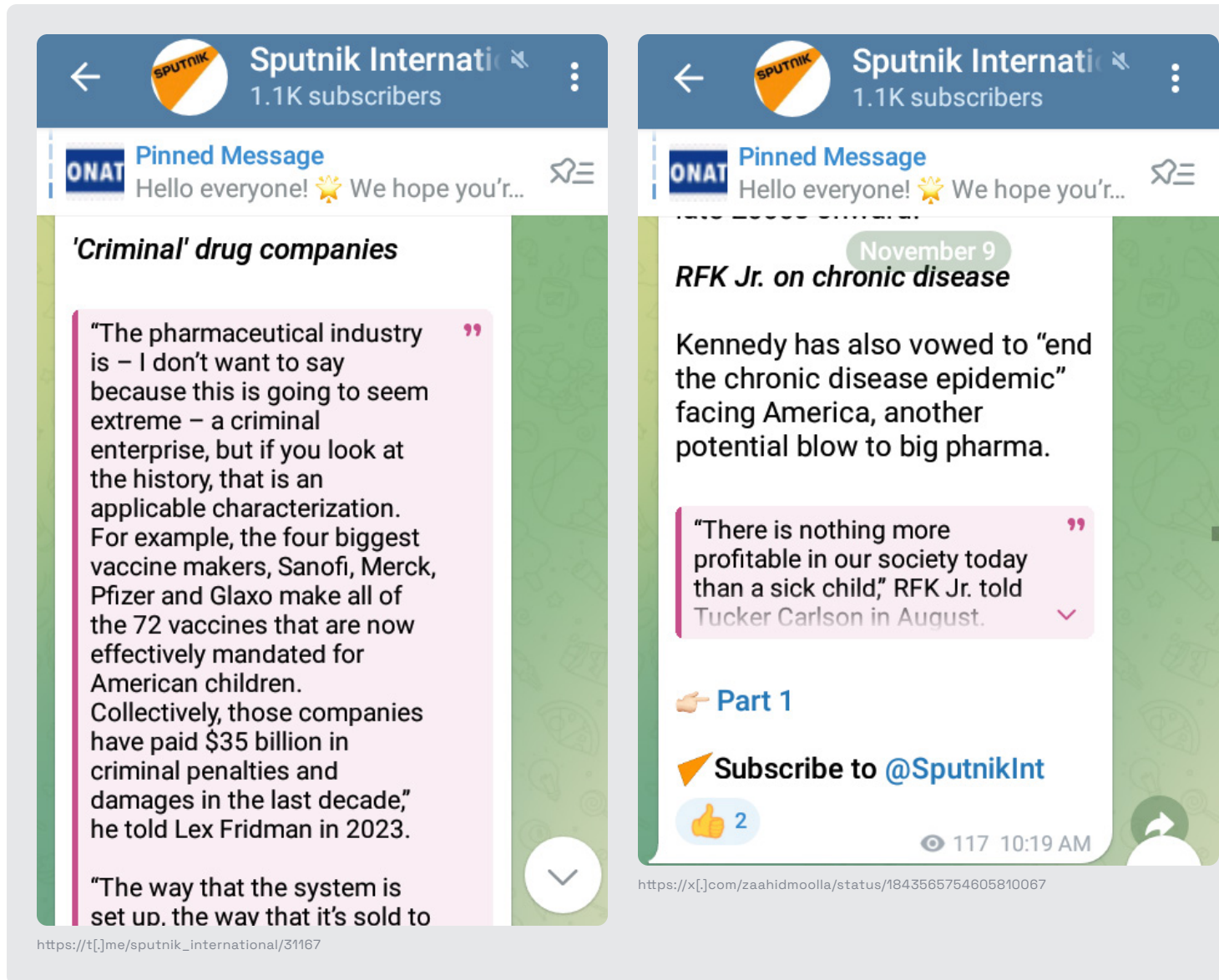


<https://x.com/zaahidmoolla/status/1843565754605810067>



In addition to the content posted by these covert Russian information operation assets, Alethea also identified content from overt Russian state media outlets, including RT and Sputnik. This content often directly tied current cabinet nominees for the incoming Trump administration to increased scrutiny of the pharmaceutical industry and potential investigation into claims about biolabs in Ukraine.

For example, Russian state news outlets Sputnik (@SputnikInt) shared posts on Telegram calling U.S.-based vaccine manufacturers Sanofi, Merck, Pfizer, and Glaxo a “criminal enterprise” and speculating that the confirmation of RFK Jr. would be a “blow” to the pharmaceutical industry. This content received, on average, low engagement on Telegram.



While content shared by Russia-backed sources often received low to moderate engagement on Telegram, similar claims, when shared by X influencers, attracted high engagement. For example, on November 10, 2024, Clandestine (@WarClandestine, 622.2K followers)—an X user known for sharing QAnon content and advancing claims about the so-called biolabs in Ukraine—[wrote](#) that “have all brought attention to [US bioweapons development in Ukraine]... [and] named... the Democrat party, along with all the other powerhouses in the Big Pharma network, to include Bill Gates, Rockefellers, Pfizer, Moderna, etc.” in the scheme. The post received at least 1.7M views, 10K reposts, 31K likes, 688 replies, and 6.8K bookmarks.

Background

Covert and overt Russian sources have repeatedly targeted the U.S. pharmaceutical industry in claims intended to portray the Ukrainian government as corrupt for over a decade. For years, Russian officials and state media have alleged that Ukraine is developing bioweapons with support from the U.S. government and pharmaceutical industry. The timeline below describes the origins and evolution of this content.

IN THE EARLY 2000S


the U.S. helped Ukraine dismantle its bioweapons programs through a joint program called [Cooperative Threat Reduction \(CTR\)](#).

IN THE EARLY TO MID-2010S

Russia began to circulate claims that Ukraine and the U.S. under the Obama Administration were collaborating to develop bioweapons in labs on Ukrainian territory. These claims first laid the groundwork for the information environment around Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and, later, they were used to justify the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Notably, until 2014, the U.S. maintained a cooperative program [with Russia](#) similar to CTR to repurpose Soviet-era bioweapons labs.

IN 2022

As the war began, the Kremlin made a concerted effort to mischaracterize the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program and alleged that the U.S. was using Ukrainian labs to develop biological weapons, [building on claims](#) made in the previous decade. Various U.S. pharmaceutical companies were implicated in the Kremlin-backed disinformation operation. The claims found fertile



Clandestine

@WarClandestine

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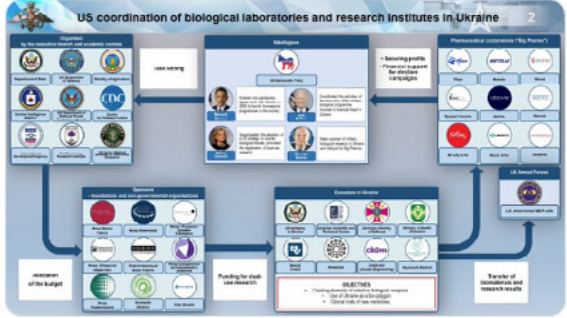
The timeline is happening ••

- Trump negotiates end to war in Ukraine.
- Putin demands investigation into US bioweapons development in Ukraine, and Trump surrogates RFK Jr., Elon, and Tulsi, have all brought attention to this.
- Deep State implicated in crimes against humanity.

Russia have been consistent in bringing forth this evidence to the UN over the last 2+ years, and they have been very clear about who they think are responsible for the production and release of biological weapons.

They named Obama, Biden, Clinton, and Soros, the Democrat party, along with all the other powerhouses in the Big Pharma network, to include Bill Gates, Rockefellers, Pfizer, Moderna, etc.

It's gonna happen. When Trump and Putin negotiate, this is going to be a stipulation for Putin to withdraw his troops. Putin wants justice for Covid too.



<https://x.com/WarClandestine/status/1855752251484021090/>

ground among some [domestic groups](#) within the U.S., who called for an investigation into activities in Ukraine.

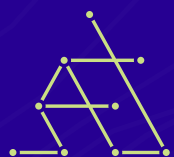
IN 2024

a Russian state-backed information operation created and shared videos on social media in the lead-up to the 2024 Presidential Election that deceptively accused the U.S.-based pharmaceutical companies of having corrupt ties to Democratic Party figures, including Vice President Kamala Harris and her spouse Doug Emhoff, and using these relationships to increase the sale of their drugs.

ALETHEA

We are a technology company helping the Fortune 500, private companies, and nonprofits protect themselves from harms stemming from disinformation.

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