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Will Russia's Belated Promotion of Sputnik V at Home Sway a Doubting Public?

The vaccine has met with a cool reception and muted promotion among skeptical Russians, despite international fanfare.

By Felix Light

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An early campaign poster featuring medics reads "Help Us Save Lives." **Felix Light / MT**

In early March, with Russia's domestic Covid-19 vaccination campaign stalling, prominent tech and publishing entrepreneur Ilya Krasilschik took to social media to urge his followers to get their coronavirus jabs.

"We are living through a national catastrophe," wrote Krasilschik in a widely publicized Facebook post.

"Go and get vaccinated."

Krasilschik is one of few Russian celebrities to publicly embrace the country's first-in-the-world coronavirus jab which — despite international fanfare — has met with a cool reception and muted promotion among vaccine-sceptical Russians.

Now, with a full-scale campaign to promote Sputnik V at home in the works, experts fear that a belated public relations offensive may not be enough to overcome deeply ingrained suspicion in one of few countries where Covid jabs are widely available.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia — where a three-month lockdown was lifted in summer 2020 — has been one of the countries least perturbed by the viral pandemic.

According to data from the independent Levada Center pollster, the number of Russians worried about contracting the virus has remained below 50%, with brief spikes in spring 2020 and during a second wave that hit Russia in the fall.

Russians' relaxed attitudes to the virus have been reflected in a skeptical view of vaccination.

Despite having produced the world's first coronavirus vaccine, Russia remains among the most vaccine-hesitant countries worldwide.

Since the beginning of a nationwide vaccination program in November, polls have consistently shown that only around 40% or less of Russians are prepared to have the vaccine, with scepticism attributed to a lack of trust in the authorities, cultural preferences for foreign medicine and Sputnik's own rapid development.

This reluctance has not, however, translated into a nationwide public health campaign that might persuade Russians to change their minds.

"There hasn't really been much of a PR campaign to promote vaccination," said Denis Volkov, deputy director at the Levada Center.

"That is reflected in the high levels of anti-vaccine sentiment."

In the early days of Sputnik V's roll-out, the jab's availability was advertised on the streets by posters of prominent Moscow doctors endorsing the vaccine.

For some marketing professionals, relying on medical workers to sell the jab wasn't enough to tackle the huge task facing the Russian authorities.

"Doctors talking in medical jargon aren't going to convince anyone to get vaccinated," said Alyona Avgust, a Moscow-based PR consultant and political analyst.

The result, according to Avgust, was weak vaccination uptake which — according to unofficial figures — has resulted in only around 1.4 million of Moscow's estimated 17 million inhabitants receiving a vaccine, despite the offer of free ice cream with vaccinations in central Moscow's upmarket GUM shopping mall.

"The public relations approach needed to be emotional, built around storytelling. But the state hasn't been able to do that," said Avgust.

Sputnik's muted roll-out at home jarred with the vaccine's high-profile successes abroad.

Overseas, Sputnik V proved to be a major soft power coup for Russia, with London public relations firm Hudson Sandler hired to promote the vaccine abroad and high-profile deliveries of first vaccine shipments to countries including Argentina and Mexico widely publicized by Russian media.

On social media, Sputnik V's promotional account on Twitter — a relatively little used social network in Russia — has over 270,000 followers on an active and aggressively promoted page. On VKontakte — Russia's homegrown Facebook equivalent and social media market leader — the first-in-the-world vaccine's verified page has only around 3,000 subscribers.

The understated public health push contrasted sharply with the previous summer, when a referendum on constitutional amendments that waived President Vladimir Putin's term limits until 2036 was given blanket coverage in state-aligned media.

At the time, the authorities bolstered a large-scale media operation in support of the constitutional changes through a parallel effort to pay social media influencers and bloggers to provide online support for the amendments.

According to industry figures, however, no similar effort to support the vaccination campaign is underway in Russia, even as public health bodies in countries from the United States to Indonesia enlist influencers in their own inoculation efforts.

"This year, nothing like that is happening," said Anna Davydova, an editor at YOUTUBER, a YouTube channel that covers Russia's blogosphere and documented the financial incentives offered to YouTubers willing to promote last year's constitutional amendments.

"It's not even being discussed."

The lack of a wide-ranging PR campaign in support of vaccination has left Sputnik dependent on the flagship state-controlled television channels, which air at least one segment daily on the easy availability of Covid-19 vaccines in Russia.

Though the state television channels are Russia's most influential media outlet, their audience is heavily skewed towards an older, pro-government demographic with little reach among younger urbanites.

This imbalance may have an impact on Russians' attitudes to vaccination. According to Denis Volkov, willingness to receive an anti-coronavirus jab is correlated with both age and political views, with younger, anti-Kremlin Russians least likely to receive a vaccine.

More recently, however, Russia's vaccine campaign has scaled up.

With the Russian government officially aiming to vaccinate 60% of the population by summer, billboards in Moscow featuring famous actors endorsing the vaccine, and messages on how to register for a jab playing in the capital's Metro, the new campaign represents a

major effort to speed up Russia's faltering public health push.

According to the Meduza news website, with Russia's vaccine production now able to meet domestic demand, the Kremlin is now planning an extensive PR push, with intensive TV advertising and a set of tailored viral videos advertising vaccination to various different demographic groups.

Even so, with most scientific estimates putting the vaccination threshold for herd immunity from Covid-19 at between 60% and 70%, some observers doubt the new PR push can convince enough Russians to receive a coronavirus jab.

In particular, limited enthusiasm for vaccination among the Russian elite poses a problem for those tasked with promoting the jab.

While other countries have sought to promote vaccination by publicizing high-profile politicians and celebrities receiving their own jabs, such efforts have been patchy in Russia.

Among the ruling Kremlin elite, only Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has publicly received the vaccine. Putin — by far the most trusted person in the country — had his jab behind closed doors, and without cameras.

Unlike in neighboring Ukraine — where a host of high-profile celebrities were vaccinated on live television to publicize the country's anti-coronavirus push — among Russia's homegrown stars, Sputnik uptake has likewise been scattershot.

Though a mixed bag of cultural and business leaders have announced that they have received Sputnik, they have not yet been enlisted into a broader public health offensive.

To the Levada Center's Volkov, the Russian elite's failure to rally around the vaccine represents a major missed opportunity for generating public enthusiasm for anti-Covid efforts.

"If they'd put Putin and [veteran popstar Alla] Pugacheva on TV, getting their vaccines in front of a camera, they could absolutely have shifted the numbers in favor of vaccination," said Volkov.

"But, for whatever reason, they didn't."

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