

# NZ anti-vaxxers fall for 'tsunami' of Russian disinformation

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## Extremism

***Russia's "firehose of falsehood" has hit New Zealand's conspiracy fringe, with pro-Putin disinformation now a mainstay of anti-vax forums, Marc Daalder reports***

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is one of the two dominant topics in New Zealand anti-vax forums, a disinformation expert says, and the discussion is uniformly pro-Putin.

Sanjana Hattotuwa, who monitors more than 100 Telegram channels and dozens of Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter accounts run by New Zealand's motley anti-vax movement on a daily basis for The Disinformation Project, told Newsroom the rapid emergence of Ukraine as a major narrative is like nothing he's seen before.

"All of the people who are part of [New Zealand's

misinformation community] are now proposing and promoting a very pro-Kremlin content frame. The second-greatest signature when the protest was on - which is quite extraordinary really, when you think about it - apart from what was happening in front of the Beehive, was Ukraine."

As the narrative around the protest becomes more fractured, Hattotuwa thinks the Ukraine discourse could become *the* dominant narrative on New Zealand's conspiracy fringe - or certainly the one that is most prevalent, given the "deluge" of posts relating to the conflict. Already, New Zealand's conspiracy theorists are almost unanimously supportive of the Russian invasion and are creating or spreading conspiracy theories about bioweapons facilities and pedophile cabals linked to Ukraine.

This is new for these communities, which The Disinformation Project has been following since the beginning of the Delta outbreak in August 2021. They had never before expressed any interest in foreign affairs and now it's the second-most discussed issue, even while anti-vax protesters were brawling with cops outside of Parliament.

"To be fair by them, we've never had a crisis that would have propelled that kind of attention from New Zealand. But we've never had, ever, a signature that is remotely akin to this kind of interest and emphasis and projection and also engagement with a very partial perspective around the

invasion of a country," Hattotuwa said.

"There are very clear signatures around Russian disinformation. There are now disinformation signatures that have been traditionally, academically associated with Russian disinfo, [which we are now seeing] here.

He's quick to clarify that there's no sign that New Zealand is being specifically targeted by Russian disinformation.

"There's nothing to suggest that New Zealand is exceptional. What we have studied is the evidence that RT News was very interested in promoting frames of the protest - and partial to the protest - before the invasion of Ukraine. That was, at the time, an unusual interest. It's up in the air as to why that was."

This coverage by one of Russia's state-owned outlets would have lent the protests some sense of legitimacy, at least among RT News' domestic and international audiences.

"RT News has distribution channels on Telegram, which are in the hundreds of thousands, and it has a global ecology that amplifies it to hundreds of thousands more," Hattotuwa said.

What's certain is that New Zealand is part of the broader community of Western democracies caught up in what [one prior report has described as Russia's "firehose of falsehood"](#).

"Russian propaganda is produced in incredibly large volumes and is broadcast or otherwise distributed via a large number of channels," that report, from 2016, found. It comes through social media as well as more traditional, state-owned media outlets like RT News or Sputnik.

This mirrors what Hattotuwa says he's seen in the New Zealand space.

"It's inundated with content that is partial to the Kremlin. It doesn't need to be coherent. Whatever sticks, sticks. It's just a tsunami, a deluge, everyday," he said.

"It's very quickly migrated from imported to locally produced [content]. The central thrust could be anti-vax, but at the end you find a very anti-Ukraine and pro-Putin statement. It's like, what's going on here?"

"There are new things happening and the effort seems to be to occupy attention and regain it. The attention on the landscape that we've studied has been gripped by a very partisan, statist, anti-Ukrainian, anti-Semitic, harmful, toxic and virulently violent commentary around that original content. The pro-Putin, pro-Kremlin content is indistinguishable from QAnon conspiratorial."

These intertwined disinformation and misinformation networks have also formed something of an ouroboros, with the Russian government now amplifying conspiracy theories from the QAnon and anti-vax fringe on its own official channels.

For example, a conspiracy theory which falsely posits Russia invaded Ukraine to take out US-run bioweapons labs developing the next pandemic pathogen [is being embraced by Russia](#). On Monday, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs tweeted that Russian forces had found evidence of a "military-biological programme" financed by the United States Department of Defense.

"That [conspiracy theory] came up in the United States and was imbricated with QAnon and the far-right. We are in uncharted terrain where now you have official sources from the Russian state saying the same thing that was debunked by fact-checkers as well and primarily produced by QAnon conspiratorialists out of the US," Hattotuwa said.

When asked by Newsroom, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern declined to comment on any specific disinformation on which she had been briefed.