



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

MAGA: Measles Are Great Again?



It's a sad commentary on the world when one of the surest ways to explain what's going on is a reference to the 2006 futuristic movie parody Idiocracy.

It depicts a USA on the brink of starvation because it waters its crops with an energy drink. How far off is that from the current US Health Secretary **recommending** vitamin A for measles?

It's an example of how partially valid information is being weaponised to feed into fake news, in this case promoting vaccine hesitancy and creating a false sense of security.

Yes, vitamin A can be important to help boost the immune system to fight measles but mostly in cases where there's a deficiency, which is less commonly seen in the US. It is certainly no cure.

Measles cases are **spiking** across the world, including in the Americas and Europe, the WHO, CDCs and the ECDC are reporting. This comes as vaccination coverage in the Global North, where measles had been eliminated in many regions, is falling below the required 95 per cent of the population that's needed for herd immunity.

An avalanche of measles cases

In the US this has led to more than 900 **cases** in the first three months of the year, with some 13 per cent needing to be hospitalised.

The majority of the cases are among those under the age of 19, by far, the most cases are located in Texas, and overwhelmingly, they occur among those not vaccinated, not wholly vaccinated or who don't know their vaccination status.

In Europe too, an avalanche of measles cases is being reported, well above what's been experienced in previous years. France, for example, has had some 400 cases of measles in the first three months of this year alone, as many as for the whole of 2024.

While Europe and the US might seem to be in the same boat in this case, the responses couldn't have been more different

And rather than a one-time blip, there seems to be a trend. The World Health Organisation and the European Centres for Disease Control recently published figures showing a tenfold increase in measles cases in Europe and an eleven-fold increase in the Americas in 2024 over the previous year.

While Europe and the US might seem to be in the same boat in this case, the responses couldn't have been more different. The EU has emphasised the need to raise vaccination coverage and combat misinformation that encourages vaccine hesitancy.

How to deter online misinformation?

On the occasion of the recent European Immunisation Week, Marianne Takki, the European Commission's acting head of the Unit for Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, fired a **warning** at large online platforms that don't prevent the spread of vaccine misinformation.

"The European Democracy Action Plan and the Code of Conduct on Disinformation set out measures to tackle disinformation which provide a strong framework for very large online platforms and search engines," she said.

Other Commission officials have said that the EU's Digital Services Act could be brought into play to deter online misinformation on vaccines.

Compare that to the US, where the Health Secretary, Robert F. Kennedy, has **ordered** the Centres for Disease Control to step up the search for new measles treatments.

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None have been forthcoming despite decades of research. All this while vaccines are 97 per cent effective in preventing the disease.

During the current outbreak, Kennedy has had to acknowledge the efficacy of vaccines, but he has also continued to repeat the long-debunked link between them and autism.

Recently he even said the highly effective MMR (measles, mumps, rubella) vaccines contain aborted foetus debris". And apart from vitamin A, he has mentioned several other treatments as if they'd be effective against measles, which is not, or only very partially, the case.

Malleable middle

The damage of such statements in undermining the case for vaccines can for now only be guessed at. But a recent KFF tracking [poll](#) in the US found that the percentage of the population that has been exposed to the false claim that measles vaccines are more damaging than the disease itself has grown by some 15 per cent in the past year.

More worryingly, over half the respondents were not sure whether false claims that the MMR vaccines have been proven to cause autism, that vitamin A can prevent measles infections, or that getting the measles vaccine is more dangerous than becoming infected with measles were entirely false.

The survey concluded that most people fall into the "malleable middle", where they're not saying it's definitely true or definitely false. Having a health secretary further undermine vaccines is something that could conceivably affect someone in that malleable middle.

There's more evidence that right-wing conspiracy thinking, also fanned on social media, converges with vaccine hesitance

Another phenomenon that the poll confirmed is that people on the right-wing of the political spectrum tend to be more distrustful of vaccines. Republicans credit false claims on measles and vaccines more readily than Democrats.

In Europe, the same phenomenon can be seen, and it was abundantly in evidence during the corona pandemic, when particularly the right-wing demonstrated against anti-COVID measures.

There's more evidence that right-wing conspiracy thinking, also fanned on social media, converges with vaccine hesitance. The country with the largest spike in measles cases in Europe is [Romania](#).

It alone accounted for 87 per cent of case notifications and most fatalities in the EU and EEA areas in 2024, according to the ECDC.

Tensions between the US and Europe

Given what we know about the surge of the far-right in Romanian politics and the role of social media platforms such as TikTok in their rise, the question of whether such phenomena are linked presents itself.

The candidate who came first in the first round of the country's presidential election, George Simion, and his AUR party, rose to prominence on the back of propagating conspiracy theories and anti-vax sentiment during the COVID pandemic.



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As noted, the European Commission looks at countering vaccine disinformation in the context of its Democratic Action Plan. “We are working with Member States and international organisations to address disinformation across various policy areas,” said the Commission’s Takki.

If the EU’s tougher approach towards vaccine misinformation and general disinformation on social media platforms translates into more measures or fines against large tech companies, this could further exacerbate tensions between the US and Europe. It will also be another area in which the two sides of the Atlantic diverge.

But even then, the question of how effective the European approach will be in countering vaccine misinformation remains. It is not as if a more robust European stance against the far-right and its propaganda has paid off, as we see not only in Romania but in countless other countries.

In the end, if people consciously choose to water their crops with energy drink, there’s apparently very little anybody can do to stop them.