

“Vaccine diplomacy” targeted at Eastern Partnership countries

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia and China openly targeted the six Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries with their “vaccine diplomacy”, while the EU and US engaged in less visible vaccine diplomacy. The Eastern Partnership members’ responses varied according to their geopolitical orientation. Ukraine and Georgia categorically refused Russia’s *Sputnik V* vaccine, while the other states accepted it; Belarus even started producing the vaccine on its territory. Another cleavage concerned the six states’ participation in the US, EU and UK-sponsored COVAX vaccine-sharing mechanism to assist developing countries: Belarus alone refused to join the scheme for political reasons. Against a backdrop of Russia-EU political tensions, Russia focused on a disinformation campaign discrediting Western vaccines within the EaP region, while China discreetly secured commercial deals with some EaP countries. China benefitted from delays in the roll-out of vaccines through the global COVAX program (which was intended to provide 20% of these countries’ demand) and certain EaP states’ unwillingness to use the *Sputnik V* vaccine. India, China’s competitor in the field of global “vaccine diplomacy”, especially in their shared neighborhood, has been so far practically absent from the EaP countries because of its limited political interests.

The EU and US multilateral approach: poor visibility

In respect of Covid-19 vaccines, the EU and the US for the most part let [their pharmaceutical companies sell their products to the highest bidder](#). As a result the EU, the world's largest producer of Covid-19 vaccines, [lagged in its own vaccination programs](#), falling behind [Israel, Bahrain, UK and US](#) among others. Instead of a proactive bilateral "vaccine diplomacy", the US, the EU and the UK privileged a multilateral and parity-based approach toward 125 developing countries. Trans-Atlantic cooperation intensified following the departure of Donald Trump.

The EU (and some individual member states) and the US have been the major contributors to the World Health Organization's (WHO) [COVAX vaccine-sharing mechanism](#) – [giving about 2.5 billion US dollars](#) each. As well as the UK, they were [joined by Japan, Canada, and Saudi Arabia in this initiative](#). None of these states publicized their contributions with the amounts nowhere to be seen even on the [COVAX official website](#). Neither Russia nor China contributed to the scheme.

In the six countries of the EaP, the EU and the WHO's Europe regional office started implementing [a three-year \(2021–2023\) 40 million euros project](#) that incorporated COVAX and the [EU's own vaccine-sharing mechanism](#).

As of end May 2021, all the EaP countries – except for Belarus which did not join COVAX after snubbing the WHO's social-distancing recommendations – [received some free doses via this mechanism](#). [Azerbaijan received 84,000 doses](#) of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is about a fifth of all doses that will be allocated. Georgia [received 43,000 doses of AstraZeneca](#), approximately one fourth of a promised delivery of AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines. [Moldova received about 88,000 doses](#), approximately one third of its allocated delivery of AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech. Ukraine received about [240,000 doses of Pfizer-BioNTech and 367,000 doses of AstraZeneca](#), which constitute one fifth of the promised total.

Some EU member states tried to develop their own vaccine diplomacies targeting EaP neighbors. For example, in February and March 2021 Romania dispatched [some free vaccines](#) to Moldova, the shipment being [coordinated by the EU](#) through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism. In May Lithuania [announced its donation of vaccines](#) to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, but none to the regime of Lukashenka in Belarus which it has severely criticized since August 2020.

Sputnik V and Russia’s great power aspirations in the Eastern Partnership region

Russia used its vaccine to “[redefine its role in the global system](#)” in times of uncertainty. [The first state to develop and license](#) a Covid-19 vaccine in August 2020 – the efficiency of which was only later [confirmed in the medical journal “The Lancet”](#) and is [still questioned by some scientists](#) – it gave its vaccine a name that says it all. *Sputnik V* is named after the first man-made satellite (the Soviet Union’s *Sputnik*) and underlines Moscow’s past technological achievements, despite the fact Russia [has not been a leading pharmaceutical power](#).

Russia has used vaccination to a far lesser extent for internal legitimization. Vaccine production [has been slow](#) due to limited industrial capacities and the government’s communication campaign did not help solve the problem of the low trust among Russians in *Sputnik V*, which is “[perceived as a state project](#)”. According to a February 2021 poll by Levada center, [62% of Russian citizens](#) said they are against getting vaccinated with *Sputnik V*. Therefore, one can talk about Russia using its vaccine mostly to secure its interests abroad and, to a certain extent, as an export commodity.

When it comes to the EaP countries, in April 2021 Russia provided some doses free of charge for the vaccination of doctors and vulnerable groups in [Moldova](#) and [Armenia](#). The arrival of these humanitarian aid cargoes was extensively covered in the pro-Kremlin media.

Belarus, pushed tighter into the Kremlin’s embrace following Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s repressions after its August 2020 election, sought to demonstrate its geopolitical loyalty to Russia. Belarus was the first country to start clinical trials of *Sputnik V* in September 2020, leading to its approval, and in April 2021 started part of the production on its territory (filling syringes with the vaccine). Indeed, contrary to their western counterparts, Russian and Chinese companies have been [more willing to provide license deals](#) for the manufacture of their products in other countries.

Belarus could potentially export some of its planned [production of 500,000 doses a month](#) and engage in its own “vaccine diplomacy”. Moreover, on May 7 [Alyaksandr Lukashenka declared](#) that Belarus has developed and is going to produce its own vaccine. But even Kremlin-sponsored media such as Sputnik

Moldova and Sputnik Ossetia emphasized that [Belarus has no previous experience in developing and producing](#) vaccines.

The trust in this vaccine will most likely be low among the Belarusian population. Indeed, even the Belarus-manufactured *Sputnik V* is less trusted among Belarusians than the Russian-produced version, according to a [March poll by SATIO and BEROc](#). Aside from the [high skepticism of Belarusians](#) toward vaccination¹, which is characteristic of the entire EaP bloc², this stems from the low legitimacy of the Belarusian authorities in light of the ongoing repressions and Minsk’s failed communication on Covid-19 (see our paper: “[The coronavirus outbreak in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine: Responses by the state, business and civil society](#)”). The Russian *Sputnik V* and the West’s Pfizer/BioNtech and Moderna vaccines were the most known and trusted by Belarusians.

As the popularity of Belarusian state media [decreased in 2020](#), propaganda [discrediting Western vaccines](#), often [echoing the Russian media](#), had little influence on Belarusians. The following illustrates the harmonization of disinformation narratives between Russia and Belarus. Beginning in August 2020, for instance, a common message was that the Moderna vaccine has been unjustifiably declared the best vaccine at the World Congress of Vaccines: Belarusian state TV [ONT](#) and the Kremlin-sponsored Sputnik offices (e.g. [Sputnik Moldova](#)) both made this claim.

Armenia, going through its own political crisis after the defeat in the Karabakh war against Azerbaijan in the fall of 2020, has been slow to respond to the “vaccine diplomacy” efforts of major states. Russia’s foreign minister [Sergei Lavrov reported at the beginning of May](#) on the talks between the two states to produce *Sputnik V* in Armenia and promised deliveries of up to a million jabs. Armenia, mind, did not put all its eggs into one basket and also obtained vaccines from China through COVAX.

Azerbaijan, alongside Belarus, Armenia and Moldova, approved the usage of *Sputnik V* on its territory. However, neither Moldova (with its new pro-EU president) nor Azerbaijan (with Russian peacekeeping troops deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh)

¹ According to a March poll by SATIO and BEROc, which found 36% of Belarusians supporting the obligatory vaccination of the population. Belarus lags behind the 15 countries covered by [Ipsos survey of January 2021](#).

² According to a February 2021 “Public Opinion Barometer” of the Republic of Moldova by the [Institute for Public Policy](#), only about 29% expressed readiness to get vaccinated should Moldova receive vaccines. According to a February 2021 poll by the National Democratic Institute of Georgia, only 35% would choose to receive a vaccine if given the option. According to a [March poll of the Rating Group Ukraine](#), 37% were favorable toward vaccination.

have held talks on its production. On February 9, the [Ministry of Health of Azerbaijan approved clinical tests](#) of the combined usage of the *Sputnik V* and *AstraZeneca* in a move that [sparked controversy](#) among the population. According to Russian [R-Pharm](#), Belarus also agreed to such trials although there was no confirmation of this in the Belarusian media or through official communication.

Pro-Kremlin disinformation discrediting Western vaccines in the EaP countries

As well as disinformation from anti-vaccines groups with no obvious political agenda, the EaP countries continued to be targeted by Russian disinformation during the third wave (see our paper: [Government communication and public resilience to propaganda during Covid-19 in Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine](#)). This disinformation discredited American and European vaccines, the management of vaccination programs in the EU and the US, and promoted the supremacy of *Sputnik V*. This trend was further enhanced amid the growing tensions between the West and Russia in light of the poisoning, then jailing, of Alexei Navalny, Josep Borrell’s controversial visit to Moscow in February 2021, and the [extension of EU sanctions](#). The EU’s European Medicine Agency has started a rolling [review of Sputnik V only in March 2021](#).

EUvsDisinfo distinguished the [main narratives on vaccine roll-outs](#) produced by pro-Kremlin media. The main one underlines the supremacy of *Sputnik V* to the detriment of Western vaccines. For instance, Sputnik Abkhazia claimed that [“Pfizer has practically no experience in developing vaccines, but is associated with some large scandals”](#), while stating that side-effects and deaths from this vaccine can be linked to the technology having previously only been used on animals. Sputnik Azerbaijan also published an article with an alarming headline: [“What is wrong with the Pfizer vaccine? The media learned of pressures applied to the EU regulator during its approval process”](#).

The EU, as previously, has been accused of being incapable of coordinating efforts by member-states. For example, Sputnik Azerbaijan published an article with the title [“The EU can’t cope with its vaccination administration”](#) claiming that Brussels left the EU member states in need and that vaccination programs outside the EU were progressing much more quickly. Sputnik Azerbaijan also tried to spark indignation among the citizens of Azerbaijan toward the European Commission’s proposed [Digital Green Certificate](#) by publishing an article with the suggestive title [“Azerbaijanis will no longer be able to go to Europe?”](#).

With debate raging within the EU about the side effects of the AstraZeneca vaccine, which has been used to vaccinate a [considerably higher number of people](#) in the world than *Sputnik V*, the Russian media extensively discredited it. Sputnik Moldova claimed that *Sputnik V* “[does not cause deaths unlike AstraZeneca](#)”.

Ukraine, often described as a failed state by Russian media, was criticized for banning the Russian vaccine. In Ukraine the trust in *Sputnik V* was the [lowest among all vaccines](#), unsurprising given that Russia and Ukraine are in a military conflict. The [Kremlin-controlled media largely quoted](#) a Ukrainian opposition deputy who said that Ukraine’s refusal of the Russian vaccine constituted “genocide”. The Kremlin-controlled media also [questioned the quality](#) of foreign vaccines purchased by Ukraine. However, the media influence of Russia in Ukraine somewhat diminished following the February 2021 [blocking of three TV channels friendly to Kremlin](#). The channels were also [blocked by YouTube in Ukraine in April 2021](#). The presence of a media watchdog community in Ukraine also diminished the effects of Russia’s disinformation.

Russia acts as a patron for breakaway statelets in the EaP countries (i.e. Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, and Transnistria). These statelets were very vulnerable to Russian disinformation during COVID-19: such disinformation discredited the parent state and [generated mistrust of democratic countries and processes](#). Sputnik Moldova, for instance, claimed that the Russian vaccine received as humanitarian aid is “[dearer](#)” to Transnistrian inhabitants than rival vaccines; the separatist region also received Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines. Sputnik Ossetia [claimed that *Sputnik V* has fewer side-effects than Pfizer](#).

China’s more discreet “vaccine diplomacy”

China also engaged in “vaccine diplomacy” in the EaP region, but did so in a more discreet manner. Its diplomacy was also accompanied by disinformation, according to [EUvsDiSiNFO report](#), but because of China’s limited media influence in these countries – contrary to Russia it does not broadcast or publish local language media – its scale and effects were more modest. Furthermore, China, as always, revealed few details about any deals it concluded with other states. Inside China, the authorities [discredited Western countries as “vaccine nationalists”](#).

Chinese “vaccine diplomacy” can be seen through the prism of the [Belt and Road initiative](#), launched in 2013, and aimed at forging influence in eastern Europe

and the south Caucasus. With the goal of later securing commercial deals and political influence, China made donations of vaccines to the majority of the EaP countries: [Belarus in February 2021](#); [Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova in April](#); and [Armenia in May](#). Later, Moldova ordered the Chinese SinoVac and the Chinese vaccine formed the [backbone of the vaccination program in Azerbaijan](#) as of March 2021.

India, the world's largest producer of medicines, has been an important competitor of China, [especially when it comes to "vaccine diplomacy" in their shared neighborhood](#) but also globally. However, India has not been very present in the EaP countries, selling its Covishield (the generic version of AstraZeneca) [to Ukraine](#) alone. The sale, in February 2021, was met with reluctance from the population according to a [March survey by the polling group Rating](#). Ukraine will also obtain this vaccine through the COVAX scheme but it expects delays in deliveries owing to a new wave of infections in India itself.

In some EaP countries public figures received vaccinations in line with their geopolitical preferences. In Moldova [two deputies](#) from the socialist party, members of the parliamentary group of friendship with China, publicly received Sinopharm shots while [President Maia Sandu opted for AstraZeneca](#). The Ukrainian opposition leader Victor [Medvedchuk received a Sputnik V shot](#) while on vacation in the annexed Crimea, while President [Volodymyr Zelensky received a Covishield jab](#).

Conclusion

The vaccine diplomacy that major states targeted at EaP countries varied widely. One could argue that the EU and the US did not develop "vaccine diplomacy" and focused on vaccinating their own populations first, before establishing a parity-based mechanism for vaccine distributions among poorer countries. The majority of the states in the EaP have so far (as of May 2021) received small quantities of vaccine through this mechanism (from a third to a fifth depending on the country), largely attributable to delays in production. There have been some attempts by EU member states such as Romania and Lithuania to develop "vaccine diplomacy" toward specific members of the EaP.

China proactively engaged in "vaccine diplomacy", making donations to most countries of the EaP and securing commercial deals with some of them. It had little media influence in these countries through which to spread disinformation. Russia has so far made more modest donations because of its limited production capacities, but it targeted the countries of the EaP with a large disinformation campaign discrediting Western vaccines (and the Indian one), and vaccination organization and speed in Western countries. This contributed to the traditional skepticism toward vaccination in the EaP making the populations more vulnerable to the virus and distrustful of their national authorities.

EaP countries responded very differently to "vaccine diplomacy". The cleavages were mainly along geopolitical lines: Georgia and Ukraine refused to buy the Russian vaccine; Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia were potentially willing to buy the Russian vaccine; and Belarus established production of *Sputnik V* on its territory.