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## Russia's and China's Vaccine Diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes the causes, implementation strategy, and results of vaccine diplomacy of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, the activities of China and Russia in Serbia, Hungary, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine are covered. The main directions, tools, and consequences of the activation of the two states in the region are outlined. The article underlines that China is expanding its strategic goals according to the One Belt One Road Initiative through the so-called Health Silk Road, providing a vaccine to low- and middle-income countries. The goals of the Russian Federation are established more in the geopoliti-

cal and political spheres. Russia seeks to reduce the influence of the EU and the US in the CEE region from political, economic, and security perspectives. China and Russia are both allies and competitors. The two countries are trying to gain additional leverage in the CEE region by means of political lobbying, investment, finance, propaganda, Euroscepticism, public opinion manipulation, and soft power. For some time, the shortage of medicine for vaccination, which was caused by giving priority to the population of vaccine-producing countries, contributed to a rather increased activity of the PRC and the Russian Federation in the implementation of the strategy of gaining image benefits.

**Keywords:** China, Russian Federation, Central and Eastern Europe, EU, Covid19, vaccine diplomacy.

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## Introduction

The term “vaccine diplomacy” was analyzed in publications by Peter J. Hotez in *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* in 2006 (Hotez, 2006) and on the *Foreign Policy* website in 2009 (Hotez, 2009). The latter defines it as “a multinational effort to eradicate a disease that could not only save lives but also prevent conflict” (Hotez, 2009). In an era of pandemics, vaccines are a means of preventing and alleviating the disease and a means of international cooperation. However, the current pandemic, which has been rapidly spreading worldwide and has required the fast development of vaccines for protection, has shown that vaccines can be a foreign policy tool. This tool can be used by individual countries not only to improve their own image but also to promote specific foreign policy interests.

Why can a vaccine be a tool to achieve this goal? The reason is that vaccination of a large part of a population can relieve tension in society, allow enterprises, small and medium businesses to work, continue tourism and educational exchanges, etc. In addition, the vaccine opens borders for vaccinated people (with the introduction of corresponding COVID passes or COVID passports). All these factors, in general, are supposed to contribute to the recovery of economies, both national and global. Therefore, those countries that have the scientific and technical capacity to invent, develop and manufacture vaccines have the opportunity to sell or distribute them as humanitarian aid (which should provide image bonuses).

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has divided the world countries into two categories: those capable of developing and producing their own vaccine and those devoid of this ability. International bodies have intensified their attempts to guarantee the vaccination of the population, such as the launch of the global COVAX platform. Moreover, this situation has given rise to a new term, “vaccine nationalism,” which is defined as the willingness of governments to ensure vaccination primarily of their citizens. It has caused problems in the political sphere of some countries, e.g., the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). Furthermore, in January 2021, there was an announcement of a new diplomatic mission by India, namely Vaccine Maitri (English: Vaccine Friendship).

## Theoretical Framework

Vaccine diplomacy belongs to the sphere of the soft power of a country, which tries to achieve its goal by using tools to create its positive image. The theoretical explanation of soft power was made by famous American researcher Joseph Nye Jr. back in the 1990s. Although various strategies of influencing public opinion were used in practice long before Joseph Nye, his ideas became an impetus for the theoretical understanding of these processes by other researchers. In a conversation with the Ukrainian Institute for International Politics, the scholar defined soft power as the ability to achieve one’s own goal not by coercion or rewards but by persuading others so that they want the same as you (Nye, 2011).

An integral part of soft power today is public (citizen) diplomacy. Compared to various vectors of public diplomacy, i.e., government or population, vaccine diplomacy, unlike most types of medical diplomacy (Lee, 2021), is clearly aimed at the public of the target country and can only be applied at the state level. One of its tasks may be to cooperate with this country’s governmental structures, which also need to improve their image in the eyes of the population. Given that this vaccine diplomacy is implemented on a governmental level, it can be considered part of state branding.

Unlike the EU and the US, China and Russia promote their vaccine at the government level, thus conducting vaccine diplomacy. They position themselves both as allies and competitors. In contrast, European and American pharmaceutical companies, whose goals and approaches were initially aimed at making a profit, have no geopolitical objectives and therefore do not use such diplomacy.

The sources analyzed in the article require the use of appropriate methodological tools. A systematic approach is used to study vaccine diplomacy through the prism of aspects that interact with each other in a single space; to identify the significance of different events; and to establish their relationship and interdependence. In addition, this method allows forming a holistic picture of vaccine diplomacy of China and Russia in Central and Eastern Europe. The application of analysis and synthesis contributed to the identification of the key aspects of the vaccine strategy and the challenges the countries face; the establishment

of components of the foreign policy decision-making process which take into account the personal attitudes of heads of states (V. Putin, Xi Jinping, A. Vuchich, etc.); and the identification of their influence on the formation of foreign policy. The paper analyzes the official documents of the European Council, the European Commission, the US Presidential Administration, the State Council Information Office of China (SCIO), and others. Statistics on vaccines and the number of vaccinated in CEE countries are analyzed, and reports from regional and international media, including the European Pravda, Ukrinform, Radio Liberty, Xinhua, Reuters, and others, are studied.

Russia and China were the first countries to announce the development and use of vaccines which bypass the required stages of research (CanSino's COVID-19, 2020; Sputnik V). It may testify to the strategic nature of vaccine diplomacy of these countries. Meanwhile, in Russia, the number of vaccinated population has been relatively insignificant.

The vaccine diplomacy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) primarily focuses on Southeast and East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Nevertheless, Chinese vaccines are distributed in the CEEC and other countries of the EU. Two of the PRC's vaccines were approved by the WHO: Sinopharm in May 2021 and Sinovac in June 2021. It enabled the worldwide emergency use of these vaccines and their inclusion in the international COVAX platform.

Having neglected all the testing phases and lacking the necessary ability to maintain vaccine production, Russia organizes extensive promotion of its own vaccine. With the help of Russian lobbyists among European political elites, the vaccine is promoted in the EU, provoking multiple scandals. However, no promotion of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine is conducted in the countries which have suffered from the aggression of the Russian Federation. Finally, by means of spreading the vaccine, Russia pursues its geopolitical goals, including destabilization in the region.

Moreover, the EU's late and unsatisfactory vaccine adoption and supply strategy have allowed Russia and China to win strategic time and gain more possibilities to deploy commercial, political, and diplomatic resources to pursue their interests during the pandemic. Therefore, criticizing the vaccine nationalism of Western countries, China and Russia provide vaccines for countries with a low and av-

erage level of economic development, including the EU countries.

Thus, Russian and Chinese promotion in the region also facilitates the EU's sometimes chaotic extension strategy to the Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. As a result, both countries are trying to gain additional leverage in the CEE region, using political lobbying, investment, finance, propaganda, Euroscepticism, manipulation of public opinion, and soft power.

### China's Vaccine Diplomacy

In June 2020, the Chinese government published a white paper entitled *Fighting COVID-19: China in Action* dedicated to dealing with the pandemic. According to the document, Beijing's primary goal is to develop a global health system that will bring benefit to all humanity and build a "society of common destiny" (Fighting COVID-19, 2020). Elizabeth Wishnick argues that Chinese leaders want the world community to associate their country with the Health Silk Road diplomacy and successful development of the vaccine, but not with the country where the virus appeared and spread (Wishnick, 2021).

Chinese President Xi Jinping stated at the 16th G-20 Summit in October 2021 that the PRC uses its vaccine as soft power, giving it for free to Chinese citizens and more than a hundred countries and international organizations (China provides, 2021). Such a strategy is essential for the PRC in the context of the international community's criticism of Chinese actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and general problems related to human rights and the PRC's economic advancement. Consequently, China's leadership uses all possible conventional and unconventional tools to improve the country's image and increase its presence in the regions, especially in the CEEC.

The main targets of China's vaccine diplomacy are the CEE countries. Primarily, these are Serbia, Hungary, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Moldova, Belarus, and Ukraine. Contrastingly, in the countries of the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, Beijing promotes its vaccine as free access to medicine combined with investment in roads, ports, and 5G network development, as well as renewable energy. In the CEE region, the vaccine

comes in tandem with the growth of China's cultural, scientific, educational, and economic presence.

Michael Leigh, an expert at the independent Bruegel think tank, marks that for the PRC, the supply of vaccines to Europe is a part of the Health Silk Road, a rhetorical continuation of the One Belt One Road Initiative, which is aimed at demonstrating the high level of Chinese medicine and commitment to global public welfare (Leigh, 2021). Moreover, it is a continuation of the original mask diplomacy, which the PRC has been actively promoting since the beginning of the pandemic.

The inclusion of Serbia in China's One Belt One Road Initiative, close ties with political leaders of the country, expansion of economic and investment interaction, cultural, academic, scientific, and educational cooperation (signing of interuniversity agreements in 2018) also facilitate the realization of the PRC's vaccine strategy in the CEEC. Serbia was the first country to receive the Sinopharm vaccine (about 1,5 million doses). Moreover, Serbia is one of the leading platforms of the Chinese presence in the region. It should be remembered that Serbia is the prominent lobbyist for Chinese interests in a 17+1 format, the forum founded by Beijing in 2012 to cooperate with the CEE countries, 12 of which are members of the EU (Standish, 2021). Furthermore, China is actively strengthening its ties with the educational and scientific environment of Serbia. The PRC is presently completing the construction of Europe's biggest Confucius Institute in Belgrade. Symbolically, the building of the Institute is located in the place of the embassy of China in Belgrade, which had been functioning before the beginning of the NATO bombing in 1999 (Leigh, 2021). Finally, another Confucius Institute is prearranged to open at the University of Novi Sad.

In March 2021, Alexander Vucic announced the conclusion of the deal on the production of the Sinopharm vaccine in Serbia, which will become the first European country to produce the medicine. Earlier, Serbia also announced the beginning of production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine, which is evidence of Belgrade's wider balancing of its foreign policy in the European region.

Strong ties between Beijing and Belgrade allow Serbia to function as an economic and political hub for China, whose purpose is to demonstrate the advantages of Chinese initiatives, i.e., from its presence in the

region to the active collaboration in the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Finally, it is through Serbia that the Chinese vaccine is supplied to Northern Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro.

However, no other EU country has such close contacts with China as Hungary, which is actively influenced by the PRC's soft power and vaccine diplomacy. Back in early 2021, against the EU standards, Budapest unilaterally approved the Sinopharm vaccine for emergency use and ordered 5 million doses. Thus, as of October 2021, 2,116,774 Hungarian citizens (out of 9,627,000) were vaccinated with the Sinopharm vaccine.

At the same time, the share of China's presence in the scientific and educational sphere of Hungary is increasing. In April 2021, a Strategic Agreement was signed between Hungary and the prestigious Fudan University (Shanghai), which provoked ambiguous assessments in both foreign and local press and led to mass protests in the Hungarian capital. The decision to build a campus in Budapest by 2024 using a \$1.5 billion loan from a Chinese bank has testified to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's close ties with Beijing and raised concerns about the long-term impact of such a project on higher education in Hungary. As a result, Brussels fears that Budapest's excessive rapprochement with Beijing could weaken Hungary's ties within the European Union.

Albania has also allowed the use of the Chinese Sinovac vaccine. According to Prime Minister Eddie Rama, Sinovac is to build a plant to produce various vaccines in Albania (V Albaniyi, 2021). Thus, China's vaccine diplomacy is quite successful, and it ranges from recognizing the quality of vaccines and supplying drugs to a wider range of countries to the construction of vaccine manufacturing plants on the territory of CEEC.

## Russia's Vaccine Diplomacy

Problems and delays in the supply of vaccines by European manufacturers have intensified the vaccine diplomacy of the Russian Federation. In September 2020, Russia announced its intention to use the vaccine as an element of soft power in international politics. Moreover, long before the approval of the first Western medicines, in his video speech during



the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Russia promised to provide the Russian vaccine to anyone and even to the UN staff for free (75-ya sessiya, 2020). Finally, Sputnik V is promoted abroad by the Russian Direct Investment Fund.

Back in early 2021, Sputnik V was ordered by more than 50 countries (as of August, more than 70 countries have approved the Russian vaccine); moreover, France and Germany have discussed the possibility of the joint production of the medicine with Russia. The latter began shipping Sputnik V vaccines to Serbia and Montenegro, while Croatia started negotiations with the Russian Federation on receiving the vaccine, without even waiting for the approval from EMA (European Medicines Agency).

The first CEE countries that received the Russian vaccine were Belarus, Serbia, Hungary, North Macedonia, Montenegro (all of them acquired the vaccine from Serbia), as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Moldova, and Albania. The political leaders of some countries started lobbying for the distribution of the Russian vaccine in their countries (e.g., A. Vucic, V. Orban, M. Zeman, I. Matovic, I. Dodon, etc.).

By simultaneously ordering Russian, Chinese, and European vaccines, Serbia tried to diversify its supply of medicines and provide them not only for its population but also for the neighboring countries where Serbian minorities live. In addition, on June 4, 2021, the production of the Russian coronavirus vaccine Sputnik V began in Serbia (Pavlyuk, 2021). Earlier, Minister of Innovation and Technological Development Nenad Popovic said that Serbia had received the preliminary approval for the production of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine inside the country and would start producing it on the basis of the Torlak Institute in Serbia.

Hungary was the first country to start the vaccination of its citizens with Sputnik V. Thus, as of October 2021, the number of people vaccinated with this medicine was 1,806,225 (out of 9 million 627 thousand).

Russia's promotion of vaccine diplomacy was ambiguously perceived in the recipient countries. For instance, the political crisis in Slovakia, which began in March 2021, was later significantly exacerbated by the uncoordinated purchase of the Russian vaccine by Prime Minister Igor Matovic. The crisis, which lasted

a month, ended with the resignation of Matovic, but it still left open the question of the use of the Russian vaccine obtained bypassing the EU (Panchenko, 2021). As of October 2021, 37,675 people (out of 5,463,000) were vaccinated with the Russian vaccine.

The neighboring Czech Republic also did not begin vaccination with Russian medicines. Back in February 2021, Czech President Milos Zeman made a personal request to Putin to provide Sputnik V. Russia first offered to sell 300,000 doses of the vaccine to the Czech Republic. However, the vaccine supplies were sharply opposed by the MPs and the opposition, who called it a weapon in Russia's hybrid warfare. As a result, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Foreign Affairs resigned. Furthermore, in April, a political and diplomatic scandal erupted between the two countries, during which 18 Russian secret service officers working under diplomatic cover were expelled, and the visit of Czech Deputy Prime Minister Jan Hamáček to Moscow was canceled (Chekhiya, 2021). As early as the end of April, the State Institute for Drug Control in the Czech Republic reviewed materials on the Russian vaccine against COVID-19 Sputnik V and stated that so far, they could not call the vaccine safe due to the lack of all necessary documents (Lutsenko, 2021).

Russia is failing its vaccine diplomacy. Despite the signed contracts for the medicine supply, Russia, unlike China, has not been able to establish full-scale production and comply with the terms of supply. In addition, there is a decrease in demand for the Russian vaccine, a suspension (e.g., Czech Republic, Slovakia), or a complete withdrawal from its use (e.g., Brazil, Guatemala).

The "needle diplomacy" of China and Russia was criticized by leading European and American politicians. In fact, in an open letter, Charles Michel, President of the European Council, accused Beijing and Moscow of using the vaccine in propaganda, disinformation, criticism of Western medicines, and an increase of their influence (A Word, 2021). President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, Commissioner for the Internal Market Thierry Breton, German Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas, White House representative Jennifer Psaki and others also joined the criticism (Press Briefing, 2021). High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell noted that these countries exercise vaccine diplomacy, and it is crucial

to be aware of this fact and act accordingly (Borrell Calls, 2021). Director-General of the WHO Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated that the countries which spread vaccines for diplomatic purposes are engaged in geopolitical maneuvering, not cooperation.

There were attempts to spread Sputnik V through pro-Russian forces in Ukraine as well, which led to the ban on the country registration of the Russian vaccine in February 2021. At the same time, the Russian Federation actively uses this vaccine in the occupied Ukrainian territories (Donbas and Crimea), which can be viewed as a part of information warfare rather than vaccine diplomacy.

### Obstacles to Realization Strategies of the Russian Federation and the PRC

The obstacles which prevent the full implementation of the strategies of the Russian Federation and the PRC are primarily posed by the prejudiced attitude of the CEEC's citizens to political, informational (propaganda), economic, cultural, and social models of Russia and China. Despite the mistakes of European politics, the level of perception of the EU and the prospect of membership remains positive (except for Serbia). Furthermore, the EU has managed to start producing, approving, and supplying European and American medicines to the CEE countries and has assured them of its full future support.

At the same time, Sino-Russian relations are not perfect either due to the competition for vaccine markets in Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, as well as mutual accusations of spreading the virus (China accused Russia of spreading the virus through frozen fish exported from the Far East) and slipping negotiations on joint production of vaccines.

### Conclusions

Consequently, Russia and China are trying to conduct active vaccine diplomacy, with the strategic goal of spreading their influence in different regions of the world, including the CEE countries. However, at least for the Russian Federation, this campaign has not been successful. Russia and China are both allies and competitors at the same time. The reasons for the intensi-

fication of the two countries in the region are, first of all, the late and unsatisfactory strategy of production, adoption, and supply of EU and US vaccines, as well as "vaccine nationalism" of Western countries, which allowed to deploy commercial, political and diplomatic resources quickly.

World recognition of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine and Sinovac vaccine and their distribution was much more successful, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The quick development of the vaccine, the lack of evidence, and other factors prevented the European Medicines Agency from recognizing the Russian Sputnik V vaccine. The countries that agreed to supply vaccines from Russia had slightly different reasons for turning to this partner and, as a result, different consequences. In democratic countries, the actions of government officials led to political losses (Slovakia), which contributed to the return or rejection of vaccines (Czech Republic). In countries whose political system tends towards authoritarianism, they have successfully used the opportunity to develop cooperation with Russia and China (Hungary). As approaches to vaccine distribution improve, some countries will abandon Chinese and Russian aid. At the same time, China has improved the development of the medical sector in the region by building medicine plants in the Balkans.

Thus, Chinese vaccine diplomacy in 2020–2021 was quite successful in contrast to Russian. Russia is considered to have lost its chance to use this soft power tool for at least a few years.

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