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THE VACCINE DIPLOMACY OF RUSSIA

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the novel coronavirus came with an unexpected turn in international relations, as the term ‘vaccine diplomacy’ became the hot topic of the discipline. The states developing vaccines took different approaches, the United States of America imposed export limitations, while China and the Russian Federation exported a significant amount of their vaccine supply. Russia did this despite not meeting domestic demand for vaccination. To analyse the puzzle, ‘why did Russia take this approach’, we study the case of not only Russia, but the United States and China as well to provide a context for the understanding of the Russian ‘vaccine diplomacy’. Despite the turmoil debates about the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in certain recipient states, the geopolitical incentives of these countries are rarely discussed. The second puzzle looked at in this paper is ‘what consequences Russia’s vaccine diplomacy had on the states at the demand end’ with an emphasis on the influence of Russia’s incentives. We argue that Russia’s diplomacy was motivated by competitive generosity, the will to increase soft power in the international community rather than health-related concerns. On the other hand, we argue that the demand end’s approaches were determined by the concept of issue hierarchy, where – as according to structural realism – the security of a state is perceived as a higher matter and overwrites health-related issues.

Keywords: Russia, COVID-19, vaccine diplomacy, Sputnik V, soft power

Table of Contents

1. 1

2. 3

3. 4

4. 6

4.1. 7

4.2. 7

5. 13

6. 19

BIBLIOGRAPHY

20

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the novel coronavirus came with an unexpected turn in international relations, as the term ‘vaccine diplomacy’ became the hot topic of the discipline. The vaccine developing states took different approaches, the United States of America imposed export limitations (Farell & Newman, 2021), while China and the Russian Federation distributed a high percentage of their vaccine supply (McCarthy, 2021). Russia did this despite not meeting domestic demand for vaccination (Holder, 2021). To analyse the puzzle, ‘why did Russia take this approach’, we study the case of not only Russia, but the United States and China as well to provide a context for the understanding of the Russian ‘vaccine diplomacy’.

Despite the turmoil debates about the Russian Sputnik V in certain recipient states, the geopolitical incentives of these countries are rarely discussed (Rohac, 2021). The second puzzle looked at in this paper is ‘what consequences Russia’s vaccine diplomacy had on the states at the demand end’ with an emphasis on the influence of Russia’s incentives.

We argue that Russia’s diplomacy was motivated by competitive generosity, the will to increase their soft power in the international community rather than prioritising health-related concerns. Russia used vaccine supplies to widen their influence during which the European Union was struggling to keep their commitment to free market and solidarity, while also acquiring enough jabs (Farell & Newman, 2021). On the other hand, we argue that the demand end’s approaches were determined by the concept of issue hierarchy, where – as according to structural realism – the security of a state is perceived as a higher matter and overwrites health-related issues. The perceived threats of the European countries from Russia are measured using data from opinion polls, supplemented by the analysis of foreign affairs events and government insights.

In December 2019, a new virus was reported in China. SARS-CoV-2, or COVID-19, as it is often referred to, has since become a global pandemic causing the death of approximately 5,5 million people as of the end of 2021 (worldometers.info, 2023).

Governments around the world imposed lockdowns and quarantines to slow down the spread of the coronavirus, however, these measures could only bring temporary solutions (with multiple disadvantages). The race for inventing a vaccine began, as it could lower the death rates and offer political-financial power to the suppliers. (newscientist.com, 2021)

In August 2020 Russian President, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia's health regulator body had approved the first COVID-19 vaccine in the world (followed by the German-American Comirnaty). Its name was Sputnik V, implying that just as the Soviet Union was the first to successfully use a satellite in space, Russia was the first to invent a coronavirus vaccine (Breen-Schiffing, 2021). First, there was an outcry in relation to the vaccine, as trials about safety and efficacy have not been finished and made public yet at the time. However, since then they have been completed, and the Lancet, one of the oldest medical academic journals stated that it has an outstanding 91.6% efficacy rate (Logunov et al., 2021, p. 671).

Vaccination has become somewhat of a political issue. China and Russia have shown that they are willing to neglect their own citizens and fall behind 'the West' in domestic vaccination in order to distribute vaccines all around the world, as it may come with advantages (Holder, 2021). In the long run, 'vaccine diplomacy' could bolster soft power (making these great powers more appealing) and strengthen bilateral relationships (Leigh, 2021). In the short run, there are also hard evidences on the advantages: Russia began talks with the Bolivian government about rare earth mineral mining rights and nuclear projects, just after delivering the first shipment of vaccines, while China generously supplied Laos, Cambodia and anyone who would back their territorial claims in the South China Sea (economist.com, 2021). Meanwhile the United Kingdom and the United States implemented policies to limit vaccine export (Farell-Newman, 2021).

This paper analyses the events from the time when the first news about COVID-19 came out to the end of 2021, as a result of the war that broke out between Russia and Ukraine a few months later.

After the Introduction, we present the theoretical framework of both the analysis of the supply and the demand side. In the following chapter the paper gives an analysis of the approaches of the European countries to Sputnik V, covering the concept of the Bratislava-based think tank, GLOBSEC about the categorization of the countries on the demand end (Milo, 2021). By using the terms 'Bear huggers', 'Bear feeders' and 'Bear sceptics', GLOBSEC grouped European countries based on their way of approaching the Russian 'vaccine diplomacy'. We end the paper with a conclusion of our arguments and analyses.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – SUPPLY SIDE

We turn to the analysis of the reasons behind the export-oriented vaccine diplomacy of Russia. Compared to the US, which as of May 2021 had only exported 1% of the vaccines produced by them, Russia had already exported 37% (McCarthy, 2021). Questions about whether this action was motivated by a public-health related empathy or rather geopolitical calculation arise. In this essay we argue that the reality is closer to the latter explanation and that Russia's vaccine diplomacy was designed in this fashion so that the state could gain more influence and increase their soft power in the international arena. In the context of the Sputnik V vaccine, we argue that the Russian government wanted to have more influence on the countries lying on the demand end and use vaccines as a tool of soft power. In conclusion, we argue that Russia was not influenced by public health related motivations in its vaccine diplomacy, but rather by non-health related, geopolitical ones. For this analysis we use the theoretical framework of soft power, competitive generosity and complex interdependence.

After in August 2020 Russian President, Vladimir Putin announced that Russia's health regulator body had approved the first COVID-19 vaccine and the vaccine rollout began, Russia started focusing on exporting their new good – mostly in countries struggling with the costs of vaccinating their population (Breen and Schiffing, 2021).

Distributing vaccines helped Russia to strengthen their soft power worldwide, but mainly in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Asia. The high percentage of exportation happened despite it resulting in Russia falling behind with domestic vaccinations.

Soft power – according to Joseph Nye, the originator of the concept – is “the ability to achieve objectives through attraction and persuasion” (2008, p.94) or in other words, to make others want what you want. In the diplomacy of this globalized world, soft power is an important tool, as it is cheaper than the ‘stick and carrots’ of coercion and payments, while it also offers less opportunity for tension and works without the active contribution of the power projector. It also comes handy for an economic and military big power to avoid balance-of-power alliances forming against it and persuade other countries of its goodwill. As Nye (2008) argues, the main pillars of soft power are political values, culture, and foreign policy. The US has been, in the past approximately 80 years, and still is unbeatable in this field of foreign policy. There are an ‘infinite’ number of channels nowadays which can transmit culture, values and policy.

However, the arguments saying that the majority of pop culture is being produced in the US, democracy is still the most desirable regime type, American firms are supplying the world with

the most popular products while the United States is the main provider of development aid can be questioned (Nye, 2005). China, in the image of a rising challenger and Russia, a fading ex-great power trying to break down the hegemony of the US, could not resist when the opportunity of distributing vaccinations arose.

For these reasons, Russia is seeking to invest in their soft power, for example with sportswashing, hosting popular sport events like football world cup or the Olympics. And more recently, with COVID-19 vaccines. “Few areas of diplomatic goodwill connect more with the humanitarian nature of international citizenship than medical assistance” (Bier and Arceneaux, 2020, para. 9), and Moscow knows this. The protectionist vaccine nationalism of the West left behind a huge area of soft power vacuum, in countries familiar with Russia, and with China: Asia, Africa, Latin America.

Nevertheless, the question, how can it be known that these were not the results of humanitarian selflessness? First of all, it broke the before-COVID definition of ‘vaccine diplomacy’. As conceptualised by Peter Hotez in 2014, ‘vaccine diplomacy’ means aspects of global health diplomacy relying on the use or delivery of vaccines and includes the importance of the joint work of several international actors. These can be states, multistakeholders and even informal actors, i.e., companies, NGOs, and civil society (Hotez, 2010). The approach chosen by Russia was different however. Therefore, the term that should rather be used here for the case of Russia is ‘vaccine nationalism’ (Hotez, 2010). The concept has been described by the Director General of WHO, Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus as an approach putting the interests of one’s country before all others’ (Bollyky et al., 2020).

To conclude, the Russian vaccine policy was fuelled by geopolitical and not public health related motivations. The attitude of the European countries on the ‘receiving end’ was influenced by the geopolitical incentives of the ‘sending side’.

3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND – DEMAND SIDE

On March 11, 2020, the COVID-19 disease, caused by the rapid international spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was officially declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). In March COVID-19 cases were present in nearly every single country in the world. (Singh et al., 2021)

As the outbreak developed into a pandemic, and COVID-19 became a health crisis, the development of several vaccines began, with the Sputnik V being one of the firsts. Despite the

high numbers of infected and hospitalized citizens, several European states approached the then newly invented Sputnik V vaccine with caution, keeping in mind the perceived threat to their national security from Russia. Other states, which do not consider Russia a security threat, did seek out the opportunities to import Sputnik V vaccines. To examine the reasons behind the different approaches of certain countries, the framework of neorealism or structural realism is applied with an emphasis on the notion of the hierarchy of issues, which can serve as an explanation to why several states could not overlook their relationship lacking trust with Russia when it comes to the importation of the Sputnik V vaccines.

The term ‘issue hierarchy’ was coined by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye in *Power and Interdependence* (2012), their critique of the theory of political realism. As this term manages to grasp the key notion of this phenomenon, it is used in this essay to refer to the assumptions of realist scholars about how international politics works.

The neorealist or structural realist lineage of the broader International Relations theory of realism suggests that competition and conflict among states have their roots in the conditions of anarchy (Waltz, 1988). Neorealist scholars, Kenneth Waltz (1988, 1979) and John J. Mearsheimer (2001) attribute this struggle for power not to human nature, as classical realists did, but rather the lack of a central authority with the monopoly of legitimate force is the root. As they both argued, anarchy leads to a logic of self-help. States turn towards self-help practices in order to protect their security threatened by the characteristics of the anarchic system. This constant state of preparation for conflicts and the defence of security affects the relations of the states.

The critiques, Keohane and Nye give a very similar description of the deterministic structure of the international arena. They argue that international politics is seen as a struggle for power in an anarchic system, which lacks an overarching authority able to regulate the actors and monopolize violence. There are certain assumptions, which are integral to realists. Seeing states as the units of analysis and the dominant actors in world politics is one of them. Others are the effectivity of the use of force as a tool of influencing policy, and finally, the assumption of the hierarchy of issues. These notions are all interconnected and constitute a certain type of imagined world, created from the realist viewpoint. In this world, states are ultimately doomed to follow self-help principles in order to ensure their security and protect themselves from objective or subjective threats, which is evidently the end goal of all actors. Cooperation amongst states is possible, however only for the time it serves the interests of the powerful states. (Keohane, Nye, 2012)

As Waltz (1988) argues, the structure leads states to maximize their relative power positions. Measures enhancing the security of one actor, diminishes the other's. A state gathering instruments of war is seen by others as a threat – even when that state is doing it for the strengthening of its own security. The maximization of one's security threatens other states, leading to a constant spiral of security dilemma (Booth, Wheeler, 2008). This security dilemma is to be understood as a spiral, where the reaction of others will reassure the first state that its initial assumptions were correct, and it was right to decide to maximize its security (Waltz, 1988).

Security for realist scholars, foreign policy advisors and statesmen means a system defined by a strong hierarchy, where certain issues are ranked more important than others. This importance or priority refers to the ability of the issues shaping the behaviour and actions of states in the international system. (Keohane, Nye, 2012)

As a matter of course, there are several crucial problems, such as global climate change, migration or energy crisis, requiring the attention and possibly the cooperation of the international arena. However, what dominated the agenda for neorealists is the survival or military security of a state (Mearsheimer, 2001). Keohane and Nye (2012) describe these matters as more salient or critical than others, therefore these are issues of 'high politics', noting that this categorization can affect the way states prioritize their foreign policy goals and the strategies they use to pursue them. All other matters of world politics, such as economic and social affairs are seen to be dominated by the questions of security, as argued by Keohane and Nye.

Therefore, even after COVID-19 was officially declared a pandemic, and referred to as a health crisis, the national security concerns of several European states remained at the top of the hierarchy of issues. Understanding issue hierarchy is crucial for analysing international politics and predicting the behaviour of states and other actors in response to different issues and events.

4. ANALYSIS – SUPPLY SIDE

In answering the question, 'Why did Russia export a significant amount of their vaccine supply', despite not meeting domestic demand for vaccination, we study the case of the United States and China to provide a context for the understanding of the Russian 'vaccine diplomacy' as well as to give a comparative framework to the paper.

4.1. THE CASE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

As of May 2021, the US had only exported 3 million doses of the vaccines produced by them, which amounts to 1% of their vaccine supply. Compared to this at that time, the Russian vaccine export was already at 37%. Besides Russia, others shared their vaccine stock as well. The European Union exported 28%, India 35%, while China – with the highest percentage – exported 42% of its domestically produced vaccine supply. However, the United States, similarly to the United Kingdom, approached the issue differently, and was not focused on sharing their vaccines at that time. Rather, the centre of attention for the US was to meet the domestic demand, while importing vaccines from the EU. This led to a smooth vaccination campaign in the United States, after which it could begin to increase its vaccine exports at a time when it already had vaccinated a large percentage of American citizens. (McCarthy, 2021)

Farell and Newmann (2021) argue that the example of the United States was a case of wealthy democratic governments pushing “liberal market principles aside in favour of aggressive restrictions aimed at meeting new internal political demands” with access to vaccines and national security matters at stake. The policies implemented to restrain vaccine export in the US as well as in the UK fit into this picture. They have confidential, expensive contracts with developers to prioritize their demand, while the US even used the Defense Production Act to force companies to favour domestic needs (Farell & Newman, 2021).

This new type of ‘protectionism’ practiced by London and Washington is in line with the change in the political climate induced by the pandemic. Citizens hold state leaders responsible for their actions, miscalculations and failures as in the end, their lives are what depend on these decisions. Therefore, politicians now have to oversee complex processes of acquiring vaccines and meet the needs and wants of their citizens. If the democratic leaders of the United States want to be re-elected, they cannot neglect the opinions of the American people and have to fulfil domestic demand. (Farell & Newman, 2021)

4.2. THE CASE OF CHINA – A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Compared to the United States, China, as of May 2021, exported 42% of their vaccine stock (McCarthy, 2021). This approach of exporting a high percentage of their supply rather than focusing on domestic vaccination as the US did, is very similar to the one seen in Russia. As stated by Farell and Newman (2021), “China and Russia went in a different but equally assertive direction—using vaccines as a tool of international influence.”

In this section we illustrate how China as an autocracy with a lack of soft power influence saw an opportunity in the COVID-19 crisis to strengthen its power and impact on international politics. We argue that both China and Russia (as it is presented in the next section) used their vaccine supply as tools for increasing soft power.

Leigh (2021) argues that ‘vaccine diplomacy’ can bolster soft power, making great powers using this method more appealing and leading to strengthened relationships with other states who are parts of the market relating vaccines. However, the field has become politicised as both China and Russia started exporting their supplies in high percentages compared to e.g. the United States or the United Kingdom, while neglecting their own citizens (Holder, 2021).

As opposed to the leaders of democratic states, the heads of autocratic ones do not have the same responsibility of following the opinion of their country’s population but rather can follow through with their own political agenda. In connection with the case of COVID-19 it can be said that these autocratic states are more willing to use vaccines as a ‘tool of influence’ than democratic ones. China has exported its vaccine, Sinovac to several countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. (Farell & Newman, 2021)

The goal of seeking out the advantages of distributing vaccines all around the world fits into China’s foreign affairs, as it started delivering supplies to Laos, Cambodia and anyone who would back their territorial claims in the South China Sea (economist.com, 2021).

China and Russia often underperform in country brand opinion polls. According to Nye (2008), China’s soft power is limited by its aggressive nationalism and expansionism, and they are also wrong in thinking that the state can suppress the civic society and be the only producer of soft power. These characteristics are also true for Russia.

4.3. THE STRATEGY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

Why had the Russian Federation, like China, turn to a different approach from the United States and the European Union regarding the distribution of home-produced vaccines? We argue that Russia had the foreign policy goal of expanding its sphere of influence by strengthening its soft power, courting favors from developing countries and posing as the humanitarian savior in regions where it competes with western influence. The following section explains why do we think that Russia was led more by these motivations and less by aspiring to provide medical help to those in need.

As discussed in the theoretical section, soft power - according to Joseph Nye, the originator of the concept – is “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2008, pp. 94) or in other words, to “make others want what you want” (Nye, 1990, pp. 167). Nye (1990) says that the main pillars of soft power are political values, culture and foreign policy. In today's highly globalized world, health diplomacy has a growing importance in strengthening soft power. According to Joseph Nye, China's soft power is limited by its aggressive nationalism and expansionism, and they are also wrong in thinking that the state can suppress the civic society and be the only producer of soft power (Nye, 2015). We think it is safe to say that these characteristics are also true about Russia based on its breaking of international laws by attacking sovereign countries (Ukraine, Georgia), supporting separatist regions in these countries, while Russian hybrid warfare – by cyber-attacks, propaganda and interventions in foreign democratic elections – is also a highly publicized phenomenon. Civil liberty is also extremely limited in the country. Thanks to these reasons (and others) Russia (and China) often underperform in country brand opinion polls (softpower30.com, s.a.; BrandFinance, 2021), so exploiting the possibility of health diplomacy during the coronavirus pandemic was a logical choice. Moscow knew that “Few areas of diplomatic goodwill connect more with the humanitarian nature of international citizenship than medical assistance” (Bier and Arceneaux 2020, para. 9).

Fazal's (2020, p. 78) definition of health diplomacy is “international aid or cooperation meant to promote health or that uses health programming to promote non-health-related foreign aims”. Health diplomacy is transnational in its nature as it “relates to health issues and determinants that go beyond country boundaries limitations, are international in nature, and need global consensus to address them” (Fazal, 2020, p. 78). Health diplomacy, to which soft power literature attributed less significance compared to other tools such as popculture or ideology (democracy, liberal capitalism) promotion policies, became one of the center topics of soft power analysis with the COVID-19 pandemic, and it is likely to remain highly relevant in the medium to long terms as well (Giusti – Ambrosetti, 2022). The European Commission for example publicly recognized the importance of science and technology (which is a broader umbrella concept including health) as an “effective soft power tool (...) to support external policy objectives for peace, security, humanitarian aid, and social and economic development” (European Commission 2016, p. 76).

Almost every step of Russia's approach to its vaccine diplomacy shows that it also had other political aspirations than solving the global pandemic. First of all, it broke the before-COVID

definition of vaccine diplomacy: they developed the vaccine without any international cooperation, they give it to countries in bilateral deals, ignoring international institutions like COVAX (Kiernan et al., 2021). The Sputnik V was developed by the state owned Gamaleya Institute (Giusti – Ambrosetti, 2022). The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), the country's sovereign wealth fund, financed Sputnik V and looked after its international sale negotiations (Giusti – Ambrosetti, 2022). Vaccine development (starting with the smallpox epidemics in the 19th century) had been the subject of cooperation, even in the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union joined forces to develop vaccines (Hotez, 2014). Russia, by keeping itself aloof from international cooperation (with countries, enterprises, NGO-s and supranational institutions), treated vaccine development as a zero sum great power game and by only distributing it through bilateral deals it also risked lowering the efficiency (and fairness) of vaccine availability. Russia's objective, we argue, was to acquire the fame of the first vaccine developer – thus show the technological strength of the country, and to distribute the vaccine according to its foreign policy (mostly – but not only – soft power) aims. These aims are discussed in later paragraphs.

The rush to win the “vaccine race” was also showed by the unorthodox approval of the Sputnik V. The developers of Sputnik V (Moscow's Gamaleya Institute) had been reluctant to share scientific data with international regulators and researchers for unknown reasons (Stronski, 2021). The Russian vaccine had been approved and marketed even before broad-based Stage III trials were completed, to which the only reason could be to make sure the country is the first in developing a marketable vaccine (Stronski, 2021). They even sent millions of vaccines countries globally, without review of a “stringent regulatory authority” (defined by the WHO), which is unfortunate as many low- and middle-income countries often lack adequate pharmacovigilance mechanisms (Straus – Rubin, 2022). Therefore, Russia risked the safety of recipients of the Sputnik V, in order to pose as the scientific powerhouse that is able to develop a COVID-19 vaccine before western (and Asian) counterparts, or in other words, Russia had prioritized its soft power ambitions over safety and reliability.

The rollout of Sputnik V also showed how Russia pursued foreign policy goals with its vaccine. The main targets were its immediate sphere of influence (Center Asia), region where Russia and Europe competes (Eastern Europe and the Balkans) and the USA's sphere of influence on Latin America (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). In some cases, Moscow did not even hide its intention to reach foreign policy goals by vaccine diplomacy: Russia provided Sputnik V for Israel to use it in a prisoner exchange deal with Syria (Bergman et al, 2021), while, shortly

after delivering vaccines, it began talks with Bolivia about rare-earth mineral mining and nuclear projects.

Russia did not send vaccines in equal numbers to all emerging countries. Some, such as Brazil, Chile, Indonesia and Mexico, will get millions of doses., while others, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, could only get a few thousand vaccines (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). This way Russia strengthened ties with South American countries, which are known to be closer to the United States. In this way, their vaccine diplomacy also highlights the differences regarding the American protectionist policies. Russia also targeted countries where it could compete with the European Union, and where the initially slow start of EU's vaccine distribution heightened tensions (Eastern European member states) and where western vaccines were less available (Balkan countries) (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). Russia's push received warm welcome in some countries (Hungary, Serbia), however it ignited a government crisis in others (Czech Republic, Slovakia). To divide the east and the west of the EU, Russian propaganda (pro-Kremlin media) also targeted the European Medicines Agency (EMA) multiple times and accused it for deliberately delaying the review and registration of Sputnik V because of political bias and russophobia (Giusti – Ambrosetti, 2022 cites EUvsDisinfo 2021).

Apart from dealing with sovereign countries, Moscow also used its vaccine distribution strategy to validate its expansionist politics. Most of the territories contested by Russia and other countries received the vaccine. The Russian Government confirmed that Donetsk and Luhansk, Ukrainian territories controlled by Russian separatist forces at the time, received shipment of the Russian jab, while the annexed Crimean Peninsula also relied on Sptunik V vaccinations. The two breakaway territories of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia also started inoculation with the Russian vaccine. (Gusti - Ambrosetti, 2022)

Russia also made sure to strengthen ties with what it considers “near abroad”. Belarus has been the second country to register Sputnik V, after being the first foreign country to participate in Russia's vaccine trials (Giusti – Ambrosetti, 2022). It also started to produce the vaccine, after a deal with the RDIF (Giusti – Ambrosetti, 2022). In Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan kicked off its vaccination campaign with Sputnik V, while Kazakshtan also opting for producing the vaccine (Bartlett, 2021). Meanwhile, Uzbekistan ordered 35 million doses from Russia (Bartlett, 2021). Big powers prioritizing allies and countries geographically close with its scarce goods is not unusual in international relations. What is, however, very unusual is prioritizing exports ahead of domestic needs. Until the end of 2021 (end of the period analysed is this paper) only 46,02% of Russian population had been fully vaccinated (Statista,

2023), while they already exported (or contracted to export) 663,34 million doses of Sputnik V vaccines (Statista, 2022). Thereby it is safe to say, that Russia prioritized vaccine exports over domestic immunity, which also shows that the country used the vaccine as a political asset instead of a medical one.

Moscow's vaccine diplomacy has also been backed up by intense propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The name of the vaccine, Sputnik V also serves as a propaganda equipment, since it reminds of the Sputnik satellites, implying that just as Russia was the first country to deploy a satellite in space, they are the first to invent a coronavirus vaccine.

CNN reported that online platforms (related to Russian intelligence) were spreading false claims about western vaccines (Brown et al. 2021). Even Russian state media and governmental social media accounts raised concerns about the safety and effectiveness of the Pfizer-Biontech vaccine (Brown et al. 2021). News media outlets controlled by the state such as Russian Times also reported the AstraZeneca vaccine to be highly dangerous (Klingová, 2022). The official Twitter page of the Sputnik V vaccine called for the suspension of the Pfizer vaccine over allegations of high mortality rate (Martuscelli – Scott, 2021). Meanwhile Russian newspapers spreaded stories about masses of vaccine tourists arriving to the Russian Federation, even though independent fact checking confirmed that these tourists were mostly Russian citizens living abroad or family members of Russian citizens, and only a handful of foreign tourists arrived to get Sputnik vaccine (Kazharski - Makarychev, 2021 cites Tokmantseva, 2021). According to the Russian media narrative, dozens of countries prefer Sputnik V over western and Chinese vaccination “in spite of US pressure or EU hesitation” (Kazharski - Makarychev, 2021, pp. 137. cites RT, 2021). Russia especially targeted countries with its disinformation campaign where it competes with Western and Chinese influence - for example South Africa, Mozambique and Nigeria in Africa (Campbell, 2020) and Argentina Mexico and Guatemala in the Americas (Klingová, 2022). By downplaying the efficacy and safeness of other vaccines in its propaganda campaigns, Russia showed that international rivalry and great power politics are more in the scope of its vaccine diplomacy than global safety, while paying especially high attention to regions where it competes with other powers' influence shows that the disinformation campaign's true aim is strengthening its soft power.

Just like as previously mentioned countries, Moscow targeted Eastern-Middle-European countries with its propaganda. When the Slovak government flirted with the usage of Sputnik V, Russian news agencies and automated twitter accounts falsely stated that the vast majority of Slovak people prefers the Russian jab (Klingová, 2022). The officials of the Slovak State

Institute for Drug Control (SUKL) however came under attack after they declined to register the Sputnik V vaccine because of lack of data and the differences between the vaccines arriving in the country from the ones used in the studies of the Lancet's peer-reviewed medical journal, which was the first independent study confirming the efficacy of the Sputnik V (Klingová, 2022). RDIF rejected these claims by calling them "fake news", while the twitter account of Sputnik V accused SUKL of sabotage (Klingová, 2022). Russian propaganda also often attacked the European Medical Agency for its criticism (Klingová, 2022). These processes go beyond soft power politics, as Russian propaganda tries to ignite fault lines in government and generate distrust in the public against domestic institutions. "There is only one explanation: it is not just a vaccine, it is a tool of hybrid warfare", as Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, Ivan Korčok concluded the course of events (Klingová, 2022).

In conclusion, we think that Russia had other than medical, even geopolitical objectives with its vaccine diplomacy. The Kremlin neglected international cooperation and professional standards in its development and distribution processes to pose as a scientific great power winning the vaccine race, chose the recipient partners with great care regarding its foreign policy goals, disseminated false informations about its and others' vaccines, created mistrust and chaos in other countries domestic politics while completely ignoring the need for its own domestic immunity. Even though in the Global Soft Power Index, measured by Brand Finance Russia jumped from 13th to 9th, it is hard to measure the success of this political endeavour, because the developments regarding the Russo-Ukrainian war completely tarnished its image in several third countries. Russia also failed to comply to a relevant amount of vaccine deals, because of logistical problems (Kier - Stronski, 2021). However, undemocratic (rouge) states turning a global pandemic into great power politics, soft power competition and hybrid warfare, safe to say, surprised unprepared Western powers.

5. ANALYSIS – DEMAND SIDE

The validation and application of the Sputnik V vaccine has not been as easy as Russia might have hoped, especially in Europe. Even though the European Medicines Agency (EMA) started a rolling review of the Russian COVID-19 vaccine in March 4, 2021, some member states of the European Union were reluctant to wait for the bloc to authorize authorization, and acted on their own to get Sputnik V supplies. (Gosling, 2021)

According to neo-realism, this could be explained by health policies being low politics, therefore vaccine importations are limited by security considerations. Vaccine deals with a

major superpower could come with strings attached and they could withhold the fulfilment of contracts, both threatening the recipient's security. (Keohane-Nye, 2012)

To prove that national security might overwrite the needs of health policies we examined the connection between vaccine trade deals struck with the Kremlin and the perceived threat from the Russian Federation by some relevant European countries.

Vaccine imports and exports are largely transparent however, perceived threat is difficult to measure. There are three possible ways for it, that we presented in this analysis: by opinion polls, one could measure the extent to which something is perceived as a threat by the population, thus deducing the judgement of the government, hoping that either democratic elections create a bottom-up linkage, or state led propaganda creates a top-down effect. The other ways are that someone who gathers enough data from the government, the intelligence offices and the military – so the primer sources – could easily make assumptions about the government's perceived threat, or one could try to use their foreign affairs knowledge to qualitative analysis.

GLOBSEC, a global politics think-tank from Bratislava went with the first approach: they recently released a study about the image of Russia in Central-Eastern-Europe and the Western Balkans. GLOBSEC took a look at the following countries: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bulgaria. In conclusion, they created three different groups: “Bear huggers”; “Bear feeders” and “Bear sceptics” (Milo, 2021, p. 9) by asking the local populations to answer questions like “Is Russia our most important strategic partner?” (Milo, 2021, p. 13), “Do you think that Russia presents a danger to your country?” (Milo, 2021, p. 17). or decide disputes like whether NATO has deliberately provoked Russia by encircling it with allies or Russia is the provocateur who initiates conflicts in Eastern-Europe. (Milo, 2021)

The group “Bear huggers” can be described by this: “Undergirded by complex historical, cultural and ethnic ties, these countries express favourable views and share a high level of affinity towards Russia. The victimhood narrative that places the blame squarely on the shoulders of West and NATO, moreover, receives a sympathetic audience and buy-in in these countries. The notion that they share a common Slavic heritage with Russia is also pervasive and popular among an overwhelming majority of people, reinforcing other narratives” (Milo, 2021, p. 9). These countries are Serbia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro (Milo, 2021). According to realism, these states should seek every opportunity to import Sputnik V, as they

have nothing to fear from the provider. In practice, Slovakia and Serbia made a deal (statista.com, 2021), Montenegro initially received a small amount from Serbia (Guenot, 2021) and later opted to import tens of thousands of jabs (Government of Montenegro, 2021) and Bulgaria is an outlier which was likely to import, as their parliamentary committee has passed a motion to purchase Sputnik-V (euractiv.com, 2021a), however they later withdrew from the decision (The Sofia Globe, 2021).

“Bear feeders” have the following characteristics: “This group of countries is home to attitudes on Russia that are marked by pragmatism and some sympathetic ears. Unlike in the previous group, Russia is not seen as a brother/ sister and religious, cultural and/or historical links play a considerably less prominent role. Several Russian narratives, nevertheless, are accepted in significant numbers” (Milo, 2021, p. 9.). These are Hungary, Czech Republic, and North Macedonia (Milo, 2021, p.9.)). North Macedonia has used Sputnik V jabs (statista.com, 2021), while Hungary was the first member of the European Union to go down the same path (Rohac, 2021). The Czech Republic was widely considered to be the next member state turning to Russia for help, as their president, Milos Zeman persuaded their Prime Minister, Andrej Babis to engage in negotiations with the Kremlin which caused the dismissal of their Russia sceptic foreign and health ministers (Rohac, 2021). Later however, amid domestic opposition to the Russian vaccine, they decided to dismiss Sputnik from the agenda (Lazarová, 2021).

“Bear sceptics” can be described by this: “Neither perceives Russia as an important strategic partner and the prevailing view in each sees Moscow labelled as a threat.” (Milo, 2021, 9.) p.). These countries are Romania and Poland, who have both refused to order Sputnik V, while experiencing a high level of threat from the Russian Federation (Milo, 2021). This unwillingness was even articulated by both states: Romanian Prime Minister, Florin Citu said that Romania would not buy Sputnik-V (Chirileasa, 2021). Michal Dworczyk, chief of chancellery in Poland meanwhile also ruled out Russian vaccine without doubt by saying that “When it comes to the Russian vaccine, we do not plan to buy such a vaccine, but when it comes to the Chinese vaccine, we are analysing this issue ... no decisions have been made on this matter” (reuters.com, 2021).

Looking at Table 1 below concluding this GLOBSEC study and the countries’ approaches to Sputnik-V, a clear trend could be drawn: while the majority of bear huggers and bear feeders are happy to import, bear sceptics prefer to stay away.

Country	Group	Sputnik V approach
Bulgaria	Bear hugger	Almost imported
Montenegro	Bear hugger	Imported
Serbia	Bear hugger	Imported
Slovakia	Bear hugger	Imported
Czech Republic	Bear feeder	Not imported
Hungary	Bear feeder	Imported
North Macedonia	Bear feeder	Imported
Poland	Bear sceptic	Not imported
Romania	Bear sceptic	Not imported

Table 1; Source: Own Creation, by Milo, 2021

As a simple, but effective way to include Western Europe, we looked at a study by Pew Research Center. This study included Greece, Hungary, Italy, Germany, France, Spain, UK, Poland, Sweden and Netherlands and examined whether the citizens favour Russia. Apart from Greece, there were no countries that favoured Russia more than Hungary, so they all lie between bear feeder and bear sceptic (Letterman, 2018). It is no surprise that neither of them imports the Russian vaccine however, it is interesting that the only western country coming close to Hungary's score (so being a potential bear feeder) is Italy (Letterman, 2018), which is the first European country to produce Sputnik V domestically (euronews.com, 2021a). Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi's stance on Sputnik V is positive, his spokesperson said that "If a vaccine, works and the regulators tell us that it is safe, nationality is of little interest to me. Italy is ready to collaborate with the Russian government" (Aljazeera.com, 2021a).

After including Western European countries, we make an eastern opening. There are some Eastern-European countries which did not order any Sputnik V vaccines, and territorial security could not be overseen when analyzing their motives. These countries are the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Ukraine. Estonia and Ukraine are afraid of Russian aggression, since both of them has prolonged territorial disputes with Moscow. In March 2014, Russian troops took control of the Crimean Peninsula, and later annexed it following a disputed local referendum (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). The tension heightened as Russian-backed

separatist paramilitary groups in Donetsk and Luhansk declared independence from Ukraine (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). The armed conflict is still ongoing accompanied by cyberattacks attributed to Russia (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). While the Kremlin denies any involvement, some sunk cost signals made their intentions clear, as in 2018 Russia held its largest military exercise since the fall of the Soviet Union, and right now (in the spring of 2021) they positioned more than 100,000 troops near Ukrainian border (Aljazeera.com, 2021b).

It is no surprise, that Ukraine did not make any attempts to acquire any Sputnik V. In addition, Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna firmly distanced themselves from any involvement in Sputnik trade, as she said, “we are unofficially warning the EU that Sputnik V is 20% medical treatment and 80% hybrid threat and propaganda” (Gotev, 2021).

Between Estonia and Russia, there are tensions concerning border treaties, but fortunately it did not provoke military involvement. The dispute is about that the Estonian constitution accepts a treaty from 1920, according to which 5% of Estonian territory is under Russian supervision. Russia, in contrast, accepts the administrative boundary of the USSR. Even though there is no armed conflict, and the Estonian government shows willingness to formally solve the dispute, we cannot deny that an ongoing territorial dispute cause heightened perceived threat to national security. (euractiv.com, 2021b)

The other Baltic states are also highly aware of Russian threat. Throughout history, all three of them were (unwillingly) provinces of the Russian Empire and member states of the Soviet Union. There are also issues worthening their perceived security, as they are trapped in between Russia and Russian exclave Kaliningrad, and Moscow handle sees them important spheres of interest, because the loss of these territories meant the loss of important ports in the Baltic Sea. This is extremely relevant, as the annexation of Crimea could be partly because of the strategic importance of warm-watered harbours of Sevastopol. (Treisman, 2016)

The Baltic states are also participating in an uneven arms race with Russia. Since the Crimean incident in 2014, Latvia and Lithuania doubled their military spending, so nowadays all three of them reached the NATO threshold of 2% of GDP (Chemla, 2019). They also tried to equilibrate the uneven distribution of capabilities by joining NATO in 2003 (and EU in 2004). Right now, all of them accommodates 1000 NATO soldiers under British, Canadian and German command, while the French army also increasingly getting involved. Considering these measures of defense, it is unlikely that Russia would launch a frontal war, however, they use

systematic disinformation and cyber-attacks to destabilize the Baltic states. Their foreign ministers repeatedly warned the EU and the NATO about these issues, and even said that “we have seen in the last three or four years that democratic nations are the target of attack” (Chemla, 2019). To conclude, we could comfortably say that the Baltic states rationally feel threatened by the Russian Federation and use balance of power techniques and investment in high politics to ensure their safety. (Chemla, 2019)

This preoccupation with survival disabled the Baltic States to engage in health policy cooperation with Russia, as realism would assume. In contrast, neo-liberals would say that the emergence of the pandemic would make it the most important issue and motivate cooperation even between unfriendly states (Baylis, 2014). The Baltic states even declared their point of view regarding Sputnik V. Ingrida Simonyté, Lithuanian Prime Minister tweeted the following: “They say, Sputnik V is good but Putin doesn’t care to use it as a cure for the Russian people - he offers it to the world as another hybrid weapon to divide and rule.” (Simonyté, 2021). In Estonia, the mayor of Tallinn, Mihail Kolvart said “Russia perhaps uses Sputnik in pursuing its political objectives. Why they are not vaccinating their own population but are offering this vaccine to outside - it's in order to increase their clout, the same is being done by China.” (news.err.ee, 2021), while Latvia took the pragmatic stand by saying that EMA approval is needed for making a deal (baltictimes.com, 2021).

To conclude, analyzing their foreign affairs and the public declarations of their leaders, we should label Ukraine and all the Baltic states as bear sceptics, which would (according to realists) explain their reluctance to purchase Sputnik V vaccines.

There is an interesting and relevant Eastern-European country not yet discussed. Belarus is militarily inferior to Russia while sharing a border with it. However, the former soviet country poses no threat to Russian security, as they are more Kremlin friendly than West friendly. Their biggest economic partner is Russia, they even got stimulus loans from Moscow, and Putin is a committed supporter of the Lukashenko regime. Belarus would surely qualify as a bear hugger. Feeling wholly secure, Belarus only imports Sputnik V vaccine, and their president called it a “serious support” (euronews, 2021b).

Previously, at the start of the analysis, we mentioned that an effective way to measure the perceived security threat of European countries would be the studying of government documents regarding this topic. In 2017, Czech think-tank European Values released a study, which aim was to examine European Union member states’ stance related to Russian threat.

They were able to access more than 450 policy documents, intelligence reports and other sources to evaluate how Russian aggression impacts security policies of the EU. (Janda, 2017)

This report partly varies from our analysis before, but there are no major differences. Countries mentioned in both our analysis and this study are classified in the following way. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland are worried about Russian aggression and are at the forefront of planning a response strategy. Czech Republic are partly concerned, which explains why they flirted with the idea of importing Sputnik V. Bulgaria and Croatia are below radar supporters of countering Russian steps. Romania was also classified as sceptic in this paper, however, the scepticism of Bulgarian leadership seems to differ from the support of the population. Hungary and Slovakia are not concerned, and only using “the Russian card” for domestic reasons, which could explain why they were the first member states who imported Sputnik V vaccines. Italy is considered Kremlin friendly, which is obvious, considering that they were the first member state to produce Sputnik V on domestic soil. (Janda, 2017)

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we argued that one, Russia’s ‘vaccine diplomacy’ or rather ‘vaccine nationalism’ was motivated by competitive generosity, the will to increase their soft power in the international community rather than prioritising health-related concerns. To support this argument, examples of Russia's approach with a goal of bolstering their soft power are looked at. One of them is breaking the before-COVID definition of ‘vaccine diplomacy’ by developing the Sputnik V vaccine without any international cooperation, giving supplies to countries in bilateral deals and ignoring international institutions like COVAX. Another example is the rush to win the “vaccine race” during the unorthodox approval of the Sputnik V. The rollout of their vaccines also showed how Russia pursued foreign policy goals with distribution. Distributing vaccines helped Russia to strengthen their soft power worldwide, but mainly in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Asia. The high percentage of exportation happened despite it resulting in Russia falling behind with domestic vaccinations.

The second puzzle we analysed was the consequences Russia’s chosen vaccine nationalism had of the states at the demand end. Despite the turmoil debates about the Russian Sputnik V in certain recipient states, the geopolitical incentives of these countries are rarely discussed. We argued that the European states mentioned in this paper viewed national security as a matter of ‘high politics’, which is at the top of the hierarchy of issues, and looked at public-health related concerns as only ‘low politics’. This led to certain states approaching the then newly invented

Sputnik V vaccine with caution, being reluctant to order and keeping in mind the perceived threat to their national security from Russia. Other states, which do not consider Russia a security threat, did seek out the opportunities to import Sputnik V vaccines. This is aligned with our hypothesis, that the medical crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic was not treated superior to national security issues.

The significance of this paper is in the two-sided analysis of the supply and the demand side of Russia's vaccine diplomacy, with a focus on discussing the geopolitical incentives of the importing countries, which is a whole in the existing literature connected to this field. We put an emphasis on the influence of Russia's incentives and how these shaped the approach of the states on the demand side.

The scope of this paper could be widened by other theoretical approaches, such as constructivism to examine the effect of the norm diffusion of autocracy. There can be seen a tendency of countries with lower score on democracy evaluations to order Sputnik V. It would be interesting to see how ideological differences can jeopardise trade and medical help in-between the East and the West. In addition to this, as a future research, the connection between the Sputnik V orders and how dependent a country is on Russian natural gas export could be studied in order to show whether there is a correlation linking the two.

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