

Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?



Michael Leigh discusses the rocky start to the EU's vaccination rollout that has allowed Moscow and Beijing to score political points in the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe

As COVID-19 continues to rage throughout Europe, China and Russia seem to be giving the European Union lessons in soft power on its home ground. Several EU members and countries nearby are turning to Beijing and Moscow for additional supplies of COVID-19 vaccines, faced with discontent at the slowness of the EU's own [vaccination rollout](#), supply shortages, delivery bottlenecks, poor communication and concerns about vaccine safety.

China's vaccine deliveries come with soft-power messages. Beijing is providing its vaccine [free](#) to Chinese citizens and to 53 countries while, in parallel, seeking to counter critical views, following harsh Chinese repression in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, by vaunting its economic success, scientific and medical achievements, culture and language.

Beijing is completing Europe's largest Confucius Institute in Serbia, an early recipient of Chinese vaccines. The institute is located on the site in Belgrade where the Chinese embassy once stood before being bombed by NATO in 1999.

Heavy symbolism

Meanwhile, Russia's Sputnik V vaccine is gaining increasing acceptance in Europe. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) is [reviewing its efficacy](#) and it has won plaudits from the head of Germany's standing commission on vaccination.

Germany's health minister has discussed [overcoming supply shortages](#) in the EU with Chinese and Russian vaccines, once they have been approved. Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder has [announced](#) a preliminary purchase order for 2.5 million doses of Sputnik V, to be produced in Bavaria. Chancellor Merkel said in March there were "*good data*" on Sputnik V and that all vaccines were welcome once they receive the green light.

Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron have discussed joint production of Sputnik V with Russian President Vladimir Putin. This is despite heightened tensions with Moscow following the imprisonment of opposition leader Alexey Navalny and Russia's recent troop build-up near Ukraine.

Russia misses no chance to accompany offers of vaccine or joint production to Eastern Europe and the Balkans with soft-power messages, dwelling on European failures and highlighting Russian support for countries covered by the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies.

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Over fifty countries have [ordered](#) the Sputnik V vaccine. Russia has made a show of vaccine deliveries to Serbia and Montenegro, while Croatia has begun talks with Russia about acquiring the Sputnik V vaccine. Croatia's health minister is [reported](#) to have asked its health regulator to authorise the vaccine without waiting for EMA approval.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia have also turned to Russia for supplies of Sputnik V. But Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovic resigned in March after failing to obtain the governing coalition's agreement for his personal decision to purchase 2 million doses of the Russian vaccine.

Hungary became the first European country to administer Sputnik V in February 2021, after issuing emergency authorization, and plans are afoot to produce the vaccine in Italy.

Austria has held talks with Moscow about acquiring the Russian vaccine once it has been evaluated by EMA. Austria's Chancellor Sebastian Kurz accused EMA of being too slow to approve the vaccine.

Beijing meanwhile is targeting low and medium-income countries for early vaccine deliveries. It has supplied vaccines to EU member Hungary and EU candidate countries Serbia and Turkey.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban posted a photo of himself being inoculated with a vaccine from Chinese manufacturer Sinopharm. [China had shipped](#) 115 million doses worldwide while the EU had exported 58 million by the end of March.

Recently, however, concerns have grown about the relatively [low protection rates](#) given by Chinese vaccines and about their availability. Trust in the reliability of Russian data and the comparability of its tests is still wavering.

EU countries are entitled to acquire vaccines approved by their regulatory authorities from suppliers not involved in the [EU's centralised scheme](#). But a senior [EMA official](#) condemned this as *"somewhat comparable to Russian roulette,"* a remark that prompted calls for an apology from the Sputnik V manufacturer and criticism from the Kremlin.

Alarmed at member countries breaking ranks, European Council President Charles Michel launched a fierce defence of the EU's response to COVID-19. He [wrote](#) in his newsletter: *"We should not let ourselves be misled by China and Russia, both regimes with less desirable values than ours, as they organise highly limited but widely publicised operations to supply vaccines to others."*

A geopolitical open door

Nonetheless, the late rollout of the EU's vaccine purchase and delivery scheme handed Beijing and Moscow a commercial and diplomatic opportunity that fitted their strategic narratives.

For China, supplying vaccines to Europe forms part of its 'Health Silk Road', a [rhetorical extension](#) of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), intended to showcase the prowess of China's medical sciences and its devotion to global public goods.

China promotes the BRI in Central and Eastern Europe through [17+1](#), a loose network launched in Warsaw in 2012. At the start of the epidemic, China and Russia stepped in to [provide masks and personal protective equipment](#) to European countries amid severe supply shortages.

Moscow, too, seeks to convey the impression that its medical science is prevailing over the West's, despite low vaccination rates in Russia itself. The name Sputnik V mirrors that of the world's first artificial satellite, launched by

the Soviet Union in 1957. Russia rushed to become, on 11 August 2020, the first country whose COVID-19 vaccine was approved by national authorities.

China and Russia are pushing at an open door in Eastern Europe because of the EU's faltering strategies in the Balkans and eastern partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The EU promised membership to Balkan countries at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003.

Since then, only Croatia has joined the EU, and there are scant prospects for others to follow in the foreseeable future. Persistent governance problems in the Balkans and enlargement fatigue in the EU are responsible for the stalemate.

Despite repeated assertions that the region is destined for EU membership, the EU lacks a credible geopolitical strategy for the Balkans, an area surrounded by EU members that are its major donors and investors.

The EU has provided €70 million from existing funds to Balkan countries to acquire vaccines and a [€3.3 billion package](#) to tackle the health crisis, support investment and stimulate recovery. Balkan and eastern partnership countries are eligible for vaccines under the World Health Organisation's global [COVAX scheme](#) for low- and medium-income countries.

The EU recently doubled its contribution to COVAX to €1 billion. But these efforts fall far short of neighbouring countries' needs and of the COVID-fighting programmes deployed within the EU itself.

In March 2021, the European Commission [ended](#) the exemption of Balkan countries from the EU's vaccine export controls, reducing the credibility of its soft-power outreach to the region.

Foreign ministers from nine EU countries on 11 March 2021 [called](#) on the Union *“to take a strategic look at the Western Balkans.”* They asserted that the pandemic had exacerbated existing trends, with their geopolitical implications, and that *“other actors are ready to step into regional affairs, often at our expense.”*

Despite huge EU support for the region, *“other actors were more effective in presenting their support and thus undermining our reliability, credibility and perception of our solidarity.”* Earlier, in January 2021, a group of foreign ministers, mainly from the EU’s new member states, made a [similar plea](#) on behalf of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Vaccine diplomacy and soft power

But despite the diplomatic and commercial agility with which China and Russia have moved to fill the vaccine and geopolitical gaps to the EU’s east and south-east, their soft-power appeal to the countries concerned is limited.

Soft power derives from the attractiveness of a political, economic and social model and whether others aspire to emulate it. Despite China’s success in containing the pandemic domestically and the early availability of its vaccines, few in Europe and its eastern periphery seek to emulate the Chinese model of society.

Russia, too, holds little appeal to populations in Europe’s east whose main preoccupations are unemployment, living and governance standards and, in some cases, corruption. Disinformation, domestic repression and cyber-attacks do little to endear the Chinese and Russian regimes to public opinion in Europe.

Some 59% of respondents across the Balkans to the June 2020 [Balkan Barometer](#) survey consider that EU membership would be a good thing, up from 42% in 2014, the baseline year. The benefits of EU membership cited most often are greater prosperity and freedom to travel for work and study.

Serbia, where state television regularly presents the EU in a negative light while depicting China and Russia positively, is an outlier, with less than a third favouring EU membership. However, there is growing pessimism in the region about the prospects for joining the EU.

In Eastern Partnership countries, where the [most recent regional survey](#) was conducted in 2019 before the pandemic, just over half the respondents had a favourable view of the EU; 80% associated it with economic prosperity and human rights. Setbacks in fighting the pandemic have dented but not destroyed the EU's soft power in the Balkans and Eastern Europe.

Strategic choices

Chinese companies are engaged in public works in European countries, especially in Serbia. But infrastructure projects promoted by China's BRI have provoked environmental protests, created few jobs for local workers and raised debt levels to unsustainable levels, particularly in [Montenegro](#).

Some major projects have been cancelled or remain incomplete. Six EU countries that are part of the 17+1 initiative were represented only by lower-rank officials at a virtual summit hosted by President Xi Jinping in February 2021, a setback that may herald the demise of this tenuous grouping.

If some governments in the Balkans and Eastern Europe appear to be prioritising vaccines from China and Russia, it is less on geopolitical grounds than as a response to delays in delivery by western suppliers. President Aleksandar Vucic of Serbia and Prime Minister Orbán in Hungary exemplify this opportunistic, tactical approach. Vucic takes pride in achieving a high vaccination rate by using European, Chinese and Russian vaccines, claiming that he remains equidistant from all three. He has [announced](#) an agreement to produce Sinopharm vaccines in Serbia.

Chinese and Russian vaccine diplomacy might offer a partial workaround in the face of EU delays, but not a strategic choice. The aspirations of strengthening democracy and closer EU links **remain strong** in the Balkans and in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Sabre-rattling by Moscow over Ukraine and the ongoing Russian absorption of Belarus will reinforce the tilts to the west of EU partner countries.

The EU should reinforce its position in the region with more inclusive policies, clearer signalling and robust measures to counter disinformation. Vaccine deliveries through COVAX should be accelerated and supplemented by additional donations from EU countries, as their own vaccine rollouts gather pace. The Western Balkans should be exempted from the EU's **vaccine export control mechanism**.

At the same time, EU representatives should push back firmly when Serbian President Vucic conveys the misleading impression that the Balkans can rely as much on China and Russia as on the EU, or when he poses as a regional benefactor, making small well-publicised **donations** of European-supplied vaccines to North Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The population should be reminded that the EU has done far more than China or Russia to modernise the Balkans' healthcare sector, **providing over €450 million** in grants and loans during the past twenty years to Serbia alone.

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Michael Leigh is a Senior Fellow at Bruegel

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