

# Navigating Russian and Chinese “vaccine diplomacy” in the CEE and Western Balkans

Blog post by Practice Lead Alexander Smotrov and Senior Associate Anikó Zsebik, 18 March 2021

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The covid-19 vaccine rollout in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Western Balkans, has not been immune to politicisation. Vaccination is seen as a powerful tool to accelerate post-covid economic recovery alongside stimulus packages, but with Russia and China getting involved, some compare it to the debate on national security concerns about critical infrastructure. The question arises to what extent the region is falling prey to Russian and Chinese vaccine diplomacy with a possible spill-over risk for the rest of the EU or whether it is a zero-sum game of survival of the fittest?

The region is in the midst of the third wave and even though vaccine rollout seems to be on par with the EU average, it already claimed some political casualties. A delayed vaccination plan led to the resignation of the health minister in Latvia. In Slovakia, the health minister resigned last week, but disagreements in the ruling coalition - including over the decision to procure the Russian vaccine without the authorisation of the full cabinet or the regulator - continue to boil, with the prime minister next in the firing line. In the Czech Republic, President Miloš Zeman is pressuring the prime minister to fire the health minister who insists on waiting for the European Medicines Agency (EMA) authorisation for any new vaccine.

Disturbing examples for those national leaders who themselves depend on fragile coalition alliances and risky for those who feel bound by EU solidarity. The approach to find bespoke solutions for their ailing healthcare system has been pioneered by the Hungarian government last autumn when it started negotiations with Russia and China to acquire their vaccines in parallel with the EU procurement. Having started inoculations with Sputnik-V and Sinopharm vaccines in February, Hungary is now among the frontrunners in the European vaccination effort.

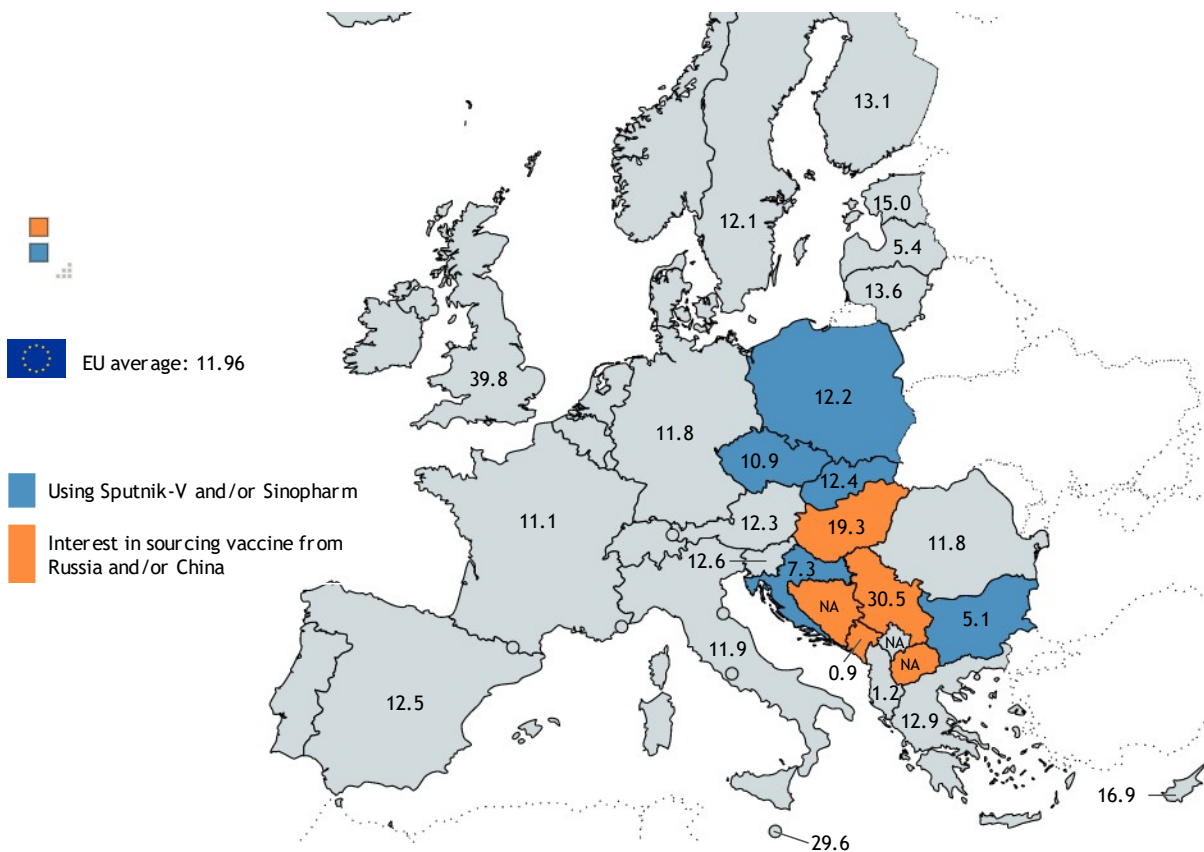
Taking the cue from their Visegrád neighbour, Slovakia and Czechia - the two nations with the highest current covid-19 death rates in the EU - are assessing the approval of the Sputnik-V vaccine, with Prague reaching out to China as well for possible procurement. Following the usual EU division lines, Poland and the Baltics are much more wary of the Russian vaccine, but do not rule out buying vaccines from China, citing the public health argument about not having the necessary volumes fast enough without alternative providers.

The Western Balkans countries - lying outside of the EU and its joint procurement programme - found themselves in a slightly precarious position as the COVAX deliveries have been delayed and expectations for the EU to share its pre-allocated doses remained mainly unfulfilled. Serbia, the trailblazer in sourcing from China and Russia, can feel vindicated in its efforts to find its own way forward. Having approved five foreign vaccines, Serbia has managed to achieve the highest vaccination rate in Europe after the UK (30.5 doses per 100 people), reportedly even giving some

patients a choice between jobs. Belgrade has embarked on its own mini vaccine diplomacy campaign by offering vaccines to Montenegro (who got a donation from China as well), North Macedonia, Bosnia’s Republika Srpska and Kosovo. The latter, however, refused the offer and rather accepted a “symbolic” amount from Albania (which itself received a donation from abroad and later struck a bilateral deal with Pfizer).

**Fig.1. Covid-19 vaccination progress in Central & Eastern Europe and Western Balkans, as of mid-March 2021**

Number of people vaccinated with at least one dose of vaccine per 100 people



Sources: Politico, Our world in data, ECDC vaccine tracker

The benefits and drawbacks of these national strategies and their political cost are yet to be fully assessed. Indeed, the price of acquisition (Hungary paid more for Sinopharm than for the others), the adopted shortcuts in the approval process in Hungary and Slovakia, or strings attached to “donations” could backfire. More stable and assertive governments in Budapest and Belgrade may be able to absorb the shocks while others could face further scrutiny.

The end game of Moscow and Beijing is also open for interpretations: whether they simply want to get deals with the nations traditionally aligned with them or whether they want to use the CEE

member states as a testing ground to help achieve wider EU approval for their vaccines and transpose this approach onto other union-wide initiatives such as “vaccine passports”.

The inclusion of their vaccines on these passports will be crucial for both Russia and China. They are the two largest global recipients of Schengen visas and will be keen to get EU borders reopened for their tourists and students. Equally, many European nations would see the return of Russian and Chinese travellers as a valuable source of revenues to assist their post-covid economic reboot. For Russia in particular, the international approval of its vaccines is not just a matter of geopolitical prestige but also a potential boost for the domestic uptake of the jabs.

So far, a pragmatic approach to both the vaccine rollout and vaccine passports looks most likely. National governments will continue to scramble for any tool that will get them ahead on the road to recovery. The authorisation of the Sputnik-V by EMA is yet to be determined but could be a game changer. Regarding the “green certificates”, even if a binding de minimis rule is agreed at the EU level, states are likely to use their sovereign right to tweak it to their own political will. Political mayhem and policy divergence are guaranteed for the time being. To what extent it will be further influenced by external players, remains to be seen.