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'There will sooner or later be an effective vaccine'

Russia, China and the US are in a geostrategic race for a Covid-19 vaccine. Johannes Varwick on risks and side effects

Read this interview in German or Russian.

We are currently witnessing a global race to produce a coronavirus vaccine. Russia is now the first country to have approved a vaccine. At the same time, warnings about the consequences of this competition are growing. Just how much does sheer concern about their own reputation play a role in the critical reactions in the US and in Europe to Russia's vaccine?

We do of course have a race for a vaccine – that's about national prestige but also about very tangible national interests. According to what we know, in its approval of the vaccine, Russia is not sticking to the standards set down by the World Health Organization. Introducing the vaccine on a large scale without waiting for the results from clinical studies amounts to experimentation on human beings. Only an authoritarian system such as Russia can afford to do that. It would be unthinkable in western democracies. It is not yet foreseeable whether the Russian vaccine – which the Russians probably want to call "Sputnik V" – is effective or damaging.

It also remains to be seen whether the unconventional Russian approach will be successful. In case Russia turns out to be the first country that has an effective protection against Covid-19 and makes it available to its people, that actually has a touch of "Sputnik" about it – i.e. as in the 1950s with the start of the first man-made earth satellites from the USSR. Russia would then have a head start in a technological race that brings prestige and economic advantages with it. If not, then the damage would be just as big. I cannot quite imagine that Russia is knowingly taking on this risk and to that extent I presume that it sees itself as being fully on the right track. But this self-perception could be illusory.

Why has research into a coronavirus vaccine become a new geopolitical battlefield?

The development of the vaccine, which is a strategic matter in overcoming the crisis of this century, is in reality about what we called "collective world goods" in the past. That means the production of material or immaterial goods, which are key for wide sections of the world – for example for international security, free trade routes and an environment in good condition. Whoever used to lead in the production of these goods traditionally determined international politics in other areas too. It was to some extent a tool of hegemons.

If vaccines are now the new collective global goods, then it is no surprise that a race has begun. However, there are two narratives which one has to distinguish between. Some say that this pandemic shows us quite plainly that we necessarily have to think globally, that we need to some extent a global structural policy in these issues of global health. The counternarrative is that now every country is first looking after itself. I do not see it yet as a foregone conclusion which narrative will win. But if the second one wins, then we really have a conflict between nation states, with all the consequences that stem from that. Presumably, no one will benefit from that in the longer term.

The big players currently seem to be Russia, the US and China – where does the European Union stand here?

The more than 150 promising developments towards a vaccine that are registered with the WHO prove that there have been huge efforts at different levels. So there will sooner or later be an effective vaccine. Incidentally, in any other period, the history of mankind could only have dreamt of that. But the fascinating question is: Who will have access to it and who will benefit from it? All the big countries, who are financially strong, have either ensured the rights for the use of vaccines for themselves in the past months or are pushing ahead with research with fully or partly state-owned companies. The investment of the German state in the Tübingen company Curevac is certainly no exception there. The fact that Curevac is now being listed on the stock exchange in the US also shows the transnational interconnectedness in this area.

The US has agreements with the German company Biontech, but also with Johnsen & Johnsen and Sanofi and a number of others. Australia, Canada, Japan and many other countries have concluded such agreements. Likewise there are numerous efforts in Europe. An alliance of Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands has agreed on a delivery of 400 million doses with the British company AstraZeneca.

The EU wants to take part in the initiative established by the WHO together with the global vaccine alliance GAVI, going by the name of COVAX, which is jointly buying two billion doses by 2021 and wants to distribute them fairly and globally.

Is the advocacy of European countries for a universal provision of the vaccine not wishful thinking? At the end of the day, countries such as Germany and France will first of all vaccinate their population before countries from the global south are considered.

If the basic philosophy of this global pandemic goes like this: "Nobody is safe until everyone is safe" then it is necessary, also in the distribution of the vaccine, to popularise this idea. On the other hand, it is of course the duty of every government to first look after its own population. It is already apparent that, in these times, one of the most important measurements of success or failure of a government is the question of how the country is led through the pandemic. But clever political leadership does not mean that these diametrically opposed. So we need a balance between purely national interests in the short term and global interests in the medium term, which are also national interests at the end of the day.

Will the vaccine be used as a lubricant for worldwide alliances to prepare for a new world order? Which countries can be expected to benefit from that?

I considered that as being exaggerated. I see more the longer term problem that international solidarity will appear to many in the future as a luxury good. The famous "duties beyond borders" – i.e. obligations outside one's own state – will come under huge pressure in the coming years. Every country will probably do their own thing as best it can and the notion of international solidarity will therefore to some extent end up under huge pressure. That will presumably manifest itself in falling budgets for development aid, in falling budgets for international stabilisation, in a withdrawal from international peacekeeping missions, also in cuts in defence budgets. So there is a risk that cosmopolitanism, international solidarity and global responsibility will fall behind – first in the debate but then also in actions.

How can we make sure that international organisations such as the United Nations do not go totally to rack and ruin in the face of this geopolitical battle?

Regrettably, the UN is not playing a role at the moment. The Security Council has admittedly met but is paralysed due to the veto rights of

China, Russia and the US. There are special individual UN organisations, such as the development programme for example, or in the area of humanitarian aid, which are very effective. That is also true for the World Health Organization, which keeps on doing a good job but is falling apart politically at the same time. Things have gone so far that the US has announced its withdrawal. The growing power struggle between the US and China is also clearly reflected in the WHO.

The UN system is therefore not totally ineffective but multilateralism, as we know it, is really under pressure. What is going on in developing countries is not at all the focus of public attention today because we also still do not know the figures. That has a lot to do with the fact that not much testing is going on there but it would already be a miracle if wide swathes of Africa or the conflict regions from Syria to Libya or Afghanistan would come out of this pandemic in a better state. The numbers will go up there too and that will lead to instability. To that extent, the famous black holes in world politics will probably increase and that may well be a cause for concern.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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