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Global vaccination III

Vaccines are in short supply. So why not get a jab of Sputnik V and Sinopharm? Dispatches from Serbia, Argentina and Canada

Read this article in German.

Read the first and second parts of our series.

Serbia

China, Russia, Europe and the US – these are the four pillars of Serbia's foreign policy. As in the glorious days of Tito's Yugoslavia, the Republic of Serbia attempts to pursue a balanced foreign policy between the great powers to benefit from its independent position in the middle and from cooperation with all four. This may be an abstract – and not entirely coherent – construct of ambitious Serbian foreign policy and diplomacy. But for the ordinary Serbian citizen it now turns into a very concrete question: since mid-January, citizens can register for Covid-19 vaccinations on the Serbian e-government site euprava.gov.rs and have to choose: China, Russia, or Europe-US – which vaccine would you like? Sinopharm from China, the Russian Sputnik V or would you prefer the vaccine developed in Germany and produced in the US by Pfizer-Biontech?

Back at the beginning of the corona crisis in March 2020, the Serbian leadership under the unchallenged and increasingly authoritarian President Aleksandar Vucic had demonstrated its openness to aid from Russia and China. European solidarity, said President Vucic, was a mere fairy tale, we can only expected help and support from friend and brother Xi, the Chinese president.

Later, Serbia absorbed the first wave of the pandemic quite well. But the second wave hit the country hard. The seven-day incidence in Serbia at the beginning of December 2020, a key figure in Germany, was 731.6. In Germany, the peak was 197.6 on 22 December 2020.

Now help is coming from China again. In negotiations, Serbia has secured 6.5 million vaccine doses from different manufacturers for its nearly seven million inhabitants. But what do orders and contracts matter? President Vucic once again presented himself as the saviour of the nation. And he was somewhat successful: On 16 January 2021, the president, together with the Chinese ambassador, received the delivery of one million vaccine doses from the Chinese vaccine manufacturer Sinopharm at Belgrade airport. Since then, nobody is really complaining about missing deliveries or the correct sequence of vaccinations. Instead, they started vaccinating fast. At 7.5 per cent, the proportion of the population already vaccinated is second only to the UK in Europe.

Those who choose the Chinese vaccine when registering get an appointment within a week and can get in line for vaccination. According to a representative survey by the think tank NSPM, the Russian vaccine is the most popular; almost half of those willing to be vaccinated (47.5 per cent) said they would like to be vaccinated with Sputnik V.

The success of the vaccination campaign in Serbia documents Serbia's loss of confidence in the EU, which has been conducting accession negotiations since 2014 that have stalled because of the erosion of Serbia's democratic institutions. At the same time, mass vaccination is the increasingly authoritarian regime's achievement. A survey in *Vreme* found a clear correlation between the population's willingness to vaccinate and support for President Aleksandar Vucic's ruling party.

However, it's unlikely that vaccination will really become a foreign policy commitment in Serbia. In the end, the best vaccine is probably the one that is available. And finally, it's a – more or less – healthy pragmatism that gains the upper hand. *Vreme* quotes a 58-year-old Belgrade woman from the survey: 'I would like to be vaccinated, but with the Russian vaccine. Well, there is this condition that with this vaccine you are not allowed to drink alcohol or smoke for 20 days before the vaccination. So I guess the Chinese vaccine will have to do.'

Max Brändle, FES Belgrade

Argentina

The first shipment of vaccine doses from Russia arrived in Argentina on Christmas Eve. A total of 820,000 doses have been delivered so far. Argentina, a G20 member with 44.5 million inhabitants, is the first major country in the world to rely on pragmatic cooperation with Russia in this initial vaccination phase. President Alberto Fernandez had himself

vaccinated with Sputnik V on 21 January 2021, making him the first Latin American head of state to be vaccinated against Covid-19.

As early as July 2020, the Argentine government announced a schedule for the production and logistical distribution of anti-Corona agents. But Astra Zeneca's testing phases dragged on and the first deliveries – it soon became clear – couldn't be expected to arrive before March 2021. Argentina needed a complementary vaccination plan if it didn't want to subject its population to another months-long lockdown – as in autumn and winter 2020 – come April 2021.

'We had a request from the Russian Foreign Ministry and the Russian Sovereign Wealth Fund if Argentina was interested in getting the vaccine in December. Of course we said yes,' the Argentine leader said in a press statement, 'We want to guarantee that there will be vaccines for all Argentines.'

The arrival of the Covid-19 vaccines marks the beginning of a new phase in the fight against the pandemic. Argentina is trying to help itself and is negotiating with various companies and countries. It has signed agreements so far with Gamaleya, the Russian institute, and with Astra Zeneca. And it is in negotiations for more agreements with Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and the Chinese. The talks with China are aimed at buying one million Sinopharm doses, with the option to buy an additional 30 million doses. The final deal hinges on the price; according to the press, they are asking twice as much as the Russians.

The arrival of the Russian vaccine was the main news on all channels in the country. On the one hand, because there is hope that an end to the pandemic is at least in sight. This view prevails in the government, but also among the part of the population that supports the current government. On the other hand, this decision is controversial because the liberal-conservative opposition fears selling out to the autocrat Putin and non-transparent research results – or simply the 'communists'. The country's clear political polarisation doesn't end at the purchase of vaccines. Russia's geostrategy reaches all the way to the Rio de la Plata. But the West should not believe that Argentina is acting gullibly. From the periphery, where there are enormous problems to be solved, the world looks different than from the centre. The Argentine government believes that its approach has been vindicated by the high efficacy certificate for Sputnik V, issued by the scientific journal *The Lancet* on 2 February 2021.

But the delivery of the Sputnik vaccine is not going according to plan either. In January 2021, five million vaccine doses should already be in

the country. In reality, 820,000 doses are available in the country, 280,000 people have been vaccinated with the first dose and 65,000 with the second (as of 29 January 2021). The cooperation with Astra Zeneca was strategic from the very beginning, as Argentina itself is part of the production process. According to this plan, Argentine laboratories will produce the vaccine and Mexico will then – in a kind of bilateral cooperation – take care of the packaging and shipping. But whether the schedule – first deliveries in March 2021 – can be met is unclear.

The Argentine government is working on at least four fronts at the same time: the bottleneck in vaccine deliveries (whether Russia or Astra Zeneca), the enormous logistics in the eighth-largest country in the world in terms of area, the high expectations of the population, which was already running on fumes before the pandemic, and – not to be forgotten – fighting the recession and 40 per cent inflation.

On the bottleneck front, a new strategy has been on offer since 1 February 2021. To boost supply and vaccination, the Sputnik vaccine is supposed to be produced directly in Argentina now. An agreement with Russia is in the making.

Svenja Blanke, FES Buenos Aires

Canada

Canada counts more than 20,000 people dead from Covid-19, with high levels of infection currently being reported in a number of provinces. The overall rate of infection is dropping for the moment, but the recent discovery of cases of the UK and South Africa variants suggest that community spread has already taken hold. Health officials are warning that March could be the worst month yet.

In the race to vaccinate before these rapidly-spreading Covid-19 variants take hold, Canada faces significant challenges. Despite purchasing the largest number of vaccine doses per citizen in the world, its vaccination program has been comparatively slow to roll out, currently ranking 20th globally in shots administered per capita. As of early February, just 1.3 per cent of the population has been vaccinated, with vulnerable elderly people living in long-term care facilities and front-line health care workers receiving priority doses. September 2021 is the target date for general population vaccination.

As of January, Canada has approved two vaccines for use: Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. Both companies have delayed delivery of vaccines to Canada this month because of production issues in Europe.

Canada is only getting about one-fifth of previously planned shipments, although the companies are still promising to fulfill their contracts by the end of March.

Complicating matters is the new European export control policy on Covid-19 vaccines made in EU member states. Currently, all vaccine doses intended for use in Canada are sourced from Europe because of a lack of domestic vaccine manufacturing capabilities, and Canada is not exempt from these new export restrictions.

In this perfect storm, Justin Trudeau's government is under considerable pressure to speed up the delivery of vaccines and prevent any potential European moves to halt exports. These delays and the risk of export limits have also contributed to a growing debate in Canada about the need to establish domestic vaccine manufacturing facilities, so much so that the federal government inked a deal with US vaccine maker Novavax to produce its as-yet-unapproved vaccine in a new Montreal facility. This vaccine is months away from production and will comprise only a small portion of Canada's supply, but the agreement speaks to the urgent political needs that are developing alongside public health demands in Canada.

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