FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 25.01.2021 | Denis Cenusa

The EU's vaccine 'non-diplomacy'

The EU disregards the Chinese and Russian vaccines. But without financial support, that's a luxury Europe's East can't afford

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Faced with a another wave of infections, Europe is again struggling to get a grip on the Covid-19 pandemic. At the moment, the efforts of containing the virus currently focus on getting as many people vaccinated as possible as quickly as possible. And Eastern Partnership countries are no exception to that rule. But while the EU works around the clock to register and deliver the vaccines produced by six Western companies, neither the Chinese (*Sinovac Biotech*) nor the Russian vaccine (*Sputnik-V*) are on the European officials' immunisation menu. And that may be a luxury most Eastern Partnership countries currently can't afford.

Some, like the political elites in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, do criticise the Russian cure. They are suspicious of *Sputnik-V* for both its alleged inefficiency and the propaganda campaign pursued by Russian foreign policy. The memory of the 2020 disinformation campaigns while supposedly aiding Italy or Serbia are still fresh.

However, the refusal of even examining the possibility of importing the *Sputnik-V* has fuelled the internal animosities between government and the pro-Russian opposition in Ukraine. The country's Minister of Foreign Affairs Dmitry Kuleba highlighted the propagandistic costs that come with the Russian vaccine. China's propaganda however isn't bothering Kyiv, which is willing to purchase the Chinese vaccine as well as Western ones.

In Belarus and Armenia, on the other hand, there's hardly any scepticism towards the Russian vaccine and already arranged the imports or are in advanced bilateral negotiations. And across the region, there's less scepticism towards China. The latter seems to act much more subtly, raising minimum noise and negative perceptions for its anti-Covid-19 cure. As long as Eastern Partnership countries cannot receive the vaccine

from Western pharmaceutical companies, they will be signing up for the Chinese vaccine, if not the Russian one.

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Though the EU has established an institutional logic towards the vaccine, it moves very slowly when defining a proactive vaccine diplomacy that would help its two neighbourhood areas to the East and South. At present, stabilising the intra-European epidemiological situation prevails over the geopolitical thinking and any 'soft power' engineering with the help of vaccines. This way, Brussels is losing the sight of an opportunity to develop an 'anti-COVID-19 vaccine Marshall Plan' for the regions in its proximity, starting with the Eastern Partnership states.

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Of course, through funding the WHO's platform COVAX with about €500 million in to support access to the vaccine for around 90 less developed countries, the EU acts with a humanitarian mandate. But contributing to global public health is different from reaping the benefits of strategically delivering the vaccines through European aid. Otherwise, Russia and China will be happy to fill in the existing void in the blink of an eye.

Apart from strategic considerations, the Eastern Partnership states – and in particular association countries like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – have the moral right to ask for tangible vaccine-oriented support from Brussels. The Ukrainian government has already made a request for facilitation from Brussels concerning the procurement of the vaccine. Although Belarus and – to a lesser extent – Armenia rely on the Russian vaccine, these countries' population should be able to see a clear perspective of getting help from the EU. Unlike Minsk with only one preference for Sputnik, Yerevan is willing to put the eggs in several baskets looking to buy other vaccines (BioNTech-Pfizer, Moderna or AstraZeneca).

A drive for more EU support

Individual EU member states are pushing for vaccine aid from the EU to its Eastern neighbours. Half of them came up with the proposition to develop a support mechanism, similar to the Commission's offer made to Western Balkans in late 2020. Internal security of the EU and at its external borders was one of the main reasons for this push.
The proposal to help the Eastern partners represents a perfect starting

point for drafting a strategy for an EU ‘vaccine diplomacy’ in the short and medium-term. Unlike the Western Balkans with pre-accession funds that will sponsor the European vaccines' expenses, Eastern Partnership countries have been promised renewed financial resources for the ‘post-2020 Deliverables’. These funds can support the region’s catching up in the vaccination drive.

The EU has the chance to think bigger and strategically invest in a more reliable geopolitically neighbourhood. Ideally, Brussels could utilise a future ‘vaccine diplomacy’ to help to cure the region epidemiologically and improve its geopolitical autonomy.



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