

Moscow's Strategic Narrative and the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Quest for Vaccine and Prestige

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Abstract

Russia, a Eurasian power with an anti-Western foreign policy agenda and a counter-hegemonic discourse, made an important attempt to develop a reliable vaccine, a key to fixing the deadly effects of the pandemic, and a matter of honor and prestige for a great power. While fighting the pandemic could not turn into a global effort because of its nationally organized and politically motivated character, the Kremlin challenged the West, not only in the scientific but also in the ideational arena by promoting a success story that ultimately aimed to undermine the rhetoric of Western normative superiority. Contemporary Russian foreign policy is based on a strategic narrative that questions the strength and permanence of the Western-dominated international system and envisions a greater role for Russia and China.

The article falls into four sections. The first part focuses on “the rise of Russia” narrative that questions the superiority of the democratic liberal model. By so doing, the Kremlin not only provides a counter-argument against the oft-raised criticisms of its illiberal authoritarian regime but also takes an offensive stance against the Western democracies arguing that they are outmoded to fight against global problems. The second part discusses the employment of the Kremlin's strategic narrative during the time of the pandemic. The third part scrutinizes Moscow's bid to develop the first working vaccine. It is argued that the race for the discovery of a vaccine became a part of the discursive rivalry among great powers for prestige and honor in global politics rather than just a scientific and public health issue. The article concludes with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Kremlin's storyline, which aims to convince domestic and foreign audiences at the time of the pandemic.

Keywords

Russian foreign policy, COVID-19 pandemic, Sputnik V, International order, Strategic narrative.

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Makale geliş tarihi : 29.09.2022
Makale kabul tarihi : 01.12.2022

Moskova'nın Stratejik Anlatısı ve COVID-19 Pandemisi: Aşı ve Prestij Arayışı

Özet

Batı karşıtı bir dış politika gündemine ve hegemonya karşıtı söyleme sahip bir Avrasya gücü olarak Rusya, COVID-19 pandemisinin ölümcül etkilerini yok etmek için bir aşı geliştirmeye çalışmıştır. Bu girişim, büyük bir güç olduğu iddiasındaki Rusya için aynı zamanda onur ve prestij meselesi olarak görülmüştür. Salgınla mücadele, ulusal düzeyde örgütlendiği ve siyasi bir karaktere sahip olduğu için küresel bir çabaya dönüşmezken Kremlin, Batı'nın normatif üstünlük retoriklerini zayıflatmayı amaçlayan bir başarı anlatısı ile sadece bilimsel değil, düşünsel anlamda da Batı'ya meydan okumuştur. Günümüz Rus dış politikası, Batı hakimiyetindeki uluslararası sistemin gücünü ve kalıcılığını sorgulayan ve Rusya ile Çin için daha büyük bir rol öngören bir anlatıya dayanmaktadır.

Makale dört bölümden oluşmaktadır. İlk bölüm, demokratik liberal modelin üstünlüğünü sorgulayan "yükselen Rusya" anlatısını ele almaktadır. Bu anlatı ile Kremlin, otoriter rejimine yöneltilen eleştirilere bir karşı argüman geliştirmekle kalmıyor, aynı zamanda küresel sorunlara karşı savaşmak için modası geçmiş olduğunu iddia ettiği Batılı demokrasilere karşı agresif bir duruş da sergilemektedir. İkinci bölüm, pandemi döneminde Rusya'nın stratejik anlatısını nasıl kullandığını tartışmaktadır. Üçüncü bölüm Moskova'nın dünyada işe yarayan ilk aşığı geliştirme gayretini incelemektedir. Aşı yarışı sadece bilimsel veya halk sağlığı ile ilgili bir mesele olmaktan çok, küresel siyasette prestij kazanmak için girişilen söylemsel rekabetin bir parçası haline gelmiştir. Makalenin son bölümü, Kremlin'in pandemi döneminde yerli ve yabancı izleyicileri ikna etmeyi amaçlayan anlatısının güçlü ve zayıf yönlerini değerlendirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Rus dış politikası, COVID-19 pandemisi, Sputnik V, Uluslararası düzen, Stratejik anlatı.

Introduction

The world experienced a dreadful pandemic in 2020. Pictures showing desperate conditions of the Western capitals were not much different from horror movie scenes. However, the fact that the pandemic hit the rich like the poor caused some rejoicing in those who thought that the selfish Western-led world order would come to an end. Meanwhile, the Kremlin increased its criticism of Western liberalism and questioned the future of the global space. What Russia sought was to bolster a positive image for itself - a responsible great

power free from the negative attributes of Western countries (i.e. imperialist, egotistical, interventionist). The Russian political elite saw the outbreak as an opportunity for Russia to gain a better international position, as Russia's success in fighting the coronavirus was considered to represent the rise of an alternative normative standpoint in global politics to Western liberal standards. The Russian leadership attached great importance to the marketing of its scientific explorations, particularly vaccine development, as a part of its image-making and soft power strategy.

The first part of the article discusses the Russian strategic narrative that defends the rise of Russia in global politics. The second part examines how the Kremlin employed its strategic narrative in the pandemic that struck the world. As the pandemic raised many questions about the strength and persistence of the Western-dominated international system, the Kremlin presented its fight against COVID-19 as a success story which would eventually support its strategy to play an increasing role in changing world order. Accordingly, the third part discusses the bid for a vaccine as part of bolstering Moscow's image and soft power vis-à-vis its Western counterparts. Since the development of the first vaccine for the virus would eventually skyrocket the image of Russia in world politics, research and development of a working vaccine became an integral part of the great power rivalry. Public diplomacy and nation branding became key aspects of the fight against the virus, as great powers were eager to promote their vaccines. While Moscow's attitude towards Western democracies could best be captured by a cold-blooded geopolitical rivalry, the rhetoric towards the developing and underdeveloped countries was characterized more by soft power diplomacy and great power responsibility. Both strategies aimed to bolster the image of Russia in global politics as a major power as strong as Western democracies but more responsible than them.

The article concludes with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian narrative, which challenges the idea that Western liberal democracy is the best model for the rest of the world. The failure of Western leadership during the pandemic strengthened the persuasiveness of Russian rhetoric, which argued that Russian/non-Western/illiberal norms and ideas could better handle crises in the global space. However, although the statistical information is an important tool in Moscow's strategic thinking and public diplomacy, the image of Russia as an authoritarian state downplays the reliability of the information originating from Russia. Accordingly, Russia, where the lack of transparency diminishes the credibility of the rhetoric, endeavors to develop new communication strategies to convince the audience of their success stories and display the failures of the West.

Kremlin's Strategic Narrative: "The Rise of Russia in a Changing Global Order"

This work uses the concept of strategic narrative to understand Russian foreign policy in the pandemic-struck international environment. Strategic narratives are stories with political purposes. Policy-makers must convince others that the policy preference is achievable and normatively desirable. Thus, they defend their choices by promoting strategic narratives which appeal values and interests of a target audience. Strategic narratives are related to soft power and public diplomacy. (Miskimmon et al, 2013; Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017) Similarly, the Kremlin crafts narratives to bolster Russia's image as a great power, justify aggressive Russian foreign policy in its neighborhood, and challenge the Western normative superiority over Russia. Moscow's narrative about its fight against the pandemic is a policy narrative that interacts with Kremlin's identity narrative (Russia is a great power) and system narrative (the international system is multipolar).

Moscow's strategic narrative challenges Western political and normative superiority. The relationship between Russia and the West has increasingly been portrayed as rivalry and conflict. Hybrid warfare, disinformation campaigns, and propaganda activities are the new lexicon of this relationship. One argument of the Russian strategic narrative is a besieged Russia by the West. (Feklyunina, 2008: 612) The message is directed to the domestic audience and argues that the Russophobe West, unhappy with Moscow's increasing power and influence, pursues an anti-Russia strategy. The West emerges as threatening geography for Russia. Any demand for more freedom or democratization is mostly considered as a part of foreign encroachments and Western intervention. Western criticisms over the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny, the Russian political dissident, and the fierce measures against demonstrations to free him were recent examples of this understanding. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, responded to the Western criticisms over Navalny protests by claiming that the law enforcement measures in the West were harsher than in Russia. (TASS, 3 February 2021) The Western criticisms regarding the increasingly authoritarian rule in Russia are, thus, explained as a part of ill-willed attacks on Russian sovereignty. The Kremlin's political choices are justified with arguments of preserving domestic order, defending sovereignty against external threats, and ensuring maximum geopolitical influence. Thus, a strong centralized government is a necessity for the integrity of the state and the unity of the nation. The pandemic has strengthened the Kremlin's hand on the need for strong leadership and order.

Russia's disagreement with the West about the meaning of order and democracy directs it to challenge the moral and normative superiority of the West by portraying it as a decaying civilization and contesting the Western norms as

being short of universal. (Hopf, 2016: 242) Lavrov explains the Russian perspective about international norms: “Genuine liberalism, in its sound, undistorted sense, has always been an important component of political philosophy both in Russia and worldwide. However, the multiplicity of development models does not allow us to say that the Western ‘basket’ of liberal values has no alternative.” (Lavrov, 2019: 11) Thus, the Kremlin asks for pluralism rather than hierarchy and universalism in understanding and application of norms, and offers alternative interpretations to the Western norms and institutions in global politics as in the example of sovereign democracy. (Ziegler, 2012) This is what Bobo Lo (2020: 312) claims as “de-universalization of international norms.”

According to the Kremlin, the idea of universal norms is just a form of Western aggressiveness and expansionism. Western ideas are not universal or superior to other ideas prevalent in different regions. The local traditions should be respected and protected. This normative perspective includes an understanding that the Western world should not intervene in the spaces that are called the Russian and Chinese worlds. (Omelicheva, 2016) Russian criticism does not imply a Cold War-type division of the world but represents the multiplicity of ideas and a firm stance against universalism and cosmopolitanism. Thus, the Russian narrative challenges the idea of the universality of the liberal order. The West’s failure to cope with the pandemic and to help those in need has increased Russia’s criticism of the superiority of Western liberal norms.

The Western liberal order puts Russia into a category of the secondary state characterized by many problems. However, the Russian strategic narrative claims that Russia is a capable country, which can cope with global problems much better than Western states. In the Kremlin’s depiction, Russia has a robust political and economic system. Russia today loudly utters that it is not inferior to the Western democracies, it is not a periphery of the West, and it is not a secondary state in global affairs. Russian exceptionalism also offers a useful explanation about the source of the Russian power, emphasizing the unique role of Russia’s geography and civilization. Thus, Moscow’s different style of governing is not a disadvantage for Russia compared with Western democracies. Russia offers an image of a great power rather than a second-class democracy and inefficient economy to secure a better status in global politics.

Another major argument of the Russian strategic narrative is the emergence of a new international order in which Russia would secure a better and just place. (Karaganov and Suslov, 2018) According to the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov “[t]he transformation of the world order has become irreversible.” (Lavrov, 2019: 9) Nonetheless, Russia is neither a systemic rival promoting an alternative model of global governance nor a great power to

assume the burden of leadership due to its limited power capabilities. (Kortunov, 2016) What Kremlin seeks is the maximization of Moscow's influence and status in the liberal international system. In Sakwa's (2021) formulation Russia's revisionism is "a rejection of the practices of US-led international order, but not of the system in which it operates." Tsygankov (2021) describes Russia's assertiveness as "an answer to American revisionism which acted to guarantee the American primacy." Moscow defends the possible reallocation of power in favor of Eurasian countries as a positive development to construct a democratic multipolar international order where Russia would assume a greater role. (Feklyunina, 2008: 615) Thus, the rise of China and Russia, which is declared by the West as clear examples of rising authoritarianism and a threat to the liberal international system, is explained as a positive development in the direction of global peace and stability. Moscow advocates a multipolar world based not only on the distribution of power but also on cultural, normative, and civilizational diversity. (Omelicheva, 2016: 722)

The Russian style of politics today is not on the defensive against Western discourse that prioritizes democracy and human rights. According to the Russian perspective, international order should evolve in the direction in which state sovereignty is respected, and Western interventions with the pretexts of human rights and democracy are prevented. The pandemic has given the Kremlin the moral high ground in prioritizing order over freedom and legitimizing its authoritarian rule.

The Kremlin's Success Story in the Time of Pandemic

The fight against coronavirus has exposed the vulnerability of the leading Western nations and the Western-led international system. As the pandemic inflicted great harm to the image of the developed Western states, it offered a good opportunity for the rising powers of Eurasia to raise their voices. Western primacy in the international system has been questioned for some time due to Russia's return as a major actor and China's remarkable rise. Today, the positions of rising non-Western states, which are bitter critics of American unilateralism and Western normative superiority, have become even more important. For the Russian elite, it is time for Russia to have a say in global affairs. The Kremlin, thus, seems to be ready to maximize Russia's prestige by offering its own version of governing and crisis management. The Kremlin wants to present a narrative about Russia as a great power, free from the double standards, insincerity, arrogance, and selfishness of the West. Accordingly, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, harshly criticized the Western policies during the pandemic, underlining Moscow's will and capacity to further international cooperation:

This is our difference from a number of Western countries who not only seek to politicize a strictly humanitarian issue of fighting the coronavirus infection, but also to use the pandemic to punish the undesirable governments, by ignoring the UN's calls to at least temporarily withdraw a portion of unilateral restrictions that complicate the sanitary and epidemiological situation in the corresponding countries. (TASS, 30 December 2020)

In the Russian rhetoric, the West is portrayed not only as a failed geography in the fight against the pandemic but also as a failed civilization selfishly seeking just its own salvation. Moscow's claim lies in the idea that Russia is better equipped to tackle the problems of the post-coronavirus world. However, for Russia what is at stake is prestige and a greater role and status in the changing international system.

In recent years, Chinese media circles have been frequently asking the question of what are human rights if you fail to keep your people alive or feed your people. (Global Times, 4 May 2020) These were both a response to the criticisms over human rights violations in China and proof for degradation of the Western image as a welfare community. Thus, it is valid to ask whether a democratic state with a robust civil society and individual liberties or a powerful authoritarian state equipped with multiple ways of controlling society can better fight the pandemic and its social and economic effects. China seems to be successful in controlling the spread of the virus better than the rest of the world. It was astonishing that the Wuhan city, where the virus originated, celebrated the new year with zeal while the Western capitals were all shut down in an apocalyptic silence to control the deadly outbreak in the first days of 2021. However, because of the absence of a free press in China and the limitations in the dissemination of fresh and reliable information, the world community is still doubtful about the authenticity of the Chinese success.

The Chinese success story was particularly important for Russia because it might show that the non-Western style of ruling and a Eurasian perspective of balancing between order and freedom worked well. Thus, the struggle against the virus was not only a matter of public health but also an indicator of the resilience of the state organization and regime type. The pandemic was a challenge for both authoritarian and liberal-democratic regimes to assess the vigor and success of their system and leadership. The answer to the questions of which state could best help its people, and which state was more capable to cope with crises was of paramount importance for the image of the great powers in domestic politics and in the global arena.

States, particularly the authoritarian ones, need success stories in time of troubles. Today, authoritarian leaders do not only depend on their security forces but more on popular approval to have lasting control in the domestic sphere. Since domestic politics is largely based on a narrative of strong and successful leadership, the struggle with the COVID-19 was a remarkable litmus test for Vladimir Putin's Presidency. Popular approval seems to be the moral justification to fill the gap for the politically and socially restricted domestic environment.

Today, no one knows how to reconcile the necessity for social control with individual rights and freedom, the distinguishing feature of the Western social order. Freedom was the victim of the pandemic, and this situation gave Eurasian powers a moral advantage that they did not enjoy before. The Western-originated ideas about individual freedom, civil society, human rights, democratic political atmosphere all became secondary as human contact had become difficult with the fear of contagion. States either willingly or unwillingly limited public gatherings and social events. At such a juncture, it was increasingly difficult to criticize governments for the absence of democratic reforms or personal liberties. RT, the government backed Russian news channel, launched its own COVID-19 freedom index where the Western states showed poor performance because of the pandemic restrictions. The question of the news title was catchy: "Has the pandemic turned your government into totalitarians?" (RT, 2021)

The pandemic offered a convenient atmosphere for the countries that challenge the international order and bolstered the narrative that the Western primacy was weakening. It also supported the claim that Russia deserved a better stance in the global system. Strong states ruled by strong leadership can bring order to the streets and societies in the pandemic struck world. Thus, Russia and China, the states which prioritize order against freedom, and sovereignty against democracy, speak more loudly regarding the relevance and correctness of their moral position.

The authoritarian regimes had many advantages in a period when the populations are under strict state control. Crisis management was more difficult in Western democracies when compared with Russia where it was mostly normal to postpone the freedom and rights of the people. Freedom and democracy are such an important part of the Western perspective to the politics that any precaution or restriction was refused and often resisted by the Western societies. (Kortunov, 2020) Anti-lockdown demonstrations that spread all over Europe showed that people were tired of coronavirus restrictions and wanted their freedom back. (Gul, 2021) Surveillance during the pandemic gave a significant impetus to the discussions about the changing state-society relations, and the question to what extent individual freedoms could be frozen or postponed became a vital question in Western democracies.

Development, production, and promotion of vaccines had a significant role in the fight against the pandemic. Therefore, the exploration and marketing of the vaccine were embedded into the “the rise of Russia” narrative. The following part discusses the Russian effort to attain a COVID-19 vaccine as a dimension of its image-making strategy in great power rivalry.

Sputnik V in Global Race: “The First COVID-19 Vaccine in the World”

According to experts, vaccine development and production normally take more than eight years, and the fastest vaccine production before the outbreak took about four years. (Felter, 2021) The pandemic, however, forced governments and scientists to develop a vaccine as quickly as possible. In shorter than one year, many pharmaceutical companies have shared the good news about the success of their discovery. As the vaccination was considered the only way out of the disease, a working vaccine would boost the developer country’s image. Therefore, it was a matter of prestige and honor for great powers to develop a vaccine.

While foreign policy statements always underlined the need to prevent vaccine nationalism and the necessity for fair distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, they were never easy goals to achieve. Fighting the pandemic hardly turned into a global effort. Rather, states followed their national strategies. (Bollyky and Bown, 2020) Worse still, research activities to develop vaccines turned into a race between Western democracies and the rising powers of Eurasia. The Russian narrative regarding the vaccine competition was based on the arguments discussed above: Russia was under Western attack, Russia was an able and responsible country. Russia pursued the rules of geopolitics to counter the assumed Western attacks and employed its diplomatic skills to present itself as a responsible great power, and to boost its image and soft power.

This section first discusses Russia’s vaccine development as part of great power competition and then highlights Russia’s employment of vaccine as an influence broker in middle and low-income countries, particularly in Eurasia, Latin America, and Africa.

Vaccine Geopolitics: Russia and the West

In August 2020, Moscow declared that the time honored Gamaleya Research Institute developed an effective vaccine. The Kremlin was quick in approving the use of the vaccine to boost Russia’s international image although phase three - testing on humans - was incomplete. It was the earliest date for an

approved vaccine in the global fight with coronavirus. The reason for this was seen in the motto of the vaccine's global promotion: "The first registered COVID-19 vaccine in the world". (sputnikvaccine.com) The Kremlin sought to show that Russian science was not inferior to Western science by discovering its vaccine earlier than other great powers. The naming of the vaccine – Sputnik V – was also related to its global promotion, and carried a message for the rivals: the Kremlin was ready for a rivalry with the West, as it had been in the first decades of the Cold War. The Sputnik was the first artificial satellite sent by the Soviet Union in 1957. (Foy, 2020) At the height of the Cold War, it was a real blow to the US prestige.

Compared to the vaccines made by the American companies Pfizer and Moderna, Sputnik V was not only cheaper but also easier to store and transport since it did not need an elaborate cold chain. However, Sputnik V's effectiveness as a scientific project became a secondary issue, because of its hasty approval and stunning naming. For many observers, it was only one of the Kremlin's projects to get political power. The critics even argued that it was not a real vaccine, since it did not complete the necessary procedures. Thus, Russia's revisionist foreign policy in recent years and deterioration of relations with the West prevented the Russian vaccine from playing a wider role in the global fight against the pandemic.

Moscow's foreign policy has often been discussed concerning its success in instrumentalizing and even weaponizing energy, diaspora, information and narrative against neighboring countries. (Grigas, 2012; Saari, 2014; Kalinina, 2016; Pieper, 2020; Tyushka, 2022) Thus, when it comes to Russia, even normally humanitarian or economic issues are considered to be matters of power politics. During the pandemic, unsurprisingly, the Western states, suspicious of the Kremlin's goals, accused Russia of politicizing the vaccine. Particularly, Poland and the Baltic states, which were once controlled by Moscow and located in the proximity of the Russian borders, were anxious about the possibility that the Kremlin could use the vaccine as a foreign policy tool to increase its influence in Eastern Europe.

The great powers were interested in the narrative of vaccine distribution. Who would be the provider of the vaccine and the liberator of the world from the pandemic? At such a point, the great powers did not want to lose ground against their rivals. While the Western nations desperately tried to save themselves and were unable to show the ability and will to help the poorer parts of the world, China and Russia seemed to have the advantage of persuading the world community that they acted more responsibly and generously. Theresa Fallon, director of a Brussels-based think-tank, noted that "It is a card Vladimir Putin can play to move from the narrative held by some in the international

community that Russia is a pariah state after the annexation of Crimea, to a more positive narrative of a vaccine provider and ‘liberator’ from the pandemic.” (Chassany, 2021)

The pandemic could not serve to facilitate the cooperation between East and West, but rather instigated the rise of suspicions about the intentions of each other. The Eurasian powers, Russia, China, and Iran all produced their own vaccines with hardly any scientific cooperation with foreign partners. There was no real information sharing in developing vaccine. Thus, every state concentrated its efforts to be the winner in this competition. This competition even turned into Cold War-like espionage activities. Since the states tried to preserve valuable information about vaccine production, the intelligence and counterintelligence activities composed another aspect of global rivalry. In July 2020, British intelligence declared that the Russian hackers targeted the organization in Britain, Canada, and the US trying to develop a vaccine. (Fox and Kelion, 2020)

According to the US state department and intelligence circles, there was a Russian disinformation campaign by the Russian Spanish media outlets to convince Spanish-speaking countries that the Russian coronavirus vaccine worked better than its Western competitors. (Frenkel, Abi-Habib and Barnes, 2021) Josep Borrell, then the highest diplomat of the EU, accused Russia of disseminating false information about the Western developed vaccines: “Western vaccine developers are openly mocked on multi-lingual Russian state-controlled media, which has in some cases led to absurd claims that vaccines will turn people into monkeys.” According to Borrell, disinformation aimed to discredit Western vaccine in the possible markets for Russian Sputnik V. (Reuters, 28 December 2020)

On the other hand, Russian authorities blamed the West for spreading false information about the effectiveness of the Russian vaccine. Mariya Zakharova, the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, was highly outspoken in her claim that there was an ongoing war of vaccines:

When they couldn’t find anything to latch onto, they came up with a ‘brilliant’ thing: they said that Russia is evil because it conducts its own misinformation campaign regarding Western vaccines. This is simply some kind of absurdity. The vaccine war is underway, but, I think, this is not the war of scientists, this is the war of politicians and precisely those fighters of the information frontlines that we deal with on the pages of mostly Western mainstream [media], they are pontificating on TV, and so on. (TASS, 24 December 2020)

According to Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, global pharmaceutical companies aimed to prevent the Russian vaccine to enter the market. He further claimed that the vaccine competition was politicized and dirty methods were used to discredit the Russian vaccine. (RIA, 11 December 2020; TASS, 11 December 2020) Famous film producer Oliver Stone also criticized the West for not taking account of the Russian vaccine. (The Moscow Times, 15 December 2020)

Vaccine Diplomacy: Russia and the Developing World

For many, vaccine diplomacy and humanitarian aid were nothing but a continuation of geopolitical rivalry by soft power means. Moscow was also interested in projecting an image of a benevolent state for the global society, while portraying the Western states as egotistic for their unwillingness to share their scientific explorations for the global good. Russia's vaccine diplomacy aimed to boost cooperation in other segments of foreign policy. Many African or Asian states turned their face to Russia, as they could not see any possibility of Western help. Despite difficulties supplying the necessary amount of vaccines for domestic consumption, Russia did not hesitate to send Sputnik V jabs to Belarus and Argentina. (Aljazeera, 29 December 2020)

Sputnik V was the fifth vaccine with an order of 765 million doses by March 2021. Over 70 countries approved the use of Sputnik V as of November 2021. (www.statista.com) Russian official news outlets welcomed the praises for the Russian vaccine, particularly coming from the developing states which were convinced of the efficiency of Sputnik V. Having quoted the Serbian innovation minister, Russian news agency TASS argued that there was a colossal interest in the Russian vaccine in the world. (TASS, 29 January 2021) The Mexican president praised the Russian vaccine as a success of the Russian science. (RIA, 25 January 2021) According to the Russians, the West overlooked the Russian success, and "the first COVID-19 vaccine of the world" was not able to obtain approval of the Western states and any order from the developed countries.

Vaccine diplomacy became a principal part of the foreign policy agenda in a divided world. While Western nations were reluctant to buy either Russian or Chinese vaccine, Russia did not prepare to use a Western vaccine, planning to depend on its own scientific efforts and production capacity. At this juncture, the small and poor states should rely on their powerful friends and successful diplomacy to vaccinate their population. (Lomsadze, 12 January 2021) The argument that the Western states were selfish to produce the vaccine for only themselves, while Russia and China were ready to share their scientific achievements with the developing world was not totally baseless. While private

companies were more visible in the West, the Kremlin took vaccine development and advertisement as a vital part of its national policy. The Russians showed that they were not only successful in finding a cure to the pandemic but also they were ready to share it with friends.

The development and production of vaccines have economic and political consequences. There is a huge market for vaccines and companies are in difficulty to reply to the demand. Political ties play a role in the dissemination of rare vaccines. Russia wanted to supply its friends. Thus, it emerged as a convenient source to boost Russian soft power in its neighborhood and beyond. For Russia, Sputnik V was a matter of prestige that could show Russian power in science and technology as a leading state in global politics.

Russia made agreements with South American and Asian countries to supply its vaccines. Even some of the Western countries, which could not solve the shortage of vaccine, discussed the possibility of buying Russian or Chinese vaccine. (Prabhala and Ling, 5 February 2021) Most importantly, the vaccine was used as an influence broker in the Russian neighborhood, the so-called near abroad. There were ongoing negotiations with the CSTO members for supplying them with the Russian Sputnik V vaccine or launching a program for joint production. Kazakhstan was a production partner, and Belarus was the first country to approve the vaccine after Russia. Even Ukraine debated using the Russian vaccine despite there was an ongoing war in the Eastern part of the country ignited by Moscow. The Russian jab was promoted by the pro-Russian politicians and media in Ukraine. However, the Ukrainian government considered the vaccination not only a public health issue but also a matter of geopolitics, and finally banned Sputnik V. (Reuters, 29 January 2021)

How Convincing was the Russian Narrative?

Although Russia did not give pictures of desperation during the pandemic, the Kremlin was hardly successful in convincing people of the quality of their vaccines and the reliability of official statistics. The official reports of the COVID-19 cases and the death tolls were considered controversial. The difference in the death tolls between 2019 and 2020 showed that the coronavirus deaths in Russia were probably three times higher than officially reported in 2020. (BBC, 29 December 2020)

Russia also failed to convince the majority of its population and the world community that it found a reliable vaccine. (Foy, 13 August 2020) According to the survey of the Levada Center, by February 2021, 58 percent of the Russian population were not ready to get vaccinated. (Levada, 2 February 2021) By Spring 2021, only 3 percent of Russians were vaccinated. This number would reach

almost half of the population in the following year when the vaccination became mandatory in Russia. (Loseva, 2022)

Moscow's agreements about the production and marketing of its vaccines, especially with the European powers like Hungary and Serbia, were explained as a major victory of Russian diplomacy. The results published in *The Lancet*, a prestigious Western scientific journal, on 2 February 2021, which declared more than 90 percent efficacy, increased the interest in the Russian jab. However, the Western skepticism about the Russian vaccine prevented the marketing success and the wished image-making. (Yaffa, 8 February 2021)

Russia sought to compensate for its own credibility problem by exposing the weaknesses of the Western alliance and undermining the reliability of the Western institutions and norms. (Liik, 21 May 2018) Russia's critical stance toward the West was a response to Western criticisms regarding the authoritarian trends in Russian domestic politics and Moscow's aggressive foreign policy in the former Soviet space and beyond. Thus, competing narratives emerged to justify policies, damage the image of rivals, or teach people how to think and react to the new realities of the world. Digital platforms, government-controlled NGOs, and information agencies spread Russia's perspective on global developments and aimed at creating a convincing narrative about the success of the Kremlin's pandemic policies. Russian state-run media outlets like RT and Sputnik often claimed the moral decadence of the West and challenged the normative superiority of the Western democracies.

Disinformation seems to be part of the great power rivalry to mobilize people in domestic politics, and gain the most desired prestige and dignity in the international space. The Kremlin also utilized disinformation and conspiracy theories to discredit Western narratives and exaggerate the weaknesses of the Western states in managing the crisis. (Scocozza 2020: 390) For many analysts, this was part of the Russian hybrid warfare with the Western world. The popularity of conspiracy theories skyrocketed in 2020, especially about the origins of the virus, and the uses of the vaccines. (Lynas, 20 April 2020) Disinformation about the pandemic, which WHO called infodemic, spread as quickly as the virus itself. (WHO, 23 September 2020) Many people in China thought that it was America that spread the coronavirus to China. The Russian Communist Party claimed the vaccination would be a covert mass chip implantation by globalists. Bill Gates was a scapegoat because he was believed to be the evil behind vaccination and chip implantation. (Goodman and Carmichael, 29 May 2020)

The numbers, statistics, and death tolls, which aimed to convince the audience of the success of political leadership, became an inescapable part of the fight against the virus. However, the reliability of Russian statistics was thought

to be low due to the politicization of numbers. Russia used statistics as a tool to defend honor or gain prestige rather than help understand the effects of the pandemic. Moreover, according to the Kremlin any critical look at the official figures was an attack on integrity and order. Accordingly, the Russian political elite considered any criticism emerging in Western sources as a disinformation operation against Russia.

The pandemic served as another battleground in the narrative contestation between the West and Russia. There are conflicting stories about the aims of Russian foreign policy and the success of the Kremlin's fight against the pandemic. (Köremezli, 2021) Control of information channels gives authoritarian states the capability to create a better success story than countries where transparency and democratic debate prevent hiding information. Ironically, however, the image of Russia as an authoritarian state in which censorship possibly prevents the free dissemination of information damages the credibility of the Russian storyline.

Conclusion

The Kremlin criticizes Western democracies for being expansionist, interventionist, and hypocritical. Moreover, Russian foreign policy challenges American primacy and unilateralism, and the dominant role and position of the Western states. Meanwhile, the rise of ultra-nationalism and xenophobia, and economic stagnation in Western democracies allowed Russia to claim its norms and institutions as better alternatives in the post-pandemic world. The pandemic also revealed that the West is fragmented, weak, and selfish geography rather than a united and morally responsible one. Accordingly, Russian foreign policy discourse explained the problems of the current international system, even the failure to cope with the pandemic, with the incompetence of the Western-led global order. Russia, as a member of the UN Security Council, despite being one of the key actors of the post-WWII order, did not share the burden of image degradation of the West during the pandemic. The pandemic has given authoritarian Eurasian powers new opportunities to challenge the superiority of the Western norms and narratives and to offer their understanding of rule and order, arguing that they are better suited to the changing world order. Today, as the euphoria of the Western triumphalism of the 1990s wanes, Eurasian leaders defend the idea of the apocalyptic fall of the Western liberal order. The moral superiority of the West further declined by its selfish policies that prevented helping poor nations during the pandemic.

However, the West remains the scientific center of the world and despite the Russian and Chinese attacks on the credibility of the West, people expect a

definitive solution to COVID-19 mostly from Western world. At this juncture, Russia needs a convincing storyline to strengthen its position in global politics. Authoritarian rule and lack of transparency are the main obstacles to the credibility of the Russian narrative. Therefore, the Kremlin's rhetoric about the decline of the West and the rise of Russia must be supported by material evidence. Yet, because of its critical tone about what is happening in the world, Russia's narrative appeals to many who are dissatisfied with the current order. Having relations with the West nearly frozen after the undeclared war against Ukraine in 2022, Moscow insists on defending its strategic narrative of Russia as a great power in changing world order. Today, there are conflicting stories about Russia's aims. Although Russia's foreign policy preferences in recent years support the image of Russia as an aggressive and even a reckless power, the Kremlin still promotes the alternative storyline about Russia that it is the power fighting against Western imperialism/interventionism to build a more democratic world order. The reality that there are plenty of people who buy the Kremlin's alternative narrative gives Russia the power to invade its neighbor without total isolation from the international system.

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