

VACCINE DIPLOMACY AS A WEAPON IN THE KREMLIN'S GEOPOLITICAL ARSENAL

Russia's ruling elite has exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to realise its geopolitical ambitions.

Vaccines intended for domestic use have instead been used to advance foreign policy aims.

Russia's vaccine diplomacy has involved extensive state-led influence operations.

OPPORTUNISM ON THE FRONT LINE OF THE PANDEMIC

During the first pandemic wave, the Kremlin made its opening gambit toward its geopolitical goals when it offered a "helping hand" to countries experiencing a shortage of personal protective equipment.

The most notable example of the Kremlin's "mask aid" was a military convoy of medical supplies sent to Italy in March 2020. The seemingly genuine relief effort to the then-epicentre of COVID-19 in Europe turned out to be a deliberate information operation that paved the way for further pandemic-related stunts by the Kremlin. Under the guise of sending aid, using the slogan "From Russia with Love", the Kremlin spread messages in the media that Italy had been abandoned during hard times and that there was no solidarity within the European Union. To this end, it used everything from misrepresented images of public sentiment in Italy to outright lies.



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Senator Alexey Pushkov, Chair of the Interim Commission on Information Policy and Cooperation with the Media of the Russian Federation Council, claimed on social media that the Polish authorities would not allow Russian planes transporting humanitarian aid to Italy to cross its airspace due to blind hostility towards Russia. This false statement, quickly refuted by the Polish government, ultimately only caused a headache for Russian diplomats in Warsaw, who were bombarded with follow-up questions from journalists.

Source: Twitter

The Kremlin's mask diplomacy stunt in Italy was rendered more cynical by the fact that, at the same time, Russia's medical staff was already suffering from a lack of protective equipment. In many places, hospital workers were forced to fight the virus without masks and other protective equipment.

The goal of Russia's influence operations is to show itself as a powerful force who is ready and able to alleviate the global crisis.

When the Kremlin itself was finally forced to use diplomatic channels to ask for help with mask supplies from other countries, including Italy, the primary concern of the diplomatic corps were the optics of a major provider of aid suddenly appearing to reclaim its aid supplies.

The diplomats' concerns were justified because the broader goal of Russia's influence operations during the first wave of the pandemic was to bring the country to the forefront of the global fight against the coronavirus – to show itself as a powerful force ready and able to alleviate the global crisis.

These efforts culminated in August 2020 as President Vladimir Putin announced that Russian scientists had produced the world's first efficient COVID-19 vaccine.

VACCINE MARKETING THE RUSSIAN WAY

In parallel with reports of the launch of Russia's first COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V, the Kremlin triggered its state-controlled arsenal of influence measures, the most notable of which was a large-scale concealed smear campaign against rival Western vaccines.

The campaign, led by the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which oversaw Sputnik V's production and supply agreements, and its head Kirill Dmitriev, who is close to Putin, was not only designed to promote Sputnik V but also to highlight the potential health threats posed by Western vaccines.

Launched publicly in Russia's state media and covertly in the global social media sphere, the campaign focused on memes with discrediting content that were supposed to look like a citizens' initiative reflecting widespread public opposition to "suspicious" Western vaccines. The campaign was primarily targeted at major developing countries, such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, India, Egypt and Indonesia.

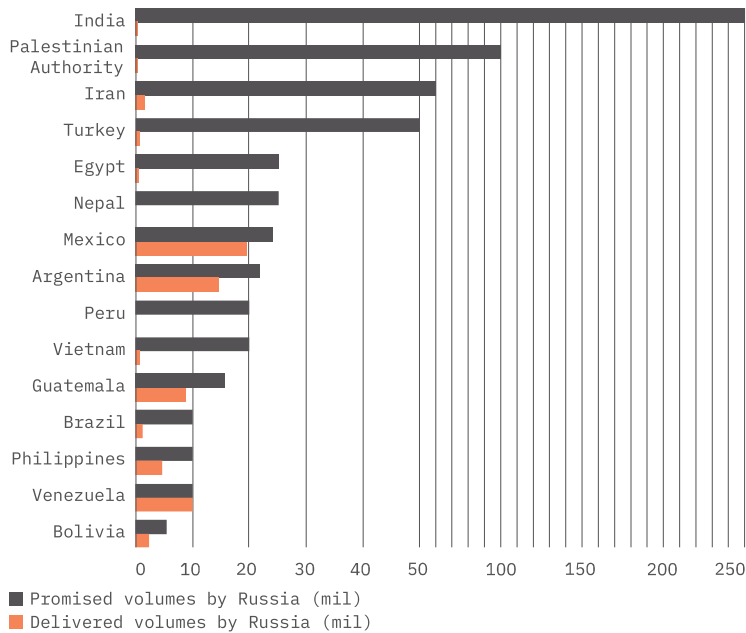
The power of the Kremlin's dark PR was most strongly felt by the British pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, whose vaccine, developed in collaboration with Oxford University scientists, was dubbed the "monkey vaccine" by Kremlin propaganda. To improve the vaccine's public image, the name was changed to Vaxzevria.

It is important to note that the choice of AstraZeneca as a target was far from random. At the time, it was among the most promising Western vaccines, with the greatest number of global advance supply agreements in place.

The smear campaign was backed by spectacular Sputnik V propaganda events for foreign medical experts as well as supply negotiations, which had become commonplace for Russian diplomats. RDIF management guidelines stipulated that it be explicitly emphasised that there is a risk of getting poor vaccines from the West that have not been tested on humans.

To help with its vaccine diplomacy efforts, the Kremlin also deployed an extensive network of influential individuals ready to lobby Sputnik V with the encouragement of the Russian authorities. These included Russian oligarchs with contacts abroad, former top politicians in the West, as well as prominent figures from business and entertainment communities around the world. The latter included people such as Argentine millionaire and film producer Fernando Sulichin, who acted as the Kremlin’s salesman in vaccine talks with the Argentine and Brazilian authorities, and with whom there were serious plans of producing a documentary film about the triumph of Sputnik V, to be directed by Sulichin’s close friend, Hollywood director Oliver Stone, who has himself successfully worked with the Kremlin in the past.

Promises related to the delivery of Russia’s Sputnik V versus the volumes delivered



Advance supply agreements of tens and hundreds of millions of Sputnik V doses for developing nations were meant to celebrate the global triumph of the Russian vaccine and perpetuate the image of Russia as a benevolent actor in the fight against coronavirus.

In reality, slightly more than 10% of the agreed-upon volume has been delivered, partly using vaccine stocks initially meant for Russia’s domestic population.

Source: Statista.com; open source

SETBACKS

The Kremlin's vaccine diplomacy efforts and widely publicised supply agreements for hundreds of millions of vaccine doses convey the impression of Russia's success in the fight against coronavirus. The reality however is different. Various machinations may have ensured initial reputational success, but maintaining this seems extremely difficult, if not impossible.

As early as April 2021, the RDIF found itself backed into a corner with supply agreements. Due to the lack of sufficient production capacity, it had to begin rescheduling agreements and reducing delivery volumes. Many countries have received only a small fraction of the vaccine supplies promised to them, and some none at all.

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Things have reached a point where foreign supply obligations are being met at the expense of Russia's domestic vaccine stocks: to calm foreign markets, and under pressure from the Russian Security Council, "extra doses" have been taken from vaccine stocks originally intended for Russia's domestic population. Such opportunism clearly shows where the real priorities of the Russian power elite lie in this crisis.

The authorities' miscalculation regarding the Russian population's usual susceptibility to state propaganda also promises to be fatal to the initial success. The intensive slander of Western vaccines proved to be a double-edged sword, as it made a large section of the Russian population distrustful of all vaccines. Globally, Russia remains at the forefront in terms of both deaths from coronavirus and low vaccination coverage.

However, there are also those in the Russian power elite who understand the seriousness of the situation and have become more active in restricting the export of vaccines for fear of domestic setbacks from overzealous vaccine diplomacy. But instead of helping to resolve the crisis, this has created two different camps among the Russian leadership – proponents and opponents of continuing active vaccine diplomacy – each of whom is trying to exert their influence to suppress the interests of the other side.

Despite everything, it is in our assessment likely in the Kremlin's interest to continue its vaccine diplomacy efforts to cast itself as a major international player. However, its lack of vaccine production and supply capacity and the increasingly critical situation of the coronavirus epidemic in Russia offer no good prospects for this. Therefore, the Kremlin may continue to back its investments in vaccine diplomacy using extensive state-led influence operations.