



Beyond Soft Power: Analysing Russian and Chinese Vaccine Diplomacy in the South Caucasus

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The use of soft power – the abilities of states to influence behavior and attitudes of foreign populations through attraction, rather than through military or economic means (i.e., hard power) – by a number of international actors is not a novel phenomenon and is exercised in various ways targeting societies and countries globally. At the same time, coercive actions such as economic and political influence, and the utilization of sharp power – use of information for hostile purposes – are applied by Russia and China. This policy paper examines and compares how ‘soft’ and ‘sharp’ power means are utilized by Russia and China in the South Caucasus. Both actors use economic and geopolitical leverage, such as foreign policy and trade priorities when it comes to the export of vaccines. Additionally, both extensively focus on developing countries and push the narrative over the lack of the effectiveness of Western vaccines through disinformation efforts. The paper explores the goals of Russian and Chinese ‘vaccine diplomacy’ and argues that in the current fight for geopolitical influence, vaccine diplomacy has become a key tool in the hands of actors such as Russia and China. Recommendations to deal more efficiently with the possible implications of Russian and Chinese vaccine diplomacy are presented in this paper.

Key words: Soft Power, China, Russia, Vaccine Diplomacy, Influence, South Caucasus, Sharp Power, Geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic created a new stage of scientific and medical race among countries – vaccine creation and its spread. Consequently, vaccine diplomacy has followed the current geopolitical order, where great powers - Russia, China, United States, Germany, Great Britain, European Union took a lead in the race. While medical institutions and companies in the West were working on vaccine trials, Russia announced its approval of Sputnik V back in August 2020, offering vaccine rollouts internally and globally starting fall 2020. Back in February 2021, China on its end started to provide vaccinations internally and pledged “to making a global public good” (CGTN 2021) to 69 countries and commercially providing to 28. The utilization of vaccine diplomacy in foreign policy and the will to assist developing countries have shown that the intention of both China and Russia are not only to win plaudits for fulfilling short-term needs but to cement their influence over the long term (Economist 2021). Moreover, in the vaccine race, vaccine diplomacy has given the opportunity to both actors to secure their global influence and take a lead over the Western actors. While developed countries purchased vaccines in advance from American and European manufacturers and focused on internal rollout, developing countries were, due to a lack of resources and negotiation power, forced to either wait for Western support or look for alternatives in China or Russia. This offered new prospects for Russia’s and China’s geopolitical influence. All three countries of the South Caucasus – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – are developing countries and have been in the spotlight of both Russia and China from the very beginning of global vaccine distribution. This paper provides examples and analyses of the secondary resources, opinion poll data, and news coverage and examines the concepts of soft and sharp power and examines the means of Russian, and Chinese vaccine diplomacies in the South Caucasus through analysis of soft and sharp power concepts.

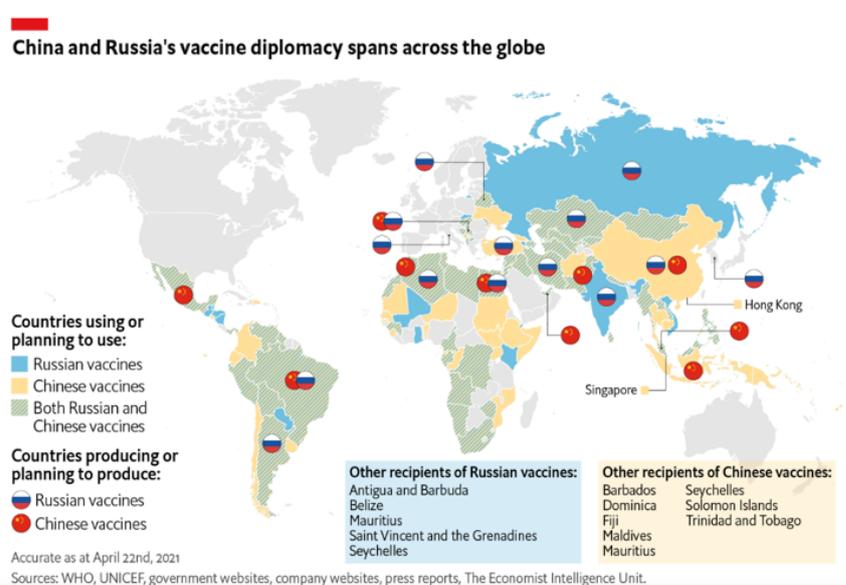
THE CONCEPT OF SOFT AND SHARP POWERS

Power is the ability to affect others to ensure a preferred outcome, and that can be accomplished by coercion, payment, or attraction and persuasion (Nye 2017). The traditional definition of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, identifies it as the ability of a state to influence another state through the attractiveness of its own image or its power of persuasion (Nye 2004, 6). It is also the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye 2017). Soft power is possessed, and its capabilities are actively used by states, international organizations, non-governmental structures and even terrorist networks.

Nye also suggests that soft power as a concept opposes hard power inherent in the realistic theory of international relations: the growth of an actor's attractiveness as opposed to force or propaganda methods. (Nye 2004, 20). As a result, soft power in its neoliberal understanding is endowed with positive features: the lack of coercion and the building of trust between the parties distinguishes soft power tools from information manipulation and propaganda. The soft power of a country is built on three major resources: culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye 2004, 6). One of the crucial components of soft power aims at the influence within the targeted countries in fighting for the "hearts and minds" of the publics and societies in those states. Soft power is not only "influence" but also "attractiveness", as the use of soft power aims to "inspire and attract the source of the corresponding impact, allowing the one who seeks it control, achieve the desired result." (Nye 2004, 10)

Figure 1 below shows the span Russian and Chinese vaccine diplomacy which is extensively spread all over the world. Vaccine diplomacy both globally and regionally has become a soft power tool of the foreign policy of both Russia and China. In the fight for geopolitical influence, vaccine diplomacy becomes a key tool, as the realization of soft power becomes central when it comes to image and nation-branding of a state.

Figure 1. Map of Russia and China's vaccine diplomacy



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit. 2021. Western powers have lost the vaccine diplomacy battle. Available at: <https://www.eiu.com/n/western-powers-have-lost-the-vaccine-diplomacy-battle/>

The classic definition of the soft power term initially is not compatible with the activities and soft power understanding of both authoritarian actors – Russia and China. Primarily, it is due to the geopolitical leverage and utilization of information, propaganda for malicious purposes. Since manipulative efforts and disinformation change the definition and meaning of soft power for Russia and China, it is important to examine the concepts of sharp and smart powers. In contrast to soft power, sharp power (Walker and Ludwig 2018), refers to the information warfare being waged by today's authoritarian powers, particularly China and Russia, which is characterized by the use of disinformation and similar forms of manipulation. Due to geographic location and transit potential in South Caucasus, China's interests in the region have been growing lately, it can offer the three South Caucasus states a new type of diplomatic cooperation to counterbalance European soft power and Russian smart power (Lambert 2021). At the same time, “smart power strategy denotes the ability to combine hard and soft power depending on whether hard or soft power would be more effective in a given situation” (Nye 2008). As mentioned earlier, and with regard to vaccine diplomacy, the communities and developing countries may be affected by both sharp and soft power approaches. Whereas smart power extends the idea of soft power, suggesting utilization of military means in combination with various types of diplomacy, persuasion for a cost-effective influence, legitimacy, and gains (Crocker 2007), in the vaccine diplomacy of Russia and China the soft and sharp power means are observed.

VACCINATION PROGRESS IN ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN, AND GEORGIA

The very first country to start a vaccine rollout campaign in South Caucasus was Azerbaijan starting on January 18, 2021, followed by Georgia in March 2021, and Armenia in April 2021. Georgia is the only country in the region which has not approved use of or received Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. The Chinese Sinovac, Sinopharm vaccines has been distributed through Covax platform to all three countries, and some quantities have also been purchased directly. Additionally, all three states have access to Pfizer-BioNTech (Germany/USA) and AstraZeneca (Sweden/UK). As of November 2021, has the highest rate of vaccination: 44.3% of the Azerbaijani adult population is fully vaccinated. In November 2021, Georgia was at 28.2% and Armenia at 9%.

After approval of the Russian vaccine in February 2021, Armenia agreed to purchase 1 million doses of Sputnik V vaccine back in April 2021 (Reuters 2021) and started vaccination with 15,000 doses. 50,000 AstraZeneca doses arrived through the international Covax program in May and Russia has distributed 74,000 Sputnik V vaccine doses in May/June to Armenia (Eurasianet 2021). 100,000 doses were reportedly shipped from China to Armenia back in April (Eurasianet 2021). Georgia has received most of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines in the region – 500,000 doses were donated by the United States and 468,000 doses by Poland to Georgia (Agenda.ge 2021). Lithuania and Belgium also stepped in with donations of AstraZeneca vaccines (86,400 and 15,000 doses). When the limited number of AstraZeneca (43,000 doses) and Pfizer (29,000 doses) vaccines were delivered to Georgia, China stepped in with 100,000 doses of Sinopharm and 100,000 doses of Sinovac. Later, Georgia received 1 million doses of Chinese vaccines through an Asian Development Bank loan to procure COVID-19 vaccines (Agenda.ge 2021). Azerbaijan purchased 4 million doses of the Chinese Sinovac vaccine (Azertag.az 2021). China also donated 150,000 doses to Azerbaijan in April 2021. Azerbaijan started its vaccination process with the Chinese Sinovac and AstraZeneca (Eurasianet 2021). Covax has promised a further 506,400 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine to Azerbaijan; the first batch of 84,000 have been delivered (Eurasianet 2021). 40,000 of Sputnik V doses arrived on June 10 and Baku has requested 300,000 more doses (Eurasianet 2021).

Although Azerbaijan started the vaccine rollout the earliest and continues to have the highest rate of vaccination in the South Caucasus, President Ilham Aliyev has repeatedly condemned what he calls developed countries' "unequal and unfair distribution" of vaccines (Eurasianet 2021). Pfizer appeared to be a desired vaccine brand amongst Georgians, as in the first 24 hours after the first batch of the Pfizer vaccine was delivered to Georgia, registration on the state vaccine registration portal spiked causing several crashes of the registration platform, and supply was unable to meet demand in certain regions. Georgian officials initially assured Georgians that they would not resort to procuring Chinese vaccines, but until the arrival of Pfizer, the Chinese vaccines were the only option for vaccination (Eurasianet 2021).

Currently, all three countries have enough resources to vaccinate their populations, however, the problem of vaccine hesitancy remains in all three countries. A study conducted by the Centre for Social Research in Baku and seven other economic regions involving 1,200 randomly selected respondents found that 58.3% of people believed they would be negatively impacted if they were vaccinated (Avetisyan et al. 2021). Meanwhile in Armenia almost half of the population (49%) does not trust vaccines at all, and 44% of those who do not intend to be vaccinated will not register for a vaccine unless the vaccine is considered safe (Avetisyan et al 2021). At the same time, half of Armenians polled at the time say that they either are satisfied or partially satisfied with the government's actions on sharing information on vaccines (IRI 2021). In an NDI and CRRC poll in Georgia, 47% of the population said that they would not get vaccinated against COVID-19 and 11% still do not know if they will (NDI 2021) and the reason for this is 'low trust in the quality of the COVID-19 vaccines.' In Georgia, 54% of the population feel that they have enough information on the vaccination process (NDI 2021). Failure in vaccine uptake may be a result of the inability of decision makers and responsible institutions to efficiently communicate with the public. The efforts of authoritarian actors such as Russia and China and internal actors who oppose vaccination, to undermine Western (and not only) vaccine effectiveness additionally creates obvious obstacles in the current public health matter.

AREAS OF CHINESE AND RUSSIAN SOFT POWER INFLUENCE IN VACCINE DIPLOMACY AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In contrast to the Western understanding of "soft power" – the ability of states to influence by "attraction", Russia and China utilize authoritarian and malign influences which include utilization of economic leverage, information operations and hybrid tactics, by which information manipulation and narrative become powerful tools. The initial aim of vaccine diplomacy can and may be considered a "soft power" approach aimed at a global public health good. However, due to the malign and authoritative nature of the activities of both actors, these actions may be more akin to 'sharp power' – the deceptive use of information for hostile purposes, which is a type of hard power (Nye, 2018). The findings of Ting Lee (2021) suggest that China's offer of use of its vaccines is used not only for image repair and for expanding Beijing's great power ambitions, but to reinforce and leverage existing soft power programs, and to capitalize on new economic and geopolitical opportunities. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Chinese bilateral approaches of vaccine diplomacy in the South Caucasus can also be considered under the influence of certain geopolitical gains aimed at future image building.

Russian and Chinese vaccine diplomacy "used as a tool against" Western "vaccine nationalism" (referring to the focus of developed countries on domestic vaccination) has become a topic of discussion in the West and the U.S. (Wilson 2021). In response to such claims, back in March, Russia's Vladimir Putin responded that

“all countries should be considering saving the lives of people and humanitarian reasons, rather than involving geopolitics or other sorts of commercial interests” (Vedomosti 2021). Similar statements were voiced by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who announced “that Chinese-made vaccines against COVID-19 would become a global public good” (Huang 2021). While allegedly focusing on humanitarian reasons, both powers established something of a lead in the race. At the G20 Summit in October 2021, Russian President Putin again lashed out at the West, claiming that “despite the decisions of the G20, not all countries in need have access to COVID vaccines. This is happening mainly because of dishonest competition, protectionism and because some states, especially those of the G20, are not ready for mutual recognition of vaccines and vaccination certificates (Al Jazeera 2021).” President Xi also made a similar call for mutual recognition of vaccine efficacy (Al Jazeera 2021).

Both Russia and China bet on the low price of their vaccines or on the humanitarian efforts, under which the vaccines are distributed as donations. Countries to focus on are developing ones, including South Caucasus. The vaccines also fall under the Belt and Road Partnership, (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC 2021) which is a global infrastructure strategy adopted by the Chinese government. China is looking to showcase its global health leadership to lower and middle-income countries (Huang 2021). China’s economic influence in the region and globally can grow even further, which could cause certain geopolitical shifts. Russia and China view Western soft power and its promotion of democracy and the free world as a disguise for global influences. At the same time, the West perceives Russian and Chinese vaccine diplomacy’s soft power means as a state project aimed at increasing positive image of both. This once again suggests that the use of soft power for the competitive purposes or in the case of some countries, can play down to the positive perception and image of the state at large.

The hesitancy and lack of proactive communication by local decision makers and relevant institutions in the countries of the South Caucasus has allowed both Russia and China to fill in the information vacuum by undermining Western vaccines and policies and retaining leverage in vaccine diplomacy over the South Caucasus region. The proactive efforts of China and Russia in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan show the intensity and increasing utilization of vaccine diplomacy for foreign policy gains and soft power influences within the positive perceptions towards both actors.

DISINFORMATION AND SOFT POWER

When it comes to Russian and Chinese soft power and vaccine diplomacy, the issue of malign activities and authoritarian interferences is crucial, which includes active interference through economic leverage, hybrid means, and disinformation. It may be argued that their disinformation efforts are a form of vaccine diplomacy in promotion of their respective strategic interests. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes by attraction rather than coercion or payment, disinformation is the distortion or manipulation of soft power, which already falls under sharp power concept.

Due to the internal political context, the Georgian authorities lacked the willingness to push far-right, conservative, and the highly religious segments of the public, in fact, the majority of the eligible population, to vaccination process. In addition to overall vaccine skepticism, some groups have been protesting the vaccination process and spreading disinformation online (MDF 2021). Similarly, in Armenia, far-right groups and politicians have attacked the overall vaccination process and mandates (Eurasianet 2021).

Although the internal and global anti-vaccination rhetoric of certain groups is similar (global conspiracy narrative, vaccines are not safe, they cause DNA change, vaccines are microchips, and the COVID-19 pandemic is not real), the disinformation and misinformation spread about Western vaccines is exploited and tailored by Russia and China in various contexts. Russia has been extensively spreading information in English, Russian, Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani on state online and other media channels such as Russia Today and Sputnik. For instance, in January 2021, Sputnik claimed that “Russian vaccines are saving everyone”, while undermining Pfizer, by claiming that “it may be dangerous, as Europeans were scared that the composition of Pfizer during trials was completely different from the one that was used for production, therefore, people don’t understand what jab they are going to get and what will happen to them” (Sputnik 2021). A study carried out by the Media Development Foundation suggested that Sputnik, through its various other channels – Sputnik Georgia, Sputnik Abkhazia, (in both Russian, Georgian, and English languages) – have spread the narrative over advantages of the Sputnik V vaccine, that the West is fighting China and Russia, while the latter are better at managing the pandemic and helping developing countries (MDF 2021). At the same time, the narratives spread by state media actors are picked up by the local media and extensively spread amongst the targeted populations (MDF 2021). Similar to disinformation narratives disseminated in Georgia, anti-Western narratives on the origins and effectiveness of vaccines has been spread in Armenia (Freedom House 2021).

Additional evidence from the EU and U.S. has shown such information manipulations and interventions (New York Times 2021). According to research by EUvsDisinfo, from the very beginning of the vaccine “race” the Kremlin has not only leveraged diplomatic channels, state-controlled media, and networks of supportive and alternative media outlets to promote its narrative of Sputnik V vaccine supremacy but has also run a simultaneous misleading mass campaign to demote other vaccines, especially Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, and AstraZeneca (EUvsDisinfo 2021). Targets have included Eastern Partnership countries and in particular, Georgia, while Azerbaijan received a lesser effect due to tougher local media controls (EUvsDisinfo 2021). China on its end started to utilize Russia’s playbook when it comes to disinformation and information operations (DW 2021). The methods primarily focused on the utilization of social media, the promotion of narratives favorable for Chinese vaccines on state networks and purchasing foreign outlets as proxies (CEPA 2020).

The current status quo of Georgian relations with Russia will not allow Russian vaccines to gain popularity in or be imported to Georgia, additionally, Georgian public health officials have been referring to the international (EU/FDA) authorization standards of vaccines, and this has not happened to Sputnik V (Netgazeti 2021). However, the efforts to diminish and undermine Western vaccines will continue in all three South Caucasus countries and generally with the regard to overall anti-vaccine rhetoric. This may continue to ensure vaccine hesitancy and favor the aims for both China and Russia.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Vaccine rollout and the provision of vaccines for the public is the responsibility of the states. The South Caucasus countries are of interest to both Russia and China for their transit and economic potential. Therefore, the next question should be considered: what is the aim of Russian and Chinese vaccine diplomacy? The prospective goal lays in possible increased leverage over the South Caucasus countries. The continuous effort to discredit and destabilize trust in the vaccination process and Western vaccines is in connection with the leverage that already exists in the South Caucasus region. For Russia, it is its threat of force and for China its economic dependency.

Both China and Russia will continue to either send for free or sell their vaccines to the South Caucasus. The current status quo of political relations will not allow Russia to spread its vaccine in Georgia, however, the efforts to diminish and undermine Western vaccines will continue, which on its end may extend the trend of vaccine hesitancy. Even though the U.S. and EU have reactively stepped in the vaccine diplomacy, there is still a lack of resources in terms of “vaccinating the whole world”. The public attitudes and lack of public trust in vaccines may be influenced by the information spread, however, governments should take and seek a proactive approach while communicating with the public the public health matter such as vaccination against the COVID-19.

To the policymakers of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan

- The similar tendency in vaccine hesitancy in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia suggests that communication with the public must be enhanced. Decision-makers must foster dialogue and formulate strategies with public health sector representatives, civil society organizations and relevant line ministries/policymakers. If needed, they should seek support and resources from the international community.
- The soft power understanding of Russia and China includes nation branding abroad, and in the countries that are targeted by the vaccine diplomacy – this on its end should be assessed by the respective Government policymakers and communicators for further policy planning and risk assessments. Proactively, policymakers can voice concerns over malign and disinformation efforts, despite the possible economic or political leverage both actors can be pursued towards the countries.
- Because public hesitancy remains high, the policymakers of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan should seek possibilities for cooperation and share the experience on bilateral levels, through interagency and working groups within ministries of health and foreign affairs. Policymakers need to continue communication and negotiation with the Western vaccine producers/governments. The authorization and research implemented by international organizations may help to plan and create a comprehensive fact-based communication campaign, which may increase public trust.
- Risk assessments and research on public attitudes towards Russia and China and analysis of impact, influence of soft power activities of Russia and China in the respective countries should be conducted in countries internally by strategic communication policymakers in cooperation with non-governmental research organizations. Such research can provide data on the positive or negative image of both actors and give an opportunity to analyze the possible geopolitical and economic leverage of both actors.

To the EU, U.S., and International Community:

- Because Russia and China are strategically expanding their geopolitical influence and reduce speculations over “vaccine nationalism” by Russia and China, the EU and the U.S. should continue to support and prioritize South Caucasus states in their efforts to support developing countries in the vaccination process.
- Since countries are highly vulnerable to disinformation efforts and malign influence which has been practiced particularly by Russia extensively, the EU and the U.S. should support civil society and state programs in the South Caucasus states that aim at the disinformation, hybrid and malign influence research and the development of media literacy skills.

- Leaving behind the political gains and focusing on the public health crisis, the international community needs to address the issue of vaccine diplomacy in the context of geopolitical competition. At the same time, solutions for boosting vaccine production for developing countries needs to be addressed at the international level by the leading vaccine manufacturers, which has received international authorization. The international community also needs to focus on international policy towards vaccine distribution.

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