

International relations

*Правильная ссылка на статью:*

Filipović A. — Vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic on the example of the Republic of Serbia // Международные отношения. – 2021. – № 4. DOI: 10.7256/2454-0641.2021.4.36719 URL: [https://nbpublish.com/library\\_read\\_article.php?id=36719](https://nbpublish.com/library_read_article.php?id=36719)

## **Vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic on the example of the Republic of Serbia / Вакцинная дипломатия во время пандемии COVID-19 на примере Республики Сербия**

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[Статья из рубрики "АКТУАЛЬНЫЙ ВОПРОС"](#)

### **DOI:**

10.7256/2454-0641.2021.4.36719

### **Дата направления статьи в редакцию:**

21-10-2021

### **Дата публикации:**

28-10-2021

**Аннотация:** Глобальная пандемия COVID-19 оказалась беспрецедентной по своим масштабам и размаху. Вакцина COVID-19 не только стала незаменимым оружием в борьбе с пандемией, но и послужила признаком технологического и научного престижа стран, которые ее разработали. Хотя термин "вакцинная дипломатия" не является новым, он, возможно, стал гораздо более актуальным во времена глобальной пандемии. Целью данного исследования является анализ вакцинной дипломатии Китая, ЕС и России по отношению к Республике Сербия во время глобальной пандемии COVID-19. В то же время в исследовании также представлены усилия Сербии по участию в собственной дипломатии вакцин на глобальном уровне. Новизну этого исследования можно увидеть в сравнительном анализе усилий «вакцинной дипломатии» ЕС, Китая и России в отношении Республики Сербия. Кроме того, в этом исследовании также представлены результаты самых последних данных опроса на тему граждан Сербии и их восприятия полученной иностранной помощи во время пандемии COVID-19. Можно сделать вывод, что китайская и российская медицинская помощь Сербии была очень хорошо принята сербским правительством, СМИ ориентированных на правительство, и сербской общественностью. Что касается помощи Европейского союза, то, несмотря на значительные финансовые средства и медицинское оборудование, она не была широко

рекламирована в средствах массовой информации и восприятие сербской общественности существенно не изменилось в пользу ЕС. В то же время правительство Сербии занялось собственной дипломатией вакцинации, сначала на региональном уровне, а затем на глобальном уровне, предоставив медицинское оборудование и вакцины COVID-19 странам по всему миру, чтобы укрепить связи с бывшими союзниками Югославии из Движения неприсоединения.

**Ключевые слова:** вакцинная дипломатия, Коронавирус, глобальная пандемия, Сербия, Россия, Китай, Европейский Союз, Balkans, Евроскептицизм, масковая дипломатия

## Introduction

As the COVID-19 global pandemic proved to be unprecedented in its scale and reach, the countries around the world scrambled to develop a vaccine that will be capable of countering the worst consequences on human health caused by the COVID-19 virus. Since January 2020 there were at least 246 vaccine projects in development, with five of them (BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, and Sputnik V) being the first ones that entered mass production.<sup>[1]</sup> The access to the effective COVID-19 vaccine meant that the population could faster achieve collective immunity via inoculation, thus placing the COVID-19 pandemic under much more manageable control. As of the second half of 2021, the world is still suffering from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with the vaccination plans, especially those within the European Union, are proving to be conceived with a more optimistic outlook than was the case. It can be argued that COVID-19 vaccines will prove to be a valued commodity and a tool of political influence for countries that decide to treat it as such. The aim of this research is to analyse the vaccine diplomacy of China, the EU, and Russia towards the Republic of Serbia during the COVID-19 global pandemic. At the same time, the research also presents the efforts of Serbia to engage in vaccine diplomacy of its own on a global level. Due to its specific geopolitical orientation, Serbia - a militarily neutral country and the candidate for the EU membership - became the only European country that by October 2021 had access to four COVID-19 vaccines (BioNTech/Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, and Sputnik V), while obtaining the license to produce two of them - Sinopharm and Sputnik V, locally.<sup>[2]</sup>

**The first part** of this research will be dedicated to establishing the definition of the term "vaccine diplomacy". **The second part** of this research will present the vaccine diplomacy of China, Russia, and the EU towards Serbia. **The third part** of this research will demonstrate how Serbia engaged in vaccine diplomacy of its own on the global level. **The fourth part** of this research will try to assess the effects of vaccine diplomacy of the EU, China, and Russia towards Serbia, by presenting the survey data from different opinion polls conducted within the country during the previous two years.

## Methodology

The methodology applied in this research paper consists of the content-analysis, which was used during the research of the official documents and statistical data, as well as comparative analysis, which was used during the analysis of activities of China, the EU, and Russia in Serbia during the COVID-19 outbreak in the country. This research aims to present the application of vaccine diplomacy towards other countries by major powers, which in this case is the Republic of Serbia, as well as Serbia's own vaccine diplomacy towards its region and beyond. The object of this research is identified as vaccine diplomacy, and the subject

of this research is identified as the Republic of Serbia during the COVID-19 outbreak. The novelty of this research is seen in a comparative analysis of the "vaccine diplomacy" efforts of the EU, China, and Russia towards the Republic of Serbia. Additionally, this research also provides the results of the most recent survey data on the topic of the perception of the citizens of Serbia, towards the aid that Serbia received during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Defining the "vaccine diplomacy"**

Anna Kobierecka and Michal Marcin Kobierecki in the article "Coronavirus diplomacy: Chinese medical assistance and its diplomatic implications" note that "*vaccine diplomacy*" during the COVID-19 global pandemic was at first termed as "*Coronavirus diplomacy*".<sup>[3]</sup> While it does not have an established position in scientific discourse, it appeared in media worldwide "*in the light of COVID-19 pandemic in March and April 2020, in several contexts*".<sup>[3]</sup> Additionally, they further state that most commonly it refers to "*Chinese international activity - its assistance and aid to other countries in their struggle against the disease*".<sup>[3]</sup> Kobierecka and Kobierecki also note that the term "*coronavirus diplomacy*" gained a pejorative meaning, as it refers to the Chinese attempt to make political use of global crises.<sup>[3]</sup> The authors however consider "*coronavirus diplomacy*" as a pursuit of foreign policy goals through "*building a positive image of an aid provider and trustworthy partner*", using China's and Russia's global activities in this field as an example.<sup>[3]</sup>

Kobierecka and Kobierecki further observe that with the second wave of COVID-19 reaching many countries by autumn 2020, China continued with its pursue of coronavirus diplomacy, which started to evolve towards vaccine diplomacy.<sup>[3]</sup> The Chinese decision to join the World Health Organization initiative for distribution of COVID-19 vaccines was perceived by the authors as a part of their broader PR strategy, with the aim to "*counteract negative perceptions of this country as well as to present it as a responsible citizen of a global society*".<sup>[3]</sup>

Peter J. Hotez in the article " "Vaccine Diplomacy": Historical Perspectives and Future Directions" states that the vaccine diplomacy is referring to "*almost any aspect of global health diplomacy that relies on the use or delivery of vaccines and encompasses the important work of the GAVI Alliance, as well as elements of the WHO, the Gates Foundation, and other important international organizations*".<sup>[4]</sup> Hotez further notes that central to the vaccine diplomacy is "*potential as a humanitarian intervention and its proven role in mediating cessation of hostilities and even cease-fires during vaccination campaigns*".<sup>[4]</sup> The author also distinguishes "*vaccine science diplomacy*", which he sees as a subset of vaccine diplomacy – or in other words, as a "*hybrid of elements of elements of global health diplomacy and science diplomacy*".<sup>[4]</sup> The author uses the term vaccine science diplomacy in order to refer to the "*joint development of life-saving vaccines and related technologies, with the major actors typically scientists*", which can originate from "*two or more nations that often disagree ideologically, or even from nations that are actively engaged in hostile actions*".<sup>[4]</sup>

Shahella Idrees Shakeel, Matthew Brown, Shakeel Sethi, and Tim K. Mackey, in the article "Achieving the end game: employing "vaccine diplomacy" to eradicate polio in Pakistan" define vaccine diplomacy as a part of "*global health diplomacy*".<sup>[5]</sup> The authors see global health diplomacy as a field that is having a dual goal of "*improving health and strengthening relations among countries*", with it being a form of "soft" or "smart" power of a country and an essential tool in modern diplomatic practice "*expanding contemporary*

*areas of economic, political and military diplomacy to the health space* ". [5] The authors note that vaccine diplomacy is nestled within the broader practice of health diplomacy, thus being a branch of global health diplomacy that *"promotes the use and delivery of vaccines to achieve larger global health goals and shared foreign policy objectives"* ". [5]

Seow Ting Lee, in the article "Vaccine diplomacy: nation branding and China's COVID-19 soft power play" argues that *"pre-COVID-19 definitions and conceptualizations of vaccine diplomacy...ignores the agency of the individual nation-state and the element of competition on display in the current COVID-19 vaccine diplomacy race"*, while adding that today, China's vaccine diplomacy *"does not adhere to pre-COVID conceptualizations of vaccine diplomacy within a limited framework of multilateral conflict resolution"*, but that it can be better understood *"within the context of China's approach toward public diplomacy in general"* ". [6]

In the context of this research, the vaccine diplomacy during the times of the COVID-19 pandemic will be understood as a soft power tool used to strengthen ties between two countries, where one country is producer and/or supplier of COVID-19 vaccines, while another country is recipient. Additionally, donations and acquisition of COVID-19 vaccines are followed by high media coverage, and donating country is usually strongly lauded by the recipient country's government and government-aligned media.

### **China's vaccine diplomacy towards Serbia**

The Republic of Serbia recorded the first case of COVID-19 infection on 6th March 2020, which prompted Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to announce that the measures will be taken to contain the spread of the virus. [7] However, introduced restrictive measures triggered protests in cities across Serbia, with the heaviest clashes between the police and protesters occurring in Belgrade in June 2020. [8] Serbian medical system, still recovering after decades of negligence, found itself under strain with the rising number of cases, and increased fatalities among the medical staff. [9]

On December 22th 2020, Serbia received its first doses of the Pfizer vaccine [10], followed by Sputnik V vaccine (30th December) [11], Sinopharm vaccine (16th January 2021) [12], and AstraZeneca vaccine (21st February) [13]. As of October 2021, 54% of the Serbian population received both doses of the vaccine, while the country's mortality rate reached on average 50 cases daily. [14] The breakdown of the situation with the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia for the end of October 2021 can be seen in **Table 1**.

<b>Total number of infected</b>	1,104,117
<b>Total number of hospitalized</b>	6,721
<b>Total number of patients on ventilators</b>	274
<b>Total number of deaths</b>	9,571
<b>Total number of tested people</b>	6,179,407
<b>Mortality ratio</b>	0.87%
<b>Total number of vaccinated (both doses)</b>	~ 50% of population
<b>Total population of Serbia</b>	6,945 million (2019)

**Table 1:** The COVID-19 data for Serbia at the end of October 2021 [14-15]

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was in a rapid expanse throughout the whole of Serbia. Faced with the deteriorating public health, president Vučić stated that *"Ursula von der Leyen (President of the European Commission) decided that we don't have right for (medical) equipment "* [16], adding that *"European solidarity does not exist...it was just a fairy-tale on the paper. Only one who can help us now is China "*. [17] Serbian public saw this as a novelty, as usually in times of crisis, Serbian leadership turned to Moscow for aid, as was the case with massive floods in the country in 2014. [18]

The first Chinese cargo planes with the medical workers and aid arrived in Belgrade on the 21st of March, with the Serbian president being personally present at the airport to greet the Chinese delegation. [19] After kissing the Chinese flag in the show of gratitude, president Vučić stated that *"everything on this plane is free-of-charge assistance, a donation from the People's Republic of China. We should thank them with all our hearts, they have proven to be great friends of Serbia and Serbs "*, while at the same time expressing his endless gratitude to his *"brother and a friend, President Xi "*. [20-21] This event was highly covered by both Chinese and Serbian media. The video which captured the moment when the Serbian president kissed the Chinese national flag out of gratitude for the received aid attracted 600 million views and 117,000 comments on the Chinese social network Sina Weibo by the 25th March 2020. [22]

In June 2020, members of the Chinese expert medical team to Serbia were awarded military memorial medals for their assistance in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic by the Serbian minister of defense Aleksandar Vulin. Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo who also attended the ceremony stated that the *"Chinese expert medical team to Serbia became a symbol of the friendship between our two countries "*. [23] This was not the only ceremony where Chinese doctors were celebrated by the Serbian government, as on February 2021, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić awarded gold medals of merit to Chinese medical experts in Serbia. [24] At the same time, China sent additional aid to Serbia in a form of two laboratories for mass rapid-testing, which were deployed in April and July 2020. [25]

On the 18th of February 2021, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić stated to the media China *"delivered (aid) in a time when no one wanted to deliver anything to this country. They delivered ventilators that saved hundreds of thousands of lives "*. [26] On the 24th of March, another delivery of one million Sinopharm vaccines was announced by the Chinese and Serbian governments. [27]

The scale of Chinese involvement in Serbia's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic prompted some Serbian political analysts to believe that China is *"attempting to capitalize on the situation, framing itself as an effective partner that does not let democratic principles and human rights standards get in the way as the EU does "*. [28] Additionally, the analysts stated that *"China's involvement in south-eastern European infrastructure projects left a good impression "*, citing that one of the results of such a good PR campaign was the increased interest in learning Mandarin among the young Serbian population. [28]

In July 2021, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić memorandum of understanding and cooperation with China and the United Arab Emirates on producing the Chinese Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine in Serbia, with Chinese Ambassador to Serbia Chen Bo stating that *"signing of the memorandum was an important step in cooperation on joint production of Chinese vaccines against COVID-19 and a new start to cooperation in the pharmaceutical*

industry ". [29] On 13th September, Serbian media announced that the construction of the Sinopharm vaccine factory started in Belgrade, with the expectations for the production of the vaccines to begin by 2023. [30]

In the case of Serbia, China proved that even when it was facing all the challenges that were caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it still managed to project the image of a nation that can aid the other countries around the world. On the one hand, Serbia is becoming an important ally of China, with the Chinese government making significant economic investments in Serbia and the Balkan region. Therefore, it was natural for the Chinese leadership to support its Balkan ally. On the other hand, Serbia is also a candidate for EU membership. With the EU failing to make a quick response towards its immediate neighborhood, China positioned itself as a more serious partner of Serbia, one that is willing not only to immediately send medical aid when requested but also medical personnel and later, vaccines. There is no doubt that the case of Serbia also served as a good opportunity for China to demonstrate its responsibility and friendship to other countries around the world, making the country's vaccine diplomacy a potent tool of its emerging soft power arsenal.

### **The EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Serbia**

For the Serbian public, it seemed that the EU was slow to react at first with the medical aid for this EU candidate state. Shortly after the first Chinese planes landed in Belgrade, Ambassador and Head of Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia Sem Fabrizi promised to Serbian government an aid package worth 7.5 million euros. [31] Additionally, the EU financed the four transport airplanes that brought medical equipment to Belgrade in March 2020. [32]

Ambassador Fabrizi stated on 1st December 2020 that "*Serbia can count in the future on the support of the EU, especially during the difficult time which is marked by the COVID-19 pandemic* " [33]. Additional aid of the European Union was approved by the European Commission on 11th March 2021, in the amount of 12 million euros, with the donation coming from the EU Solidarity Fund (EUSF). [34]

On 3rd April 2021, Serbia received its first doses of AstraZeneca vaccine through the COVAX Facility, with a total of 177.600 doses delivered by May 2021. [35] In June 2021, Serbia borrowed 200 million euros from the European Investment Bank, in order to help small and medium-sized enterprises recover from the COVID-19 crisis. This loan was part of a wider EU financial package worth 1.7 billion euros that was approved last year to aid the recovery of the Western Balkans, with Serbia being granted a total of 380 million euros from that package, including the latest loan. [36]

To the Serbian public, the EU's response to Serbia's COVID-19 outbreak seemed both less engaging and less genuine, than it was the case with the Chinese one. [37] There are several reasons for such sentiment. Firstly, the EU was facing its own internal challenges and disputes over medical aid and response to the pandemic. While China is a unified nation, and with a form of government that allows for the decision-making process to be quicker and less questioned by the internal political actors, it has a significant advantage in reaction time compared to the supra-national union of 27 members states. Secondly, the EU's aid was not as highly publicized by the Serbian government or government-aligned mass media, even though it consisted of significant financial and material aid. The reason for this can be seen in the shifting of foreign policy orientation for the current Serbian



government, which during recent years fostered very close economic ties with China, even though Serbia is still aspiring to join the EU. And thirdly, the EU itself lacks an efficient mechanism for reaching out Serbian public and informing it more thoroughly on the EU-Serbian cooperation. This lack of a mechanism for reaching out to the Serbian citizens can be very well one of the reasons why Euroscepticism is on the rise in Serbia, as will be seen in the fourth part of this research.

### **Russia's engagement in vaccine diplomacy towards Serbia**

Russia responded to the Serbian government's call for aid in April 2020 by sending eleven cargo planes to the country with medical aid and around a hundred military personnel from the chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) defence battalions along with the specialized military vehicles for decontamination. [38] The head of the combined detachment of the Russian Defense Ministry in the Republic of Serbia, Major General Mikhail Chernyshov stated to the media upon arrival to Serbia that *"Russia did not leave behind Serbia in the fight against Coronavirus. The people of Serbia are not alone. Russia had sent the most valuable thing it has - its people. There is no equipment that can equally make up for brotherly hand and help of real experts "*. [39]

The military personnel of Russia was active in decontamination efforts around Serbia until May 2020, with Serbian defense minister Aleksandar Vulin stating that *"Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Russian President Vladimir Putin renewed and confirmed once again the centuries-old friendship of two nations, that never separated in good (times), and even rarer separated in evil (times)...Serbs and Russians never chose the wrong side of the world, Serbs and Russians were never defeated "* [40]

Russia, same as China, sent vaccine shipments to Serbia, with the first 100.000 doses of Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine arriving in Belgrade in December 2020, with additional deliveries arriving in the following months. [41] In April 2021, Serbian institute "Torlak" in cooperation with the Russian Investment Fund started the production of control batch Sputnik V vaccines, with the full production starting on 4th June. [42-43] By 13th August, around 550.000 doses of the Sputnik V vaccine were produced at the "Torlak" institute in Serbia. [43]

The Russian response to Serbian request for aid was as rapid as the Chinese one, and to a degree evenly matched. Compared to the Chinese response, Russia sent around a hundred medical and military personnel who participated in decontamination operations throughout the country. Same as China, Russia approved its COVID-19 vaccine to be produced locally in Serbia under license. Russian vaccine became the first one that was domestically made in Serbia, as the country already possessed the necessary infrastructure at the "Torlak" institute in Belgrade. Even though at the first moment, the president of Serbia untraditionally requested aid from Beijing, and with the media covering significantly more Chinese activities in Serbia, Russia still managed to maintain its traditional role of the closest ally of Serbia in the perception of the Serbian public – as it will be seen in the fourth part of this research.

### **Serbia's vaccine diplomacy**

Serbia is currently the only European country that obtained the license for local production of both Russian and Chinese COVID-19 vaccines, starting to already mass-produce Sputnik V in August 2021. Not only that the country of seven million people will be able to satisfy

its own needs for inoculation of citizens, but it will be in a position to export the vaccines on both regional and global levels. However, for now, it seems that the Serbian government is also engaging in vaccine diplomacy of its own, joining the new elite club of countries that are in a position to do so. In February 2021, Serbia donated 5.000 doses of Sputnik V vaccine to Republika Srpska (an entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as 2.000 of Sputnik V vaccine to Montenegro. [\[44-45\]](#) In the same month, Serbia also delivered 4.660 doses of Pfizer vaccine to Northern Macedonia. [\[46\]](#) In the following month, Serbia donated 5.000 doses of AstraZeneca to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and additional 40.000 dosages of Sputnik V to North Macedonia in April 2021. [\[47-48\]](#)

Outside the Balkan region, Serbia donated 100.620 doses of Pfizer-Biontech COVID-19 vaccine to the Czech Republic in May 2021. [\[49\]](#) August 2021 was especially a busy month for Serbia's vaccine diplomacy. In that month, the Serbian government signed multiple agreements for a donation of Sputnik V vaccines to countries such as Lebanon (20.000 doses) [\[50\]](#), Iran (50.000 doses) [\[51\]](#), Namibia (30.000 doses) [\[52\]](#), Zimbabwe (30.000 doses) [\[53\]](#), and Angola (50.000 doses). [\[54\]](#) In the same month, Serbian foreign minister Nikola Selaković announced additional donations of COVID-19 vaccines to African countries, in a bid to strengthen the ties that date back from the time of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and its leading role in the Non-Alignment Movement. [\[55\]](#)

Besides the donation of vaccines, Serbia offered the possibility for foreign citizens to come to the country for the vaccination. One interesting development of such policy was the increased number of Russian "vaccine tourists", who used to opportunity to be vaccinated in Belgrade, as there is no visa requirement for Russian citizens for entering Serbia. [\[56\]](#)

It can be argued that the goal of Serbian vaccine diplomacy, besides the strengthening of the ties with partner countries, is twofold; firstly, Serbia seeks the political support of the former allies from the Non-Alignment Movement in the ongoing dispute over the status of its Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija; and secondly, the country seeks to present itself as a responsible and influential neighbor in the region of former Yugoslavia, with Belgrade aspiring to become again the political, economic, cultural and scientific centre of the Balkans. As Serbia is both a non-EU member with proclaimed military neutrality, as well as the only country in Europe that is producing two licensed COVID-19 vaccines, its status and prestige have the potential to grow significantly on a global level.

Vaccine diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic at first was an exclusive soft power tool of the major powers which were also COVID-19 vaccine producers. However, the case of Serbia shows that even a small country, with ambitions to become a regional power, can emulate the same actions of much more powerful nations and blocs.

If following the Serbian model, the first step for relatively small and ambitious countries would be to acquire significant quantities of vaccines and medical equipment for their own population from multiple sources that are available. The second step would be for such a country to receive permission from the vaccine-producing country for distribution of some of the vaccines (even in symbolic numbers) to neighboring states in a form of donations or base-cost sales, with high media presence and coverage of such events. And third and final step would be for a country to achieve higher autonomy in these matters by obtaining a license for production of the vaccine on its own territory – thus not only securing the source of the vaccine for the future inoculation of the native population, but also securing the freedom of using vaccines as an element of regional diplomacy, public image building, and



demonstration of economic, technological, and political power.

It can be therefore concluded that vaccine diplomacy, as an influencing tool of the soft power arsenal, will highly likely play important role in the coming decade. This is underlined by the fact that unfortunately, as of the end of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic still shows no sign of being placed under control.

### **Assessing the effects of vaccine diplomacy**

As it was mentioned in previous chapters, although the EU was the largest donor of aid for Serbia in response to the COVID-19 crisis, the Serbian government and government-controlled media praised much more China and Russia for their role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. [\[57\]](#) Besides the shifting foreign policy orientation of the current Serbian government, the cause can be seen also in the perception of the Serbian public, which is more in favor of the cooperation of Serbia with China and Russia, rather than the EU.

In 2020, a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute's Centre for Insights concluded that the majority of the Serbian population identify China (73%) and Russia (71%) as the most important economic partners of Serbia. [\[58\]](#) Considering the identification of the most important political partners of Serbia, 80% were in favor of Russia as such, with 73% identifying China, among other countries. [\[58\]](#)

An additional survey from the same year which was carried out by the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability NGO concluded that one-third of the Serbian citizens would favor the alliance between Serbia and Russia and/or China, rather than Serbia continuing its path towards the EU membership. [\[59\]](#)

Another survey conducted in 2020 by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy concluded that 40% of Serbs identify Russia as their country's "best friend", with 16% identifying China in the same way. Additionally, 90% of respondents stated that Chinese influence in Serbia is positive, with 72% stating the same for a Russian one. [\[60\]](#) Considering foreign politicians, Russian President Vladimir Putin is considered already traditionally the most popular foreign politician in Serbia, followed by Chinese President Xi Jinping. [\[61\]](#)

The newest survey from 2021 published by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies concluded that *"The Serbian public has a decisively positive view of China, with more than 60% of respondents reporting a positive or very positive view...The rest are split almost equally into those who are neutral and those who have negative or very negative views. Furthermore, almost half of the respondents stated that their view of China has improved over the past three years and only around 16% that it worsened, with the rest stating that it stayed the same"*. [\[62\]](#)

Another interesting finding in this report shows that *"Compared to the other countries included in the survey, China is among the most positively viewed foreign countries in Serbia, surpassed only by Russia and, perhaps surprisingly, Japan in the second place...On the other end of the scale, the Serbian public has the most negative views on North Korea, followed by the USA and the UK. These results make Serbia significantly different from the other surveyed European countries"*. [\[62\]](#)

The report further states that the Serbian public has generally positive views on *"various aspects of China's international standing and cooperation, such as trade, investments,*

*military power, and the Belt and Road Initiative* " with only slightly negative perceptions of *"China's impact on the global environment and influence on democracy in other countries "*. Additionally, in comparison to other global powers, China is seen by the Serbian public as a *"globally leading economic strength and its military power that is seen as second only to that of Russia and parallel to that of the US "*.<sup>[62]</sup> The survey underlines that considering the social factors, Russia is seen as possessing the most attractive culture, and the United States the least attractive one, *"with China and the EU in-between "*.<sup>[62]</sup>

The survey also mentions that the Serbian public sees *" China, Russia, and the EU as the most important global powers for Serbia's development, far above the US "*, with the trust in Russia and China is far higher than that in the EU.<sup>[62]</sup> Considering the Serbian foreign policy, the majority of the respondents think that Serbia should align its foreign policy with Russia, followed by China and the EU, with the US being in the last place. The authors believe that the pronounced general improvement of the Serbian public's view on China is likely connected to our finding that a vast majority of the respondents think that *"China helped Serbia the most with the COVID-19 pandemic - more than 80% feel China helped, and more than 60% that it helped a lot", adding that "Russia is perceived as the second most helpful global power, with only around half of the respondents thinking the EU helped Serbia with COVID-19 "*.<sup>[62]</sup>

The authors of the survey concluded that the obtained results suggest that *"Serbia might have an unyielding alliance with China, with public opinion improving over time and unaffected by views on socio-political issues "*, adding that when also taken into the account *"the outlined high regard for Russia in both economic and sociopolitical aspects, this report provides valuable insights for considerations about Serbia's path toward the EU. While the EU is seen as important for Serbia's development, the public seems to trust China and Russia much more, while also seeing these countries more favorably than leading EU countries such as Germany and France."* <sup>[62]</sup> The authors conclude their observations by stating that *"the positive views on China are likely rooted in aspirations for economic cooperation, but perhaps even more importantly - security. The EU is seen as the weakest of the four global powers, especially in terms of military power. In a region of developing economies with long-standing unresolved territorial issues, peace and prosperity seem to be critical concerns for the Serbian public "*.<sup>[62]</sup>

These surveys taken during the last two years demonstrate that China has successfully influenced the opinion of the Serbian public, surpassing the EU and even Russia in some fields. The strongly propagated positive image in the Serbian government media, along with the high-profile PR campaigns yielded tangible results for China and its presence in the Balkans. At the same time, Russia also managed to reinforce its positive image among the Serbian public. The EU, which for the last two decades played a significant role in socio-political and economic affairs in Serbia, failed to strengthen its positive image in the society, which in turn led to rising Euroscepticism among the Serbian population.

## **Conclusion**

It can be argued that the importance of vaccine diplomacy will be divided for the period before and during the COVID-19 global pandemic. While previously, vaccine diplomacy was considered as a soft power tool with low priority among major powers, due to the nature of the current global threat, it became one of the most important validators of the medical, scientific, and diplomatic achievements of a nation. Those countries that managed to produce working COVID-19 vaccines found themselves in a unique position to not only

inoculate their own population but also to spearhead the global efforts in countering the consequences of the pandemic. At the same time, it is obvious that COVID-19 vaccines also became an important element of the country's soft power capabilities, and it is therefore understandable why deliveries of vaccine donations are highly publicized media events.

China, Russia, and the EU all applied their own vaccine diplomacy towards Serbia, starting with the deliveries of medical equipment and personnel to the country, and later on, with the donation of COVID-19 vaccines. In the case of China and Russia, both countries approved local licensed production of COVID-19 vaccines in Serbia. The Serbian government, seeking to establish vaccine diplomacy of its own, replicated the behavior of major global actors by donating symbolic amounts of vaccines on the regional level at first, and later on, continued to do so on the global level as well. While it is too early to tell whether the vaccine diplomacy yielded desired results for the countries involved, recent surveys conducted among the Serbian population show that the Serbian public recognized the role of China and Russia in helping the country to combat the consequences of the pandemic. Serbian government and government-aligned media played a significant role in praising the actions of China and Russia, thus further informing the public of the received medical aid. At the same time, the details about the EU's donation of significant amounts of funds and medical materials failed to reach the Serbian public, which was mostly left uninformed on the European aid efforts. This, however, can be considered as a shortcoming of the EU itself, as it clearly lacks the mechanisms for reaching out to the Serbian public in general.

COVID-19 global pandemic proved that vaccine diplomacy will become an important part of the soft power arsenal in the future. As the number of countries around the world with the capacity to produce licensed vaccines increases, so will the aspirations for positive image-building via media-covered vaccine donations and medical aid. The case of Serbia shows that even a small country, with ambitions to become a regional power, is capable of emulating the same actions of much more powerful nations and blocs, improving its global image and strengthening the ties with allies, while at the same time helping the global effort in countering the consequences of COVID-19 pandemic.

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## **Результаты процедуры рецензирования статьи**

*В связи с политикой двойного слепого рецензирования личность рецензента не раскрывается.*

*Со списком рецензентов издательства можно ознакомиться [здесь](#).*

Данное исследование выполнено на чрезвычайно актуальную тематику, по меньшей мере, в двух аспектах: во-первых, пандемия коронавирусной инфекции диктует новые условия существования в системе международных отношений и принципы экономического взаимодействия между государствами, во-вторых, Сербия остаётся чуть ли не единственным оплотом пророссийской позиции на европейском пространстве. В этом плане рассмотрение вакцинной дипломатии - как нового явления в международных отношениях 21 века именно на примере этой стране чрезвычайно интересно с научной и практической точек зрения.

Вакцинная дипломатия становится многоплановым процессом на мировом пространстве, в который вовлечены большое количество акторов - ведущих держав, обладающих собственными разработками в сфере противодействия инфекционным угрозам и иммунизации населения, к которым смело можно отнести США, КНР, Россию и Европейский Союз.

Статья весьма грамотно и логически структурирована, она состоит из четырёх основных частей, а также введения, в котором содержится теоретико-методологическая основа исследования, сформулированы его ключевые цель и задачи и заключения, в котором содержатся общие выводы и практические рекомендации по расширению арсенала Soft Power или мягкой силы в международных отношениях. Объектом исследования является политика зарубежных стран по отношению к Сербии в области взаимодействия по вопросам вакцинации населения в условиях пандемии COVID-19. Статья написана на очень высоком научном языке, выполнена по всем требованиям, предъявляемым к научным публикациям в изданиях Nota Bene. Научная новизна и теоретико-прикладная значимость исследования сомнений не вызывают, подтверждаются всесторонним анализом вакцинной дипломатии с точки зрения методов эконометрики и анализа общественно-политического дискурса, официальных позиций публичных лиц в отношении поставок вакцины в частности, и в более широком смысле - экономический взаимоотношений и инвестиций в Сербию. Список литературы представлен значительным количеством источников, среди которых не только научные монографии и статьи, но также и публикации на официальных правительственных ресурсах, публикации в СМИ. Не вызывает сомнения тот факт, что статья вызовет глубокий интерес потенциальной читательской аудитории журнала «Международные отношения», поскольку на ее примере хорошо рассматривается динамика современных взаимодействий между государствами в трансформирующейся под влиянием внешних угроз мировой системе. Более того, в публикации затронута такая важная с точки зрения современных интерпретаций в отечественной и зарубежной науке международных отношений проблема как внешняя политика «Малых государств» на международной арене. Исследуется не только официальная линия взаимодействия между правительствами

Сербии, США, Евросоюза и Китая, но также и влияние последних на общественность и публичную повестку внутри страны посредством различных публикаций в СМИ и формирования виртуальной идентичности. Статья может быть рекомендована к публикации с высокой положительной оценкой. Публикации такого уровня способны вывести журнал «Международные отношения» на уровень мировых научных дискуссий.