



The Sputnik V Vaccine – an International Success for Russia?

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A Study to Examine the Russian Media Campaign and its Effect on Targeted States

This study examines the Russian Sputnik V vaccine campaign and the perception thereof in six states. With respect to Kazakhstan and Serbia, material benefits and positive effects on the relationship between Russia and these countries can be determined as of early 2021. With respect to Germany and Slovakia, similar benefits could have been realised due to the high willingness of the respective governments to cooperate. In the case of Germany however, this was forsaken due to a lack of cooperation and transparency on the part of Russia. In Slovakia, the controversy and government crisis regarding the use of Sputnik V had a negative impact. With respect to France and Great Britain, it is not expected that an improvement in the epidemiological situation because of Sputnik V, or any success from the campaign, will be realised. The study was based on 130 articles from Russian state media ‘RT’ and ‘Sputnik’, as well as from international and Russian independent news agencies.



On August 11, 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised the world with news that Russia had approved the first vaccine to combat COVID-19. The vaccine with the scientific designation Gam-COVID-Vac was named Sputnik V, with the letter ‘V’ standing for Victory and the name tying in with that of the first Soviet space satellite ‘Sputnik 1’. Back in 1957, the Soviet Union surprised the world in the so-called ‘Sputnik shock’ as it outpaced the USA in the race to develop space travel technology.¹ With Sputnik V, western states were challenged by Russia to a new race to develop a vaccine. In this case, the race was not solely focused on being the first to develop a vaccine, rather also to demonstrate the superiority in terms of efficacy and safety of the Russian vaccine over western alternatives.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) financed the development of Sputnik and organised the worldwide distribution of the vaccine. The RDIF initiated a global information offensive with the aim of persuading as many states as possible across the world to purchase and produce the Russian vaccine. The head of the sovereign wealth fund, which has a fund volume of approximately US\$ 10 billion (€8.4 billion), is Kirill Dmitriev, who is considered a close confidante of President Putin.²

Several European Union Member States exhibited strong interest in the Russian vaccine in Spring 2021. Hungary and Slovakia were the first movers in the EU, placing orders for Sputnik V without first waiting for formal approval of the vaccine by the European Medicines Agency (EMA). In early April, the German federal government confirmed that it would enter into negotiations regarding purchase of the vaccine, although stating that any usage would be dependent on EMA approval.³

The use of the Russian vaccine was controversial from the start – not only due to the varying approaches of EU Member States, which called into question their solidarity on this issue. Across the world, doubts were also expressed as to the effectiveness and safety of the vaccine. Further, Russia’s testing and approval processes are facing criticism given that marketing and export of the vaccine had commenced prior to the completion of the necessary third test phase. The verification processes of the EU and WHO could so far not be completed due to a lack of available data on the clinical tests carried out in Russia; as such, there has yet to be a formal appraisal of Sputnik V from a body independent of the Russian state.⁴

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of the active Russian Sputnik V media campaign outside of Russia. This is conducted on the basis of reporting from Russian foreign media RT and Sputnik/SNA which, due to state financing and control, propagate the stance of the Russian government.⁵ In a second step, assertions on Sputnik V disseminated by the media are examined against their perception and effectiveness in individual countries. As a result, the extent to which the representation by Russia corresponds with the reality in these target countries can be identified. The study examines Russian soft power abroad. In Joseph Nye’s theory of international politics, soft power is defined as the “ability to change the behaviour of states.”⁶ The usage of media is an important element of soft power and the Sputnik V vaccine campaign propagated by the media is a special case. Political observers interpreted the export of Sputnik V as an attempt to improve heavily strained relations with



the West through the vaccine. The study therefore also illustrates whether Russia has been successful in this objective.

Sources and Methodology:

The countries examined in this study are Germany, France, Great Britain, Serbia, Kazakhstan, Brazil, and Russia. The sources used are 60 reports from Russian state media ‘RT’ and ‘Sputnik’ in the respective local languages (RT DE, Sputnik Srbija etc.) and cover a reporting period ranging from Sputnik’s approval in Russia in August 2020 through to June 2021. The most important statements on Sputnik V were extracted and the specified sources and statements were verified in accordance with customary methods of critical source analysis used in historical science. In a second step, a text corpus of 60 articles from the international press in the English, German, and French languages was compiled (The Guardian, New York Times, Le Monde, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, The Economist, etc.). Controversial topics, or ‘agonal centres’, were defined in accordance with Ekkehard Felder’s method of linguistic discourse analysis.⁷ This exhibits controversial interpretations of certain events between the representations in the Russian and international press. These differences have been named.

In a fourth step, a text corpus of ten articles from the independent Russian press (Novaya Gazeta, The Insider, TV Dožd’, Meduza) was compiled. Statements on the controversial topics were also extracted and compared with the representation in Russian state media.

Results:

1. Agonal Centres (Controversial Interpretations)

The following agonal centres, or controversial interpretations of certain events and facts, can be defined from comparing the representations in various publications of RT and Sputnik and the international press: The evaluation of the Sputnik V vaccine; the marketing of the Russian vaccine; the evaluation of national governments and/or decision-makers; the questionability of the usage of Sputnik V in the respective country; the (possible) benefits of Sputnik V for the respective country; and the assessment of the export success of the Russian vaccine.

Representation in Russian State Media ‘RT’ and ‘Sputnik’

Common narratives on the agonal centres in all six countries that form the basis of this study can be found in the reports of Russian state media RT and Sputnik/SNA. These relate to the **evaluation of the Sputnik V vaccine**, which is described as highly effectively and “absolutely” safe.⁸ President Putin himself promotes the vaccine and describes it as “safe and efficient”. In evaluating the Russian invention, adjectives such as “ground-breaking”, “spectacular”, and “phenomenal” are used. The significance of the name Sputnik V – V for Victory – is also emphasised and parallels are drawn to the 1957 Sputnik satellite.⁹ A commonly published claim is that Sputnik V vaccine is “one of the best in the world” and safer than Western alternatives.¹⁰ As evidence for this claim there are mentions of the



“serious problems” and “obvious health risks” of Western vaccines, such as severe side effects and numerous deaths – particularly with respect to the Biontech/Pfizer vaccine.¹¹ With respect to Moderna, it was propagated that the vaccine causes genetic disorders.¹²

Western vaccines are being framed in the negative context of the “big pharma” profit-oriented pharmaceutical industry that is benefitting from the COVID-19 epidemic. Russia, on the other hand, is being reported as striving to save lives and fight the pandemic. This relates to another controversial topic, **the marketing of Sputnik**. In the RT and Sputnik reports, it can be observed that Russia apparently sees itself as being in competition with Western states. An integral part of the reporting is the number of countries in which the usage of Sputnik V is currently authorised, as well statements on the highest possible level of effectiveness of the Russian vaccine. In this sense, a “race of effectiveness” can be observed, with RT and Sputnik responding to reports of the efficacy of Western vaccines with their own reports claiming a higher efficacy level of Sputnik V, with reported efficacy rates of up to 96.7%¹³, or even up to 100% effectiveness in preventing severe cases.¹⁴ RT and Sputnik have not responded to criticism of the safety of Sputnik V with substantive discussion, but rather with denial such as the assertion that this is “fake news”.¹⁵

A strong polarisation can be determined in the media **assessment of the governments and politicians** which are dealing with the question of the usage of Sputnik V in the countries examined in this study. The assessment of these actors strongly corresponds to their attitude toward the Russian vaccine. Politicians that have introduced the usage of Sputnik V in their countries or have expressed interest in purchasing the vaccine are portrayed favourably. The governments of Kazakhstan and Serbia – the second country in the world and the second country in Europe to commence production of the Sputnik V vaccine, respectively – are positively portrayed as pioneers. German regional Minister Presidents Markus Söder and Michael Kretschmer are also depicted positively and extensively in all international editions.¹⁶ Particular attention was paid to the former Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič, whose secret and unauthorised purchase order of Sputnik V led to his resignation. He is portrayed as an honest politician, fighting against all political resistance in the interest of the health of his country’s citizens.¹⁷ The more reserved attitude of British and French politicians, on the other hand, is attributed to “political bias”. Special attention was also paid to the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Commissioner for Internal Market Thierry Breton, who was accused of “misleading the public with biased statements against Sputnik V” and of refusing to enter into purchase negotiations due to political reasons.¹⁸

Correlating with this is the representation of the **questionability of the usage of Sputnik V** in countries in which the vaccine has not yet been rolled out, such as Germany, France, Great Britain, and (prior to June 2021) Slovakia. This is consistently attributed to political discrimination against Russia, sabotage, disinformation, fake news, and smear campaigns. An integral part of the reporting is also the claim that “big pharma” and “politics” have carried out an “active and well-financed campaign” against Sputnik V “in order to discredit the Russian vaccine”¹⁹ – such claims are however not credibly substantiated. Negative reports on



Sputnik V are explained by a conspiracy of Western pharmaceutical companies which aims to impede the vaccine's EU market entry.²⁰

With regard to the **benefits of Sputnik V for the countries examined in this study**, the leading role of the Russian vaccine in the fight against COVID-19 is consistently emphasised. According to RT reports, Russia could vaccinate 50 million people in the EU.²¹ In an interview with RT DE, board chair of Russian company R-Pharm, Alexander Repik, stated that the company is planning to commence production of the vaccine in Bavaria and ten million doses of Sputnik V could be produced per month.²² It was also reported that an agreement had been made with France regarding the production of Sputnik V²³; this was however denied by French officials.²⁴ With respect to Great Britain, it is repeatedly reported that the vaccine is also very effective in combatting virus mutations.²⁵ In Kazakhstan, the importance of Sputnik V as the only available vaccine in the country at the start of its vaccination programme on February 1, 2021 was emphasised.²⁶ The Serbian edition of Sputnik News reported on the rapid progress in vaccination and the positive role of Sputnik V in Serbia; this was combined with direct advertising: "Vaccination at any location and without registration from tomorrow with 'Sputnik V'".²⁷

The **worldwide export success of Sputnik V** is characterised through repeated references to the current number of states that have registered the vaccine. In this regard, Kazakhstan and Serbia are used as prime examples of the successful cooperation and production of Sputnik V. In Slovakia, problems related to the introduction of Sputnik V are attributed to the state medicines authority ŠÚKL, which reportedly wants to "consciously discredit" the Russian vaccine and to torpedo negotiations with Moscow.²⁸ Great Britain and the USA are an exception here; according to a Businessinsider report, RDIF head Dmitriev referenced the "political constraints" of these states as the reason for which "[a]pplying for regulatory approval in the US and UK isn't a priority".²⁹ The most important obstacles to the export success are "big pharma" and the EU, which are "fighting" against and "blocking" Sputnik V due to fear of competition from the superior Russian vaccine, according to Sputnik Česká republika for example.³⁰

An extensive source analysis will be included in the final version of the study.

Representation in International Press

A total of 60 articles from the international press in English, German, French, and Russian languages were evaluated; these comprise publications from the online versions of internationally renowned media and agencies such as The Guardian, BBC, Le Monde, Reuters, AFP, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Astana Times, Radio Liberty, Wall Street Journal etc., as well as some regional media such as MDR, Ouest-France etc.

In the **evaluation of the Sputnik V vaccine**, advantages were seen in the favourable storage and delivery conditions, and the comparatively moderate pricing.³¹ However in most



of the publications examined, doubts were expressed in respect to efficacy and safety. These doubts were substantiated by the fact that various details provided by RDIF on the efficacy of the vaccine were not backed up with verifiable data; often, only a reference to a press release of the fund was provided. A February 2021 edition of specialist magazine ‘The Lancet’, which indicated a 91.6% effectiveness of the vaccine, has been regularly extolled by Russian state media as scientific confirmation. However, this publication has also been questioned by the international scientific community on the basis that the phase 3 study could not be independently verified due to a lack of available data.³² A particularly frequent point of criticism is that the trial protocol, that would allow for a verification of conduct of the trial, has yet to be made available. The exclusion of trial participants and the manipulation of data have also been criticised. Slovak researchers have also concluded that the properties of the product delivered to Slovakia differ from those described in The Lancet.³³

With regard to **marketing**, the international media criticised the “wildly populist” and “aggressive” social media campaign, which was “unprecedented -- even compared to the showdowns at the height of the Cold War”. With disregard for EU regulations for pharmaceutical companies Russia has, for example, reportedly used Twitter advertising to propagate Sputnik content. The Russian vaccine was viewed as a political instrument that would divide the EU.³⁴ It was reported that, through the introduction of Sputnik V in Hungary and Slovakia, Russia wants to set a precedent of bringing the vaccine to the European market and bypassing the EMA. Even the usage of the vaccine in the Republic of San Marino, a small enclave state in Italy, was described as a “Trojan horse” that will break the unity of the EU.³⁵ The marketing methods employed, such as amplifying negative scientific results concerning Western vaccines, were also subject to criticism. Reported offers to French and German bloggers to spread negative reports about Western vaccines such as Pfizer/Biontech in return for payment were viewed with particular criticism. According to media reports, Moscow-based businesswoman Yulia Serebryanskaya, who previously worked for state media and President Putin’s election campaign, was behind this strategy.³⁶

The **role of national governments and politicians** in their support for Sputnik V has been viewed particularly critically in the British press. The Guardian stated that Russia’s ‘divide and conquer’ policy could only succeed because states such as Germany and Slovakia have played along. It is reportedly irrelevant whether or not Sputnik V is delivered, for Russia has already achieved its goal of playing EU states off against one another and weakening trust in the EU programme.³⁷ Former Slovak Prime Minister Matovič in particular was heavily criticised for triggering a government crisis with his secret negotiations with Moscow and for making himself a “tool in Russia’s hybrid war”. On the other hand, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić has himself reportedly used Sputnik V as a political instrument. The NZZ reported that he is following in the footsteps of former Yugoslav President Tito and wants to use the vaccine supply to present himself as a regional leader in the Balkans.³⁸ This reportedly also serves to enhance the image of China and Russia, who are perceived as being Serbia’s saviours.³⁹

The international press did not see any problems with the **use and production of the vaccine**



in Kazakhstan and Serbia. In the countries in which usage of the vaccine is not currently possible (DEU, FRA, GBR), or has only been possible from June (SVK), the problems of missing data and the as yet lack of approval by the EMA have been consistently cited as the reasons for this. In this context, it has also been noted that Russia is reportedly slowing down the process by delaying inspections of the Sputnik V production facilities in Russia by European officials.

There is strong variation in the assessment of the (potential) **benefits of Sputnik V for the countries examined in this study**. In Germany, Minister Presidents in three federal states have secured contingents through preliminary contracts with Russia. The German federal government has held talks with Russia regarding a possible delivery to Germany, but any agreement is dependent on EMA approval of the vaccine.⁴⁰ The Federal Ministry of Health explained that “every vaccine is welcome.”⁴¹ However, Federal Minister of Health Jens Spahn stated in April that the Russian vaccine would have to come in the next three to five months as a sufficient number of vaccines from EU orders should be available thereafter.⁴² CDU politician and MEP Peter Liese also criticised the fact that Russian manufacturer R-Pharm, which reportedly wants to produce Sputnik V in the Bavarian town of Illertissen, has not provided any information on the expected timeline and volume of the planned supply.⁴³ Politicians from across the political spectrum nevertheless expressed a long-term interest and emphasised that they have no fundamental reservations. According to Alliance 90/The Greens member of the Bundestag Janosch Dahmen, “any vaccine that is safe, can be reliably delivered and, above all, that works is welcome”. Politicians from the CDU/CSU, the Greens, and the Left have explained that the lack of available data is the problem, which is why the EMA has not yet been able to conclusively assess the safety of Sputnik V.⁴⁴

In Slovakia, Sputnik V has been available since June 7, 2021 following a decision of the government. Although the vaccine had been tested by a laboratory in Hungary, demand for the vaccine from Slovakian citizens was low.⁴⁵ According to Slovak Health Minister Vladimir Lengvarsky, it is intended that the 200,000 doses that have already been imported will be used, but broader usage of the vaccine will only be possible following EMA approval.⁴⁶ This is a negligible amount; accordingly, Sputnik V will initially play only a minor role in the Slovakian vaccination programme. Doubts as to the safety and production methods of the vaccine remain. The vaccine’s image was also tarnished following criticism from the Slovak Medicines Agency, which claimed the vaccines supplied across the world under the Sputnik V label vary considerably and are “related only in name”.⁴⁷

Thanks to Russian and Chinese vaccines, Serbia has become one of the countries with the highest vaccination rates in Europe. Serbia has reportedly developed its own vaccine diplomacy, generously donating doses of the vaccine to neighbouring states North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, among others.⁴⁸ Following an initial success, a decline in interest could be observed. Observers attributed this to the fact that disinformation about vaccines had unsettled the populace. In addition, the Serbian government’s policy to reward vaccination with a monetary bonus and to punish refusal of the vaccine with a reduction in



sickness benefits was highly controversial.⁴⁹

In Kazakhstan, the importance of Sputnik V was overstated in the Russian, and in some cases also in the Kazakh, press. In August 2020, the Kazakh government entered into a contract with Russia to secure two million doses of Sputnik V.⁵⁰ Although there was no public criticism of the vaccine from official sources, it is of note that Russia had delivered only 52,000 doses by April 2021, as reported by the Astana Times.⁵¹ Due to doubts concerning the Sputnik V test procedure, the government entered into a contract with Pfizer in December 2020. Central Asia News wrote that the Kazakhs are “waiting for a real vaccine”.⁵² Three million vaccine doses were ordered from Chinese manufacturer Sinopharm which shows that, at best, Sputnik is in second place in terms of order volume.⁵³ Kazakhstan’s Karaganda Pharmaceutical Complex produces Sputnik under license, but only has limited capacity for the vaccine.⁵⁴ Sputnik V played a leading role in the vaccines carried out in February and March 2021. Priority was given to the development of a Kazakh vaccine (QazVac), which has been utilised in Kazakhstan since April 2021.⁵⁵

The possible use of Sputnik V was viewed with a high level of ambivalence by the British press. At times it was argued that Britain needs the Russian vaccine due to problems caused by AstraZeneca and Moderna, and at other times political reservations prevailed. In light of the Skripal affair and the tense relationship between the two states, cooperation between the British and Russian health authorities – which would be necessary for a joint production of AstraZeneca and Sputnik – was viewed as being very difficult. The British government and other Western leaders face an “interesting dilemma: to embrace and support Mr Putin’s vaccine and consider combining it with their own, or to continue to ignore it.”, wrote the Telegraph.⁵⁶

There was initially slow progress with the French vaccination programme due to the EU’s procurement problems and the general mistrust of French citizens. However, improved progress with the use of Western vaccines has been recorded since May 2021. French media opined that Sputnik was no longer needed, which was confirmed by President Emmanuel Macron. Macron was however open to a potential cooperation and spoke with President Putin on this matter in March.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the French President declared in April that Sputnik is unlikely to play a part in the French vaccination programme given that it would still take time to secure EMA approval and European production of the Russian vaccine.⁵⁸ Political reservations were also strong. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian described Sputnik as a “means of propaganda and aggressive diplomacy”.⁵⁹ Secretary of State for European Affairs Clément Beaune warned EU countries not to use Sputnik V without EMA approval, as this would threaten European solidarity.⁶⁰ The RDIF has announced that there was an agreement with France regarding local production. This was however denied by a spokesman for France’s industry minister who stated that no company in France had signed a contract to produce Sputnik V.⁶¹

The **export success of Sputnik V** was viewed critically in the international press. With regard to Slovakia, the media opined that Russia was taking advantage of the state of



emergency during the pandemic to divide the country and the EU, achieving success with the government crisis in Slovakia. Similar arguments were made with regard to Serbia: Russia and China are reportedly seeking to expand their influence and push back the EU through vaccine diplomacy, with the Balkans turning into a geopolitical pawn between the West and East. In addition, the success of Vučić's Balkan mission was called into question; without vaccination by a WHO- and EU-approved vaccine, it is not currently possible to enter the EU without taking a COVID-19 test. As such, it was opined that demand for Sputnik V could fall.

Russia's export success was also viewed critically against the backdrop of the state of affairs in Russia itself. It was noted that, as of June 2021, only a very small part (8%) of the population had been vaccinated.⁶² The manner in which Russian authorities dealt with the pandemic was also criticised. It was reported that barely any measures were taken to contain the virus for a lengthy period, and regional governments are only now responding with compulsory vaccinations in light of rapidly increasing infection rates.⁶³ In view of the situation in Russia, its foreign activities appeared inappropriate. It was argued that if President Putin, as announced, wanted to achieve herd immunity in Russia by end of the summer through mass vaccinations, export of the vaccine would no longer be possible. It was also pointed out that Russia had so far only actually delivered 8% of the agreed delivery volumes to its foreign customers⁶⁴, which puts the global success propagated by Russia into perspective.

2. Assessment of Sputnik V in Russia on the Basis of the Russian Independent Press

In order to assess the situation in Russia, articles from independent Russian press, such as Novaya Gazeta, Meduza, TV Dožd', and The Insider were evaluated. All press articles portrayed a low level of public confidence in the Sputnik V vaccine. According to a survey by the Levada Analytical Center, 62% of those questioned were unwilling to be vaccinated with Sputnik V. The Russian vaccine is most popular in the 55+ age group, with 37% declaring that they would allow themselves to be vaccinated with Sputnik V; in the 18-24 age group, this figure is just 12%.⁶⁵ Doubts as to the efficacy and safety of Sputnik V were also expressed, with reference made to the problem of the lack of available data and the insufficiently transparent testing process. The Meduza newspaper criticised that, in contrast to Western developers, the Gamaleya Research Institute did not publish the protocol of the clinical trials which, according to the report, would be the most important document for an assessment of the procedure of the trials. Experts that were provided access to the trial protocol complained that there were no precise criteria to determine at what point a PCR test should be conducted on a test subject suspected as having contracted COVID-19.⁶⁶

Head of Scientific Research at Inbio Ventures Ilya Yasny affirmed Western scientists' criticism of the Sputnik V test procedure described in The Lancet to The Insider: "All of these comments indicate that the study was not carried out at the highest level, but this was already clear. On the other hand, in my opinion, this does not call into question the main conclusions on the efficacy and safety of the vaccine".⁶⁷



The low level of trust in Sputnik V and Russian vaccines in general was reinforced by the nationwide practice of vaccinating recipients with an alternative Russian vaccine (EpiVacCorona) instead of the Sputnik V vaccine that they believed they would be receiving. Recipients reported that they were only informed of the change in vaccine that they would receive either during the vaccination or after having already received the vaccine. This was reportedly justified by medical staff with an explanation that Sputnik V was no longer in stock.⁶⁸ The EpiVacCorona vaccine has received an even higher level of criticism in the press than Sputnik V, with questions being raised as to whether it has any effect whatsoever. The developer of the vaccine from Novosibirsk advised the public to be re-vaccinated with Sputnik three months after an EpiVacCorona vaccination.⁶⁹ A report on the situation in regions of Russia that were poorly supplied and only received a small fraction of the Sputnik vaccine that was produced appears to confirm that there is insufficient supply of the Sputnik V vaccine for Russian citizens.⁷⁰

In June 2021, the situation in Russia was described as very difficult due to rapidly increasing rates of new infections and deaths.⁷¹ As a result, compulsory vaccinations were introduced in Moscow and a number of other regions, as well as for individuals working in the public sector and the service industry. This has reportedly led to some individuals obtaining forged vaccine certificates in order to not lose their jobs.⁷² Russian citizens were reportedly not only mistrustful of Sputnik V, rather of all vaccines in general. Opposition politician Leonid Gozman wrote in *Novaya Gazeta* that this is a consequence of the misinformation and conspiracy theories surrounding vaccines that are being broadcast on state television. He opined that the State does not treat its citizens as partners, but rather as serfs: “Terror and violence in its various forms – that is the only management strategy that those in power believe in.”⁷³

The production and marketing of Sputnik V has also faced criticism. *TV Dožd'* reported on the WHO's inspection of Sputnik V manufacturing facilities, which uncovered deficiencies at the Pharmstandard-UfaVITA production plant.⁷⁴ The level of cooperation with the EMA was also criticised. *TV Dožd'* reported that EMA approval was not expected to be received prior to September due to the Gamaleya Research Institute missing the June deadline set for the submission of data.⁷⁵

Russian expert Ilya Yasny questioned the image of Sputnik V as the “world's first approved vaccine”. He stated that, at the time of its registration in August 2020, “exactly 20 people had received both doses of the vaccine in liquid form. This is insufficient for a phase 2 study, let alone for a registration one.” At that point, a number of Western vaccines were reportedly already further ahead in the vaccine testing process. Further, he questioned the validity of the claim that Sputnik V was the first COVID-19 vaccine in the world to receive approval, highlighting the July 25, 2020 registration for military use of the Chinese CanSino vaccine.⁷⁶ Yasny concluded that Russia itself is responsible for the ambivalent attitude toward Sputnik V: “The lack of transparency in development, the withholding of information, problems with PR, and even outright lies are greatly hindering the advancement of Sputnik in the world.”⁷⁷



3. Evaluation of the Sputnik V Campaign as a Form of Russian Soft Power

Different conclusions can be drawn on the success of the Sputnik V campaign as a form of Russian soft power and whether it could lead to improved relations with the countries examined in this survey. Kazakhstan and Serbia are among the countries in which Sputnik V played a positive role in the short term. It appears that the Russian vaccine was used without any problems and that cooperation with the governments and authorities was successful. With regard to Kazakhstan however, it should be noted that only a small portion (2.6%⁷⁸) of the order volume was actually delivered. Due to the predominant usage of the Kazakh QazVac vaccine since April 2021, the importance of Sputnik V will be rather low due to the limited production capacity in Karaganda.

The same applies to Serbia; Sputnik V played a positive role in the first half of 2021, which the Serbian government is using to further its own political goal of expanding Serbian influence in the region. However, due to unpopular measures implemented by Vučić – in particular the financial disadvantages for those who refuse vaccination – it is questionable how long this success will last. It is equally uncertain whether Serbia's influence in the Balkan states will continue to strengthen given that free travel in the EU may not be granted to recipients of Sputnik V. Consequently, the demand to be vaccinated with the Russian vaccine Made in Serbia will probably decrease.

Germany and Slovakia hold an intermediate position in the evaluation. Due to the highly forthcoming attitudes and the interest expressed in the media by government officials and regional heads of government (the trips to Moscow by Slovak Prime Minister Matovič and Minister President of Saxony Kretschmer are particularly prominent examples), there would have been a good chance of success. In Germany, there was cross-party consensus in Spring 2021 that Sputnik V would be welcome if approved by the EMA. However due to Russia's unwillingness to cooperate with the EMA, the ongoing lack of data, and the lack of information regarding the supply capabilities of R-Pharm through its Bavarian factory, the window of opportunity has now closed as Western vaccines have been available in sufficient quantities since mid-2021.

While Sputnik V has been on offer to Slovakian citizens since the beginning of June, the controversy regarding the safety of the vaccine and the government crisis have caused considerable reputational damage that has had a negative impact on demand. In this case, Russia could have also defused the situation if it had provided the Slovak government and medicine authority with the necessary data. Instead, the RDIF and Russian state media have contributed to this polarisation by disparaging the ŠÚKL medicines agency and rebuffing the criticism as fake news without objectively addressing the concerns. While the opportunity to improve bilateral relations with Germany through soft power was not used, in Slovakia the controversy surrounding Sputnik V led to a government crisis and the destabilisation of the country. In both cases, Russia only has itself to blame for forfeiting the opportunity to positively influence relations.

France and Great Britain are among the countries in which Russia has the lowest chance of



positively influencing relations through Sputnik soft power. While French President Macron has showed a willingness to cooperate in principle, France's Foreign Minister and State Secretary for European Affairs are both very critical of the political function of vaccine diplomacy and the damage to EU solidarity. As in Germany, Sputnik has not yet to be used in France due to the lack of EMA approval of the vaccine. In Britain, there are also strong political reservations regarding the vaccine against the backdrop of strained relations with Russia. Due to the production of its own vaccine (AstraZeneca) and the associated export activities, Sputnik V is predominantly viewed as a competitor. This could change if the RDIF manages to persuade the British to start a joint production with AstraZeneca; this however seems unlikely after Russian state media such as Russia-1 claimed that the British vaccine was turning people into monkeys.⁷⁹ The propaganda strikes back.

¹ Juri Rescheto: „Sputnik V“: Putins Corona-Prestigeobjekt, Dw.com, 13.8.2020, <https://www.dw.com/de/sputnik-v-putins-corona-prestigeobjekt/a-54556071>

² Kauffmann, Sylvie: Le pari sur le vaccin Spoutnik V aurait pu réussir. Ce qui lui a manqué définit les limites du poutinisme, Lemonde.fr, 7.4.2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2021/04/07/le-pari-sur-spoutnik-v-auroit-pu-reussir-ce-qui-lui-a-manque-definit-les-limites-du-poutinisme_6075793_3232.html

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