

Vaccine Geopolitics, “Big” and “Small”, and Europe’s Challenge

Article by Luiza Bialasiewicz

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As Covid-19 vaccination gets underway, mistrust, conspiracy theories and geopolitical tensions, not least over supplies, abound. Across Europe, a worrying number of the general population oppose the jab, pointing not only to the impact of disinformation, but also to power plays by a variety of actors during the pandemic. In this sharp-eyed analysis, Luiza Bialasiewicz explores how and where geopolitical imaginaries are taking shape, how they are connected to vaccine scepticism, as well as what they mean for Covid-19 vaccination campaigns.

The first doses of the Covid-19 vaccines being administered across the EU in the last days of 2020 marked a critical passage point in the management of the pandemic. In these first weeks, the epidemiological value of the vaccines could be seen as largely symbolic, as the number of those able to be vaccinated is still quite limited. Yet symbols matter. And EU leaders have seized this opportunity to underline how both the approval of the vaccine, and the organisation of the common “V [for vaccine] days” across the Union are a “touching proof of unity” in Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s words.

But as with all symbolic imaginaries, this one too is not uncontested. Apart from the complex regulatory hurdles that the vaccines have had to face and the considerable logistical challenges of their transport, storage and administration, EU officials are being confronted with another crisis-within-a-crisis that risks undermining the success of the vaccination campaigns. Namely, in a significant number of EU states, an insufficient percentage of the general population is currently expressing its willingness to be vaccinated. Such doubters are far more substantial in numbers than outright anti-vaxxers and Covid-19 negationists, and while it is possible that once the vaccination campaigns have begun in earnest, public opinion will shift, the surprisingly low levels of public trust in the vaccines are drawing serious concern.

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Communication about the vaccine is a crucial battleground for European leaders at this moment. For while in most EU states popular opposition to vaccines is being articulated around the right to “personal freedom” regarding when (and if) to vaccinate, the information ecosystem shaping those choices is far from “free”, as various studies are showing, and has very little to do with “personal” choices. Just as the Covid-19 pandemic itself, vaccination efforts are being made the object of campaigns of disinformation serving a variety of political interests at the national, European and global scales. Indeed, the geopolitics that will shape the success of the vaccination campaigns will not only be contested in big-power global competition over the vaccines’ access, distribution and

associated influence – it will also be fought over in much more mundane settings, on screens and newspapers, in a much less evident competition for Europeans’ “everyday” geopolitical imaginaries of security and insecurity, trust and mistrust.

Such global and everyday geopolitical imaginaries are profoundly interconnected, as feminist scholars of geopolitics have long argued: “big” geopolitics is always folded into the intimate spaces of everyday life, with bodies, feelings (such as fear and hope), but also mundane objects and everyday habits becoming sites for the reproduction of big geopolitical imaginaries and possibilities.¹ In moments of “geopolitical vertigo” such as the current pandemic, the need to make sense of the world, both at the intimate scale of the body as well as that of global affairs, opens ample space to conspiratorial thinking that provides facile narratives of “what is wrong” and “who is to blame”. Conspiratorial geopolitical imaginaries of the Covid-19 vaccine function at these multiple scales.

War-making abounds

The Covid-19 vaccine has, for months now, been a geopolitical playground, of the overt, but also not-so-overt kind. For the key global players, the race towards the vaccine has become a race to demonstrate geopolitical dominance: for China, it has been an attempt to redeem its image from virus diffuser to sanitary saviour (of its own citizens but also of populations in the Global South); for Russia, an attempt to affirm its continuing scientific excellence and autarky, but also its role as a regional power; for the Trump administration, a way to show how the US is able to accelerate the opening of its economy through entrepreneurial scientific progress rather than restrictions; for the UK, a chance to demonstrate how the country is able to do things better and faster without the EU in the post-Brexit era. For the EU, the common procurement strategy and the common roll-out of the vaccination campaign have been wielded as proof of unity and solidarity among member states. At the same time, ensuring equal access to vaccination worldwide has also become – in rhetoric at least – part of the EU’s geopolitical self-representation, with High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell affirming Europe’s commitment to “leave no one behind and make the Covid-19 vaccine a global public good.”

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The battle for the vaccine thus has a number of overt, big geopolitical aspects and, as such, has been frequently described with appeals to military metaphors. From intimations of “vaccine nationalism” and the struggle between states claiming primacy in capturing sufficient resources or doses for its population, to the actual deployment of military personnel for the administration of the vaccines and their secure storage and transport, the imagery but also the material infrastructure of war-making abounds. And like in other conflicts, this one too is not simply a struggle for saving national bodies: it is equally a war for minds, in which targeted strategies of disinformation are being powerfully deployed by a variety of actors to undermine public trust in the vaccine and those charged with its administration.

Drawing on just such militarised evocations, in a front-page editorial on Italy’s leading daily *La Repubblica* on the eve of the EU-wide V-days, Maurizio Molinari compared the vaccination campaign to a “campaign for continental liberation.” But, unlike in military campaigns, he noted, here the challenges were not simply a matter of successful

strategy and logistics; this campaign also had an important Achilles' heel. It was the worrisome percentage of European citizens who, for one reason or another, oppose vaccination, either due to lack of proper information, or a combination of fears.

As a poll commissioned in the closing days of 2020 by Poland's largest newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* showed, only 43.4 per cent of Poles were willing to get vaccinated against Covid-19; slightly more were opposed (43.8 per cent), while almost 13 per cent declared themselves "unsure". The numbers are very similar in France: an Ipsos Global Advisor poll conducted on the eve of the V-days showed that just one in four French citizens was willing to take the vaccine. For the EU-wide aim of achieving group immunity by the end of 2021 (that requires at least 70 per cent vaccination coverage), these numbers are extremely worrisome.

The infodemic

The various scales of geopolitical imaginaries indeed reinforce one another. In Hungary, where current polls show only 15 per cent willing to be vaccinated, the Orban government has spent the past months undermining public trust in the EU's approval process, lamenting its slowness and doubting its efficacy, proclaiming that Hungarians would be better off with Russian or Chinese vaccines. Needless to say, no Russian or Chinese vaccines arrived, but when the EU-approved ones did, very few Hungarians were willing to be vaccinated. Here, the battle quickly extended from the vaccines themselves to the freedom to speak about them, turning increasingly violent: Péter Krekó, a prominent Hungarian political analyst, received death threats after a comment he made in the above cited POLITICO article regarding the instrumentalisation of anti-vaccination attitudes by the Orban regime was misrepresented by pro-government media outlets. Conservative factions of the Catholic Church have also contributed, in recent months, to sowing doubt regarding not just the safety, but also the morality of vaccines that may be produced by companies making use of foetal tissue. The Bioethics Group of Experts of the Polish Episcopal Council on the eve of the vaccines' arrival issued the ambiguous recommendation of leaving it to Catholics' "individual choice".²

Yet such overt actors are not the only ones shaping the everyday geopolitics of vaccines, and perhaps not even the most impactful. Over the past months, organisations including the EU's own External Action Service EUvsDisinfo project³ as well as various groups of scholars and activists studying disinformation on social media such as the Anglo-Dutch Infodemic project or the FirstDraft media network have been tracking the development and spread of disruptive narratives in general and conspiracy theories especially: first about the pandemic itself, and more recently about Covid-19 vaccines.

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As these and other studies highlight, strategies of disinformation are directly geopolitical, working to undermine not just trust in the vaccine but trust in European public institutions and expertise more broadly. The studies also note, however, that the spread of such disinformation is compounded by the "complexities and vulnerabilities of the information ecosystem" which, as the FirstDraft report notes, "is full of 'data deficits' — situations where demand for information about a topic is high, but the supply of credible information is low — that are being exploited by a variety of actors." And "when people can't easily access reliable information around vaccines and when mistrust in actors and institutions related to vaccines is high, misinformation narratives rush in to fill the vacuum."

The question of data deficits – or, better yet, the perception of unequal access to the “real” information – is crucial to understanding how disinformation works, but also to how it can be combatted. The Covid-19 pandemic is not the first time that a health crisis has unleashed fanciful imaginations and a variety of conspiracy theories. In a recent story on the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Australian philosopher of neuroscience Colin Klein reminds us that when “things are changing rapidly, it’s not actually unreasonable to [assume] some people have more information than others,” with “conspiracy theories born out of the murky feeling that not all is being revealed to us, that the truth is still in shadow, and someone else is pulling the strings.” The fact that conspiracy theories stick most powerfully in moments of crisis – and especially in those places and among those publics that feel least in control of events – is thus not surprising.

Geographies of vaccination

Indeed, as various commentators have noted, the geographies of vaccination will be as uneven as the spread of the virus: both because unvaccinated people will not be randomly strewn but will rather form clusters in those communities that do not have equal access to the vaccines – but also because vaccine scepticism spreads among friends and families, in the physical as well as virtual everyday exchange of geopolitical imaginaries.⁴

This is already evident today, with vaccine scepticism directly bound up (and clustered) with wider conspiratorial beliefs, but also most strongly concentrated among those populations that feel least in control over their future fate, political-economic and socio-sanitary.

One of the most striking geographical contexts in this sense is the Western Balkans, marked not only by the highest opposition to the vaccine but also by the highest rates of support for a variety of conspiracy theories regarding the origins of the virus, its spread, and the real motives of attempts to combat it. In a study carried out by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group led by Florian Bieber at the University of Graz, the research revealed that over 75 per cent of citizens in the Western Balkans believed in one or more conspiracy theories regarding Covid-19 (the percentages in EU states such as Germany or Italy are somewhere between 20 to 25 per cent). What was striking is that while education, age or gender did not impact these beliefs, they were directly linked to wider geopolitical orientations, whether regarding the EU, Russia, the US or China. What is more, conspiratorial leanings also mapped directly unto broader political beliefs and world views, including trust in the democratic process and institutions, highlighting how big geopolitical imaginaries and everyday fears are profoundly connected.⁵

How to combat such fears that do not only have immediate relevance for European public health agendas but also possibly much longer and pernicious effects on trust in public institutions and officials? Making European citizens feel they have full and equal access to information regarding the pandemic and the vaccines designed to combat it is a critical first step, and both national and EU bodies are doing their best to extend the range and availability of popularly-understandable scientific information. But alongside these science-communication efforts, governments should also make European publics better aware that what they believe are freely informed personal choices regarding the vaccine are not free and personal at all, but rather the object of targetted geopolitical strategies of hostile actors.

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Footnotes

¹ See, among others, Rachel Pain and Susan Smith (2008) *Fear: Critical Geopolitics and Everyday Life*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

² It is relevant to note here that Pope Francis has been unequivocal in his appeals in favour of vaccination. In his Christmas *Urbi et Orbi* address, the Pope called the vaccine 'a light of hope', free and equal access to which should not be tainted 'by closed nationalisms' and 'radical individualism'.

³ Launched in 2015 to address Russian strategies of disinformation targeting the EU and the wider region, but now with much wider remit, including disinformation flows on the pandemic.

⁴ Including this excellent overview by Ed Yong for *The Atlantic*.

⁵ As others have noted on these pages, European far-right movements have also ably exploited the pandemic to sow mistrust in government agendas. See here among others.



Luiza Bialasiewicz is Professor of European Governance in the Department of European Studies at the University of Amsterdam and the co-director of the Amsterdam Centre for European Studies (ACES). As a political geographer, her work focuses on EU foreign policy and border-making, as well as on the geopolitics of the European far-right. She is the editor of *Europe in the World: EU Geopolitics* and the *Making of European Space and Spaces of Tolerance: The Changing Geographies and Philosophies of Religion in Today's Europe* (both published by Routledge).

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