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# RUSSIA'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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OPPORTUNITY IN CRISIS:

RUSSIA'S RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
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## ABSTRACT

Sweeping the globe in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has delivered one of the greatest shocks to the international system in recent history. Beyond presenting a health crisis, the pandemic has affected global trade and international cooperation, granting it the potential to widen cracks in the international system or accelerate trends in power transition. As a state that desires a shift in global distributions of power, Russia stands as a valuable subject of analysis in the context of the pandemic. How has Russia pursued its national interests through its foreign policy responses to the pandemic? Are Russia's actions formulated towards the pursuit of any particular goal, or simply a reaction to an unexpected crisis? By identifying Russia's major national interests and examining Russia's foreign policy responses to the pandemic, this paper finds that Russia's international pandemic response was primarily designed to increase its power and status on the world stage, largely by means of undermining the West. The first chapter identifies Russia's major national interests as: (1) defense of the country and regime, (2) great power status, (3) a multipolar international system, and (4) non-interference from Western powers. These interests are all underscored by opposition to a Western-dominated international system and thus relate to an ultimate goal of rearranging global power distributions in Russia's favor. Chapter 2 examines Russia's main responses to the pandemic, including: (1) the development and global distribution of Sputnik V, (2) Russia's framing of itself and the West, (3) the use of information warfare, (4) Russia's domestic response, and (5) posturing at the UN. Analysis reveals that all of Russia's responses fall in line with one or more of its national interests, thus ultimately contributing to a goal of increasing Russian power and status—particularly in opposition to the West. More broadly, this research demonstrates how states may take advantage of disruptive events in the international system to advance national interests.

## INTRODUCTION

Sweeping across the globe in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has acted as one of the greatest shocks to the international system in recent history. The pandemic's negative impact on global health, cooperation, and trade grant it the potential to widen cracks in the international system and accelerate power transitions, as some states tackle the crisis by turning inward and others focus outward. As a state that desires a change in global distributions of power, Russia provides a valuable subject for analysis and a case study of how states may use disruptive events in the international system to pursue their own interests. Therefore, this paper examines the question of how Russia has pursued its national interests in the context of the pandemic. In other words, this paper explores the actions that Russia has taken in response to the pandemic and how these actions relate to Russia's national interests. All in all, Russia's international pandemic response was formulated to increase its power and status on the world stage, largely by means of undermining the West. In this way, Russia has in many ways approached the pandemic as an opportunity from a foreign policy perspective, utilizing it to pursue national interests.

To conduct analysis, this paper makes use of primary sources like direct quotes from Russian officials, statistics and reporting from Russian and Western media, and evaluations by academics and area experts. This holistic approach allows multiple facets of Russia's pandemic response—from raw data to rhetorical posturing—to contribute to the overall analysis. After establishing the relevancy of studying Russia's responses to the pandemic in the introduction, Chapter 1 identifies Russia's national interests and its underlying foreign policy philosophy. The four major national interests are: (1) defense of the country and regime, (2) great power status, (3) a multipolar international system, and (4) non-interference from Western powers. All of these are underscored by opposition to a Western-dominated global system and thus relate to an

ultimate goal of rearranging the global distribution in Russia's favor. Understanding these national interests, Chapter 2 provides an in-depth overview of Russia's responses to the pandemic. The five major response categories are: (1) Russia's development and global distribution of Sputnik V, (2) Russia's framing of itself and the West, (3) Russia's use of information warfare, (4) Russia's domestic response, and (5) Russia's posturing at the UN. Through exploring these elements of Russia's response (primarily focusing on the international end), this paper finds that all of Russia's responses fall in line with one or more of its national interests.[1] Therefore, Russia's international Covid-19 response is expressly designed to shift global power towards Russia, primarily by means of undermining the West. Finally, Chapter 4 presents an overview of the findings and potential avenues for further research.

*The Covid-19 Pandemic*

In 2020, states around the globe underwent massive shocks due to the spread of the coronavirus disease, or Covid-19. Originating in Wuhan, China in late 2019, Covid-19 – carried by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) – quickly swept the globe due to its relatively high rate of contagion.[2] The resulting pandemic has had a significant effect on the functioning of actors around the world, from individual citizens to government bodies and international organizations. Billions of people have faced unprecedented disruptions to everyday life, and countries around the world have closed borders and reduced international trade. Above all, the human cost of the pandemic has been staggering—as of April 2021, there have been over 3 million reported Covid-19 deaths.[3]

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[1] Figure 1, located in the Appendix, provides a graphic of how national interests and foreign policy responses intersect.

[2] "Similarities and Differences between Flu and Covid-19," CDC, January 27, 2021.

[3] "Coronavirus Deaths Worldwide by Country," Statista, accessed April 1, 2021.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a health crisis above all else, but its ramifications extend far past the realm of public health. For example, by 24 April 2020, over 80 countries had implemented export prohibitions or restrictions as a response to the pandemic. Global merchandise trade suffered the largest one-period decline of all time in the second quarter of 2020, decreasing by 14.3%.[4] Global supply chains have taken a serious hit, worsened by labor shortages at ports and nation-wide workplace closures. Similarly, multilateral cooperation has suffered as countries struggle to find the best path forward, often looking inward while doing so. As such, the Covid-19 pandemic and its secondary effects on the global economy pose a massive strategic shock on the global order—arguably the greatest since World War II.[5] In this way, the pandemic's disruption to international affairs has the potential to exacerbate or accelerate pre-existing phenomena.

In light of China's meteoric rise during the 21st century, a common topic in the field of international relations has been the fate of the liberal international order—will the West remain the leader of the international system, or is Western preponderance nearing its end? Is a qualitative change in the international structure just around the corner? An event as disruptive as the Covid-19 pandemic has great potential to accelerate such power transitions and exacerbate pre-existing divisions within the West.[6] As put by General (retired) Stanley McChrystal, former commander of Joint Special Operations Command in Afghanistan" "the scope of medical and economic disruption that will come from Covid-19 will leave opportunities for [China and

[4] Pepita Barlow et al., "COVID-19 and the Collapse of Global Trade: Building an Effective Public Health Response," *The Lancet Planet Health* 5, no. 2 (2021): 102–107.
[5] The pandemic's status as the "greatest strategic shock to the global system since World War II" is used often in scholarly analysis. [Jeffrey Cimmino, Matthew Kroenig, and Barry Pavel, "Taking Stock: Where are Geopolitics Headed in the Covid-19 Era?" *Atlantic Council,* (2020): 1.]
[6] David Sanger, Eric Schmitt, and Edward Wong, "As Virus Toll Preoccupies U.S., Rivals Test Limits of American Power," *New York Times,* June 1, 2020.; Cimmino, Kroenig, Pavel, "Taking Stock," 2.

Russia], and others, to try to gain advantages."[7] Just as much as the pandemic has afforded China and Russia opportunities to gain power, the pandemic can reduce the power of the West—from direct consequences like a reduction of trade wealth and population to more existential consequences like a reduction of the West's soft power and international clout. The pandemic gives the U.S. and its rivals alike a chance to demonstrate their respective systems' capacity and superiority in the face of extreme crisis.[8]

Given China's unique status as a peer competitor to the U.S. and the originator of the virus, most scholarly analysis related to the pandemic has focused on the relationship between the two states and specifically China's international response. However, Russia's status as a geopolitical rival of the U.S. and benefactor of potential power transition makes it a compelling subject as well.[9] As such, this paper addresses the following question: how has Russia pursued its national interests in the context of the pandemic? In other words, which actions has Russia taken, and how do these actions relate to Russia's national interests? The next section will begin answering this question by identifying Russia's national interests and their ultimate objective.

[7] Sanger, Schmitt, Wong, "Rivals Test Limits of American Power."
[8] Cimmino, Kroenig, Pavel, "Taking Stock," 7.
[9] Russia's desire for a shift in global power dynamics is described at length in Chapter 1.

## CHAPTER 1: RUSSIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS

Understanding the impact of the pandemic on the international system, this paper explores the ways in which Russia, a power that desires changes in the international system, has pursued its national interests during the pandemic. This chapter provides an overview of Russia's foreign policy objectives, particularly those salient to its actions during the pandemic. The four major national interests are: (1) defense of the country and regime, (2) great power status, (3) a multipolar international system, and (4) non-interference from Western powers. As with all states, Russian posturing and practices are driven by national security concerns, but in distinct and recognizable ways. Russia perceives achieving great power status and its privileges, replacing Western preponderance with multipolarity, and overturning norms of humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion as key to increasing Russian national security. Similarly, Russian foreign policy is fueled by the perception that Russia's national interests are fundamentally incompatible with the Western-led liberal international order (LIO). As such, Russian domestic and international rhetoric alike have taken an anti-West turn, and its foreign policy objectives are underscored by opposition to the West. Ultimately, all of Russia's national interests work towards increasing Russia's global power and status, primarily by means of undermining the West. Having established Russia's national interests, Chapter 3 explores Russia's foreign policy actions during the pandemic in relation to these interests. Given Russia's aspiration to alter global power distribution in its favor, an event as impactful as the Covid-19 pandemic has provided Russia several opportunities to improve its own standing and undermine the West.

**Defense of the Country and Regime**

Like all states, Russia's primary interest is maintaining the security of the state and regime. However, Russia's specific history and regime type contribute to the unique ways in which Russia views security and perceives threats. Russia is highly wary of threats on both external and internal fronts. On the external side, Russia possesses few geographical borders for its large land mass and has a history of foreign invasion; geography has shaped Russia's understanding of threats and security for centuries.[10] This geographic insecurity has led to a practice of establishing a buffer zone comprised of neighboring states. The security of this buffer zone is perceived as an extension of Russia's own security; an erosion of the buffer equates to a security threat.[11] On the internal side, a history of domestic upheaval (including the 1917 Revolution and fall of the Soviet Union) has contributed to concerns regarding internal threats.[12] In particular, contemporary Russia regards democratization efforts with great suspicion. All in all, perceptions of threat and vulnerability heavily influence Russian foreign policy.

*Defense of the Country*

Defending the country and regime—and the practices of threat perception that accompany such defense—is not uniquely Russian in any way. In fact, survival of the state—or, in other words, security—is one of the most fundamental concepts of international relations (IR). Concepts surrounding security and survival are most commonly associated with the realist tradition of IR. According to neorealism, the anarchy of the international system creates an

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[10] Julia Gurganus and Eugene Rumer, "Russia's Global Ambitions in Perspective," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* February 2, 2019.

[11] Russia perceiving a threat related to its buffer region is most clearly demonstrated in the 2014 Crimea Annexation, where signs of Ukraine potentially becoming closer to the EU prompted Russia to annex the Crimean Peninsula. [Charles Ziegler, "A Crisis of Diverging Perspectives: U.S.-Russian Relations and the Security Dilemma," *Texas National Security Review* 4, no. 1 (2020).]

[12] Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2017), 8.

environment where states must obtain and maintain power in order to ensure survival; similarly, survival is the primary goal of all states.[13] The concept of the Security Dilemma describes how an increase (or perceived increase) in the power of one state diminishes the security of another, leading to a cycle of security competition. The anarchy of the international system only exacerbates this dilemma, and thus states are inclined toward suspicion and threat perception.[14] Therefore, Russia's prioritization of ensuring the state's survival is in line with fundamental IR insights, particularly neorealist.

Other approaches within IR, such as constructivism, have added depth to analysis of threat perception. In "Anarchy is What States Make of It," Alexander Wendt argues that states' identities and interests can evolve over time rather than remaining fixed; similarly, the relationships between states and a state's own history can significantly affect the way it perceives threats. Continuous interactions between states help develop the perception of the other, which influences a state's behavior towards particular others.[15] Beyond the basic levels of threat perception described by realism, Russia's specific history plays a role in which threats it deems most significant, and in determining which actions constitute a threat in the first place. For example, Russia's position as a large continental state with a history of devastation by powerful neighbors contributes to a contemporary policy of establishing a strict buffer zone of neighboring states. Russia has taken actions to shield its near abroad from Western influence, founding regional institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Collective Security Treaty

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[13] John Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity 2nd ed.*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 78.
[14] Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," 81.
[15] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992).

Organization (CSTO).[16] These institutions prevent member states from potentially joining Western institutions like the EU or NATO, as EAEU states cannot become EU members and the CSTO bars members from joining other military alliances.[17] All CSTO members have the right to veto the establishment of a foreign military base in another member state, a power especially useful to Russia.[18] If this buffer zone is still violated, Russia acts to reinstate it.[19] Similarly, a history of fierce antagonism with the U.S. throughout the Cold War influences Russia's attitude towards the U.S. today.[20] Therefore, while defending the country and regime is a national interest shared by all states, Russia's methods of doing so are unique.

*Defense of the Regime*

Similarly, the specifics of Russia's domestic systems contribute to its perception of internal and external threats. Domestic politics typically fall outside the purview of IR scholarship. In Kenneth Waltz's *Man, the State, and War,* he identifies three levels of analysis for international conflict: the individual, the state, and the state system. Per Waltz, the characteristics of the state system are the most salient in determining state behavior and interests, and thus examination of international relations is best situated at the third level of analysis.[21] The internal mechanisms of states are therefore largely irrelevant to many IR scholars (particularly

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[16] Russia's "near abroad" refers to its perceived as its perceived sphere of influence and is characterized as the former Soviet Union minus the Baltic states. [Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* ix.]
[17] The EAEU is comprised of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. The CSTO is comprised of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. [Rilka Dragneva and Kataryna Wolczk, "The Eurasian Economic Union: Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power," *Chatham House,* May 2, 2017.; Karena Avedissian, "Fact Sheet: What is the Collective Security Treaty Organization?" *EVN Report*, October 6, 2019.]
[18] Jeronim Perović, "Russia's Eurasian Strategy," *Center for Security Studies*, May 10, 2019.
[19] The most famous example of Russia securing its buffer zone is during the 2014 Crimea Annexation. While several factors (including domestic regime legitimation and military capability) contributed to this event, a major driver was Western efforts to tighten its relationship with Ukraine through institutional means (NATO and EU). As Ukraine is seen as an essential buffer state to Russia, Moscow acted to prevent Ukrainian integration with the West through direct intervention. [Ziegler, "A Crisis of Diverging Perspectives."]
[20] Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* December 14, 2017.
[21] Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1959).

those of the realist tradition) and left to alternate fields like domestic or comparative politics.[22] However, recent work within IR shows an increasing willingness to challenge this assumption. For example, the neo-classical branch of realism includes individual and domestic factors into analysis of state behavior, arguing that a states' internal characteristics and leadership influence foreign policy outcomes.[23] The constructivist school of thought entirely rejects the notion that states' interests are fixed, and examines the roles of norms, civil society, and national identity in interest-formation. Thus, connections between domestic factors and foreign policy can be made in IR analysis.

The case of Russia illustrates the link between the domestic and international for many reasons. Despite Russia's authoritarianism and lack of democratic institutions, the source of Putin's support and survivability of a ruler makes his domestic popularity a key concern. According to Henry Hale, Russia is classified as a "patronalistic" regime. These regimes are supported by patronalistic networks within which "political collective action takes place primarily through extensive networks of personal acquaintance, networks that tend to give presidents 'informal' power that extends far beyond the authority formally stipulated in the constitution."[24] Autocrats must work to maintain the support of networks (such as oligarchs and local political machines) in order to maintain their own power. However, such networks support winners and will defect to opposition in the face of regime instability.[25] Therefore, public support is essential in maintaining patronal support, as it stands as a key indicator of regime stability in

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[22] Rhonda Callaway and Elizabeth Matthews, *International Relations Theory: A Primer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33.
[23] József Golovics, "Contemporary Realism in Theory and Practice: the Case of the Ukrainian Crisis," *Polgári Szemle* 13, (2017): 366.
[24] Henry Hale, "How nationalism and machine politics mix in Russia," in *The New Russian Nationalism: Imperialism, Ethnicity and Authoritarianism,* ed. Helge Blakkisrud and Pål Kolstø (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 221.
[25] Hale, "How nationalism and machine politics mix in Russia," 223.

competitive autocracies. If a patronal president maintains high public opinion, then his networks are more likely to buy in and not defect to opposition.[26] In competitive autocracies such as Russia, the existence of semi-democratic institutions—no matter how illiberal and corrupt—means that autocrats must take opposition forces seriously.[27] Thus autocrats like Putin still rely on a degree of public support and elite buy-in. Luckily for Putin, he has generally succeeded on this front; since taking office, Putin's approval ratings have only dipped below 60% once, and have topped 80% on multiple occasions.[28]

Another link between the domestic and international is made by practices of regime legitimation. The necessity of maintaining some degree of public support forces all types of political systems—whether democratic or autocratic—to find ways of legitimizing their regime. Some methods of legitimation look outward: invoking nationalism vis-à-vis an external "other," exaggerating external threats, or even starting military conflicts to spark a rallying, unifying effect.[29] Tying domestic legitimation to foreign policy can create a self-enforcing feedback loop: as regime legitimation contributes to the formation and reinforcement of national identity; national identity and self-perception in turn affect national interests.[30] Thus, certain legitimation strategies can influence foreign policy. The necessity of regime legitimation, paired with the methods of legitimation common in competitive autocracies, further demonstrates the link

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[26] Hale, "How nationalism and machine politics mix in Russia," 228.
[27] Steven Levitsky, and Lucan Way. "Elections without Democracy: the Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 54.
[28] Data compiled from Lavada Centre. Putin's ratings dipped to 59% in the midst of the pandemic (April 2020). Some doubt the accuracy of Russian approval polls due to social desirability status or self-censorship. However, an independent study in 2015 concluded that most of Putin's public support (expressed in polls) was genuine. ["Vladimir Putin's approval rating in Russia monthly 1999-2021," Statista.; Timothy Frye et al., "Is Putin's Popularity Real?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 33, no. 1 (2017): 363.]
[29] Daniel Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin," *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 3 (2011): 590.
[30] Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It."

between domestic politics and foreign policy and the merit of considering both when analyzing foreign policy interests.

**Great Power Status**

Another key Russian national interest is regaining great power status. In Russia's view, the major benefit of such status lies in the ability to meaningfully influence international decision-making and outcomes in a way favorable to its interests. As such, this objective is interlinked with Russia's desire to establish a multipolar world order in place of Western-dominated preponderance.[31] Possessing great power status in a multipolar world would allow Russia to check its opponents to an extent that the current unipolar system does not allow and pursue its national interests more effectively, without interference from an outside hegemon.[32] Practically all contemporary analysis of Russian foreign policy discusses Russia's desire to be acknowledged as one of a handful of global powers.[33] In many ways, this desire for great power status is rooted in Russia's fundamental foreign policy goal: defense of the country. Russia's history of attack and geographical isolation has contributed to the national logic that a strong state is the key to survival in a threat-filled world.[34] The general consensus among the Russian elite rests on the enduring belief that Russia is a great power that must protect itself in a dangerous world. While Russia may go through periods of weakness, reasserting its true role as a great power is the foundation of foreign policy.[35] In Putin's words—"Russia can only survive

[31] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 15-16.
[32] Also related to Russia's great power vision is the desire to exert near-exclusive influence over its near abroad. However, this objective is not particularly salient to the paper's main discussion and was thus omitted.
[33] Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's spheres of interest, not influence," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2009): 7.
[34] Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: the Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham:Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 13.
[35] Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy,* 15, 26.

and develop within the existing borders if it stays a great power."[36] Additionally, a history of distinction from its neighbors to the East and West (from Russia's Eastern Orthodoxy in contrast to Western Europe's Protestant/Catholic traditions, to the Soviet Union's role as the head of the international Communist movement) has bolstered the conception of a unique national destiny, one in which Russia is destined to be a great power.[37]

While great power aspirations were certainly not introduced by the Putin regime, Putin made a concerted effort to position these aspirations at the center of Russian foreign policy.[38] His first Foreign Policy Concept (adopted in 2000) listed "promoting the interests of the Russian Federation as a great power and one of the most influential centers in the modern world..." as the top priority.[39] In addition to the military and economic resources inherent to great power status, Russia's pursuit includes recognition from other states. This recognition must grant Russia superior status (particularly in relation to its near abroad) and certain privileges, including respect for its sovereignty and preponderance over its sphere of influence.[40] Similarly, Russia views great power status as essential to influencing favorable international outcomes and preventing unfavorable outcomes—essentially, assurance that Russia is not subject to the whims of the Western great powers.[41] Given its post-Cold War status as global hegemon, U.S. recognition of Russia's special status and the accompanying perks was key to Russia satisfying its great power ambitions.

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[36]Andrei Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 31.
[37] Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy,* 12.
[38] Ibid., *Politics,* 30.
[39] Ibid., *Russian Foreign Policy: the Return of Great Power Politics,* 16.
[40] Stephen Blank, "The Sacred Monster: Russia as a Foreign Policy Actor," in *Perspectives on Russian Foreign Policy,* ed. Stephen Blank (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 88.
[41]Thomas Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq: International Status and the Role of Positional Goods," *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 8 (2005): 1193.

*Great Power vis-à-vis the "Other"*

Relations with the West constitute the primary frame of reference for Russian foreign policy due to Western preponderance.[42] This fact remains true for Russia's great power aspirations. International status and prestige are inherently relational concepts that can only exist by way of comparison with other states.[43] If Russia were to exist contentedly in a Western-dominated order, it would require the ability to largely pursue its interests without outside interference. However, rather than being integrated into the core of the international system after the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia was relegated to the level of its neighboring states by the West. As noted by the RAND Corporation, Russia "refuses to accept the rank of a middle power with merely a regional role. It sees itself as a global actor, playing in the big leagues."[44] Russia's current Foreign Policy Concept states how dialogue with the U.S. must be "conducted on equal footing."[45] Thus, non-recognition of great power status by the West made long-term cooperation unfeasible.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq only strengthened Russian unease with Western preponderance. Despite Russia's strong opposition to the war through diplomatic channels and in the UN Security Council (UNSC), the U.S. acted unilaterally and explicitly outside of the framework of the UN, demonstrating a willingness to "go at it alone."[46] The situation was worsened by France and Germany's vocal opposition to the invasion—if such great powers that were much closer to the U.S. could not overturn its decision, then what could Russia stand to

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[42] This was especially true when Putin took power in 2000. While Western preponderance is arguably receding, Russia's view of the international order as unipolar and Western-dominated has been a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy doctrine. [Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy,* 21.]
[43] Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq," 1193.
[44] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 16.
[45] "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 1, 2016.
[46] Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq," 1205.

gain from allying itself with the West? In Russia's conception of great power, such status requires that Russia would be able to have a real impact on international decision-making. The fruitlessness of Russia's opposition to the war dashed Russia's hope that such great power status was achievable through cooperation with the West. Thus, the Iraq War made clear to Russia that alignment with the West was incompatible with Russia's great power aspirations. Instead, under the current system, the West (and the U.S. in particular) is able to pursue its national interests unchecked, a system that is unacceptable to Russia's national interests and self-perceptions alike.

This discussion does not intend to imply that the refusal of the West to label Russia a great power is the primary reason for Russia's anti-Western turn of the 2000s. However, understanding the turn of Russia's Western outlook from cooperative to antagonistic is important to understanding how Russia frames its current policy. Given the perceived inability of Russia to achieve its great power status and accompanying perks (a say in international decision-making and the ability to pursue its national interests) within a U.S.-dominated international system, Russia then committed fully to a multipolar vision as a means of countering the West.

*Regime Legitimation*

As discussed previously, domestic regime legitimacy is often fueled by foreign policy actions. To his domestic audience, Putin portrays himself as a leader who has returned Russia to great power, especially in opposition to the West. This tactic has been effective; in a 2018 survey of Russian citizens, 47% of respondents identified the "return of Russia to the status of great and respected power" as a success of Putin's time in office. This answer had the highest percentage of positive responses, with the second-highest answer ("stabilizing the situation in the North Caucasus") gaining 38% agreement.[47] In their comprehensive survey of post-Soviet states, von

[47] "Владимир Путин," Левада-Центр, April 7, 2018.

Soest and Grauvogel identified "international engagement" as a significant legitimating device for the Putin regime, in reference to his pursuit of restoring Russia's status.[48] To his domestic audience, Putin has crafted an image of himself as the leader of a Great Power that defiantly rejects the oppression of Western powers. This aspect of Putin's domestic appeal is closely tied to the Kremlin's anti-Western rhetoric; by establishing the image of a powerful Russia vis-à-vis the West, Putin securitizes the West in a manner that grants his rule legitimacy.[49]

Putin's anti-Western rhetoric has a legitimizing effect. Michael McFaul, former ambassador to Russia, stated how "Mr. Putin needed an enemy–the United States–to strengthen his legitimacy."[50] According to author Suzanne Loftus: "By negatively portraying the West at home, Russian leadership can diminish Western criticism of Russia, legitimize Russian behavior to the public, and defend Russia's national identity as a Great Power."[51] Beyond the general public, Putin's image as strong leader on the international stage falls in line with the elite consensus that Russia's destined role is among the world's leading powers.[52] The anti-Western angle of Russia's great power rhetoric also allows Moscow to diminish Western criticism of Russia, legitimize Russia's foreign policy behavior to the public, and defend Russia's national great power identity.[53] Aggressive foreign policy fuels a "rally-round-the-flag" effect among the Russian public, propping up Putin's popularity.[54] After the Crimea Annexation, television

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[48] Christian von Soest and Julia Grauvogel, "How Do Non-Democratic Regimes Claim Legitimacy? Comparative Insights from Post-Soviet Countries," *GIGA Working Papers* (2015): 12.
[49] Alexander Cooley, "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2017.
[50] Peter Shearman, "Putin and Russian Policy toward the West," in *Power, Politics and Confrontation in Eurasia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 64.
[51] Loftus, *Insecurity & the Rise of Nationalism in Putin's Russia: Keeper of Traditional Values* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 97.
[52] Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy,* 30.
[53] Loftus, *Insecurity & the Rise of Nationalism in Putin's Russia,* 97.
[54] Olivier Schmitt, "How to Challenge an International Order: Russian Diplomatic Practices in Multilateral Security Organisations," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 3 (219): 925.

program *Politika* described the incident as a statement from a "powerful state" that would "no longer play games with America."[55] In this way, Putin can gain public support and elite cohesion through this legitimation strategy.

**Multipolarity**

The third Russian national interest is multipolarity. In place of a Western-led order—especially one where Russia was relegated to non-significance—21st century Russian foreign policy has consistently called for the establishment of a multipolar world order. Russia's rhetorical support of a multipolar world order is based in its previous two interests—special status as a great power and the ultimate security of the Russian state and regime. Essentially, Russia views multipolarity as the most viable path in dismantling Western hegemony and an international system that gets in the way of Russian interests. Thus, multipolarity has become a staple of Russian foreign policy rhetoric.

Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* describes three major configurations of the international system: unipolar, bipolar, and multipolar. The polarity of the system is dependent on the number of great powers within the system; a multipolar system contains more than two great powers.[56] After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered a shock as it dropped from its status as a major power in a bipolar world to a diminished state in a unipolar world as the U.S. emerged as the world's sole great power. The U.S. utilized its hegemony to globalize the LIO, characterized by economic openness, multilateral institutions, collective security cooperation,

[55] Yuri Teper, "Official Russian identity discourse in light of the annexation of Crimea: national or imperial?" *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2016): 388.
[56] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Harlow: Longman Higher Education, 1979).

and democratic solidarity.[57] Many of these norms—and their distinctly universalist nature—were threatening to Russia, worsening the shock.[58] It was under this unipolar system that Russia formulated its multipolarity doctrine.[59]

In the 1990s, Russian PM (1998-1999) Yevgeny Primakov popularized multipolarity as a foreign policy mantra for Russia, solidifying a vision in the post-Cold War confusion.[60] The multipolarity doctrine served dual purposes, allowing Russia to oppose U.S. preponderance while not harming bilateral relations with other potential poles like China or India.[61] Thus, Russia's support of multipolarity is fundamentally grounded in the ultimate goal of diffusing power away from the West. As Russia's concept of multipolarity is primarily constructed as a means of dismantling Western preponderance, the doctrine lacks a coherent alternative for the international system. In fact, Russia offers no viable alternative to the unipolar world order it has railed against.[62] As such, Russian rhetoric supporting multipolarity is almost always accompanied by attacks on the Western-led order.

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[57] John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018):7.

[58] The norms of the LIO that Russia primarily takes issue with are democracy promotion, continuous expansion of Western multilateral institutions like NATO or the EU (to include Russia's neighbors), and human rights intervention.

[59] The rise of China in the 21st century and the recent retreat of the U.S. from global leadership under Donald Trump's presidency have sparked debate regarding the current polarity of the international system. Similarly, in "The end of liberal international order?", liberalist scholar John Ikenberry questions the fate of the LIO, citing a rise of authoritarianism, populism, and nationalism across the liberal democratic world.
Up until around 2017, Russian rhetoric consistently referred to the international system's unipolar nature. Only within the past 3-4 years has Russia began shifting from this diagnosis. In a 2018 speech, Putin stated how "the world is becoming or has already become multipolar." In 2021, he said "the era linked with attempts to build a centralized and unipolar world has ended." However, anti-Western rhetoric and decrying of Western "abuses of power" remain highly prominent. Thus, it appears that Russia still considers the power of the West and the norms of the LIO as strong enough to pose a threat to its foreign policy interests and thus, they remain a target.
["Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," Kremlin, October 18, 2018.; "Vladimir Putin at Davos Online Forum – Transcript," Eurasia Review, January 27, 2021.]

[60] Primakov also served as Foreign Minister from 1996-1998.

[61] Petr Kratochvíl, "Multipolarity: American Theory and Russian Practice," *Institute of International Relations Prague* (2002): 8.

[62] Stronski and Sokolsky, "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework."

In a 2008 speech following the Russo-Georgian war, then-President Dmitri Medvedev described the second of five foreign policy principles as:

> The world should be multipolar. A single-pole world is unacceptable. Domination is something we cannot allow. We cannot accept a world order in which one country makes all the decisions, even as serious and influential a country as the United States of America. Such a world is unstable and threatened by conflict.[63]

9 years later, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov echoed this sentiment, stating:

> We have repeatedly spoken about the reasons for the degradation of the international situation, about the unviability of the concept of unipolarity, about the counter-productiveness of unilateral actions, about the danger of undermining international law and the associated growth of the power factor in world affairs. Today it is obvious that the "liberal" model of globalization, rooted in the early 1990s, and...focused on ensuring the leadership and prosperity of a narrow group of states at the expense of the rest of the world, has exhausted itself. She has demonstrated instability to various challenges, inability to effectively cope with numerous problems, although external slogans seem to be noble.[64]

Russia's most recent Foreign Policy Concept (adopted in 2016) lists these as two of its foremost objectives: "to consolidate the Russian Federation's position as a centre of influence in today's world;...and [to establish]a fair and democratic international system that addresses international issues on the basis of collective decision-making...as well as equal, partnership relations among States..."[65] In fact, every Foreign Policy Concept since 2000 has included similar language emphasizing the necessity of Russia consolidating its role as an influential center of the global order. Similarly, in a 2017 speech, Lavrov spoke of an "extremely important fork" in international relations. One path would continue the Western-led unipolarity established in the 1990s. On the other, "the leading centers of civilization will manage to come to an agreement, to

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[63] Pavel Baev, "Defying that Sinking Feeling: Russia seeks to uphold its role in the multistructural international system in flux," in *Perspectives on Russian Foreign Policy,* ed. Stephen Blank (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2012),1.

[64] Sergei Lavrov, "Speech and answers to questions at the Second International Scientific and Expert Forum 'Primakov Readings'." Speech, Moscow, Russia, June 30, 2017.

[65] "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," 2016.

unite efforts on the basis of broad international partnership with the UN playing a central coordinating role. Russia is clearly in favor of the second option."[66] This persistent rhetoric reveals the intent of Russia to dismantle the current global order in pursuit one that would grant Russia great power status and its privileges.

*Opposition to the Western Order*

Relations with the West constitute the primary frame of reference for Russian foreign policy.[67] Over the past two decades, Russo-Western relations have become increasingly fraught; the U.S. now identifies Russia as one of two primary rivals (alongside China).[68] However, this relationship was not always viewed antagonistically. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia demonstrated willingness to join the Western-led order. In particular, after the September 11 attacks in 2001, Russia emerged as one of the strongest supporters of the U.S. Global War on Terrorism and dedicated itself to close cooperation with the West, so much so that then-Senator Joseph Biden declared how "no Russian leader since Peter the Great has cast his lot as much with the West as Putin has."[69] During this brief period, embracing alignment with the West was seen as the best method to secure Russia's national interests—by allying itself with the U.S., Russia could gain a seat at the table of U.S. decision-making and pursue its interests there.[70]

However, this rationale crumbled in the face of the 2003 Iraq Invasion. Russia viewed the event as evidence the to exist in a unipolar world meant being subject to the whims of the

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[66] Of course, Russia supports the UN as a central coordinator due to its privileged status in the UNSC. This angle is explored in greater depth in the Eu vs. UN section. [Lavrov, "Speech and answers to questions," 2017.]
[67] Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy,* 21.
[68] Joseph R. Biden, "Interim National Security Strategy Guidance," White House, March 2021.
[69] Russia's willingness to join the GWOT was largely a result of its own concerns about radical Islamist terrorism, especially given Russia's large Muslim population and unrest in Chechnya. By joining the Western initiative, Russia could frame its own counterterrorism measures in terms of the GWOT. Regardless of the primary motivation, Russia's willingness to ally with the U.S. in this sphere appeared genuine. [Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq," 1190.]
[70] Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq," 1205.

hegemon, no matter how benevolently it portrayed itself.[71] As put by a Russian writer, Russia's inability to influence U.S. actions in Iraq reduced the UNSC to a body whose role was merely "to legally confirm decisions made in Washington, or else to stand by impotently and watch America do what it wants and can."[72] Incidents such as NATO intervention in Kosovo, the invasion of Afghanistan, eastward expansion of NATO, and the outbreak of pro-Western Color Revolutions between 2003-2005 all worsened Russia's distrust of American preponderance.[73] Like Iraq, these incidents were perceived in Moscow as proof of the West's global overreach and tendency to intervene at will. As early as 2006, analyst Dmitri Trenin observed "Russia's leaders have given up on becoming a part of the West and have started creating their own Moscow-centered system."[74] From a Western perspective, the breakdown of Russo-Western relations was solidified with Russia's military intervention in Georgia in 2008 and only reinforced by its activities in Ukraine and Syria.[75] In this way, various Western actions since the turn of the century convinced Moscow that working within the current unipolar order is completely incongruent with its own national interests. Thus, Russia recommitted itself to a pursuit of multipolarity.[76]

Multiple acts of Western interference abroad spurred a growing consensus among Russian elite that working within the system of American preponderance was incompatible with

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[71] In a 1998 piece for *Foreign Policy,* Robert Kagan labelled the U.S. a "benevolent empire," citing its genuine conviction to protect the interests of its allies and to spread freedom and prosperity throughout the globe. He argues that the world is best off with the U.S. as the leading superpower due to its unique generosity and that U.S. hegemony supports "the preservation of a reasonable level of international security and prosperity." [Robert Kagan, "The Benevolent Empire."]

[72] Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq," 1201.

[73] Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy,* 23.

[74] Ibid.*,* 26.

[75] All three of these examples involve Russia working against Western interests. In Georgia and Ukraine, Russia thwarted potential integration into Western institutions through direct intervention. In Syria, Russia is backing the Bashar al-Assad regime, which the U.S. has fought against. [Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy Politics,* 90.]

[76] Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq," 1201-1203.

Russia's security interests. Beyond interference abroad, Western activity within Russia is viewed suspiciously, a perception worsened by mistrust from the Soviet and immediate post-Cold War period. Many Russians view the economic, political, and social chaos of the 1990s as a result of Western policy implemented by Yeltsin.[77] The influx of Western-led democratization programs during the same period was also seen by many as an attempt to influence election results.[78] Democracy promotion efforts by the West are regarded negatively by most Russians, and U.S. intentions have been consistently perceived as hostile since the end of the Cold War.[79] U.S. support of democratization efforts in the Color Revolutions and Arab Spring protests only worsened this perception, especially in the wake of the mass demonstrations that occurred within Russia during 2011-2012.[80] In fact, professional Russian military writing describes "color revolutions" as a revolution managed from the outside by external political actors, reflecting Leninist conceptions that reformers at home are supported by foreign agents.[81]

As a result of this perception, the Kremlin set its sight on NGOs within its own borders.[82] In 2005, the activities and foreign funding of NGOs engaged in "political activities" were restricted. In 2008, NGOs—particularly those involved in human rights promotion—were stripped of their tax-exempt status. In the wake of mass protests in 2011-2012, NGOs that received foreign aid were legally required to adopt the label of "foreign agent" and be subject to unannounced inspections.[83] This crackdown demonstrates the way that Russian elites often link

[77] Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy,* 95.
[78] Shearman, "Putin and Russian Policy Toward the West," 77.
[79] Ibid.," 83.
[80] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 28.
[81] Blank, "The Sacred Monster: Russia as a Foreign Policy Actor," 90-91.
[82] Robert Person, "Balance of threat: The domestic insecurity of Vladimir Putin," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8 (2017): 55.
[83] Person, "Balance of threat," 56.

foreign and domestic threats; elites claim that foreign rivals incite internal rebellion, and thus attack domestic opponents such as NGOs.[84] In this way, suspicion of the West runs deeper than foreign policy.

In accordance with Moscow's adversarial attitude towards the West and its objective to dismantle its dominance, official rhetoric of the Putin era has become increasingly anti-Western. Given the current global system, Russia only needs to chip away at the dominant Western narrative rather than construct its own.[85] In this way, most Russian rhetoric is framed in opposition to the West rather than promoting a novel narrative. Through its control over the most popular television, print, and radio outlets at home, the Kremlin promotes the message that U.S. dominance must be weakened, and that Russian influence must grow.[86] Such rhetoric serves a dual purpose, as the Kremlin has employed the process of securitization with regards to the West by presenting its existence and interference as a deep existential threat to Russia. Western influence is framed not only as a geopolitical threat, but as an existential and cultural threat to Russian culture and society. During Putin's third term, official rhetoric began emphasizing traditional values and the importance of protecting these values from degrading Western influence.[87] The West is portrayed as in moral decline in opposition to Russia's conservative values; religion, community, and tradition in turn have been embraced by the Putin regime.[88] For example, in 2020, a constitutional amendment backed by Putin banned gay marriage.[89]

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[84] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 9.
[85] Seva Gunitsky, "One Word to Improve U.S. Russia Policy," *New Republic*, April 27, 2018.
[86] Ariel Cohen, "Ideology and Soft Power in Contemporary Russia." in *Perspectives on Russian Foreign Policy,* ed. Stephen Blank (Carlisle Barracks: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 198.
[87] Marlene Laurelle, "Russia as an Anti-Liberal European Civilisation," in *The New Russian Nationalism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 288.
[88] Cooley, "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States."
[89] Dmitri Lovetsky, "Russian Constitution Change Ends Hopes for Gay Marriage," *NBC News,* July 13, 2020.

By framing the West as a threat to Russian security and identity, Putin has created a narrative in Russian society that is anti-Western and legitimizing for his actions at home and abroad.[90] The official emphasis on tradition was designed to create cultural consensus within Russian society and diminish political tensions. Emphasis on patriotism encourages state stability as opposition to the state jeopardizes its strength and defensive capability.[91] For the Kremlin, ideological posturing became a method of consensus-building, especially in the face of a missing socio-economic social contract.[92] A Russian critic of Putin said "the image of the West as an enemy has become has become the sole ideological justification of Putin."[93] This rhetoric has had significant effects: polls of the Russian public show that negative feelings towards the U.S. increased from 16% in 2010 to 73% in 2014. Positive feelings towards the EU decreased from 60% in 2011 to 17% in 2014.[94] In this way, anti-Western sentiment has become a cornerstone of the Putin regime.

**Non-Interference and Sovereignty**

Russia's fourth national interest is the promotion of national sovereignty on the international stage. Russia's understanding of the sovereignty norm falls in line with a traditional understanding: "the entitlement of a state to rule over a bounded territory," recognition of that right by other actors, and the resulting non-interference from other actors in the system.[95] Russian officials stress that approval by the UN Security Council is the only acceptable way to violate the right of non-interference. In contrast to Western norms, Russia has consistently

[90] Loftus, *Insecurity & the Rise of Nationalism in Putin's Russia,* 8.
[91] Laurelle, "Russia as an anti-liberal European civilisation," 290-292.
[92] Ibid., 296.
[93] Shearman, "Putin and Russian Policy Toward the West," 64.
[94] Ibid., 76.
[95] Ian Hurd, "Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics," *International Organization* 53, no. 2 (1999): 393.

prioritized sovereignty over upholding human rights. For example, in light of human rights violations during the Chechen Wars, Russia asserted that the conflict was a purely internal affair and rejected Western criticism. By promoting this traditional view of sovereignty, Russia hopes to create an environment where its national security is less threatened. However, given Russia's desire to insulate itself from outside threat and exert influence, this right of non-interference does not extend to the near abroad in practice, creating an inconsistency between Russia's rhetoric and actions.[96]

Hand-in-hand with Russia's push for non-interference is its vehement rejection of Western norms, primarily universal human rights and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The concept of R2P posits that state sovereignty is a responsibility rather than a mere protection from outside influence, and that "residual responsibility" lies with the international community in the case of a state failing to fulfil its responsibility or actively perpetrating crimes against its citizens.[97] R2P gained footing among the international community following the humanitarian disasters in Rwanda and the Balkans in the 1990s. Russia largely rejects these norms; Foreign Policy Concepts since 2000 have consistently deemed "humanitarian intervention" as a justification for "unilateral acts of force in circumvention of the UNSC" and "unacceptable."[98] Russia argues that there is an inherent unfairness to these norms given the selectivity of humanitarian interventions; to Russia, the hegemonic West uses its new "standard of civilization" to justify interest-based interventions in the name of universal norms.[99] Russia also argues that there are double-standards inherent in humanitarian-based interventions. As Foreign

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[96] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 19-21.
[97] "Responsibility to Protect." *Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect.* United Nations.
[98] Natasha Kuhrt, "Russia, the Responsibility to Protect and Intervention," in *The Responsibility to Protect and the Third Pillar: Legitimacy and Operationalization*, ed. Daniel Fiott and Joachim Koops (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 98.
[99] Kuhrt, "Russia, the Responsibility to Protect and Intervention," 98.

Minister Lavrov stated in 2019, "How do you [the liberal order] reconcile the imperative of defending human rights with the bombardment of sovereign states, and the deliberate effort to destroy their statehood, which leads to the death of hundreds of thousands of people?"[100]

According to realist theory, the hegemon of the international system establishes the rules of international relations, rules that encompass political and economic interactions between states. The more detrimental or non-optimal a state perceives these rules to its national interest, the more likely a state will reject them and aim to alter the current distribution of global power.[101] Analysist Richard Sawka argues that post-Cold War Russia was willing to accept American hegemony to the extent that preponderance was constrained by a system of international law—specifically the UN system.[102] However, the West of the 21st century did not act in ways that Russia deemed acceptable—alongside intervention and institutional expansion, the West pushed universalist normative claims like R2P. As put by Sawka, "the combination of radicalised hegemonic universalism and the expansive logic of the power system rendered dominion unacceptable."[103] As NATO steadily expanded eastward and the West supported democracy promotion in Russia's backyard, Russia began to perceive the norms of the LIO as inherently threatening.[104] Putin's 2007 speech at the Munich Conference captures this feeling:

> What is a unipolar world? However one might embellish this term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making...Today we are witnessing an almost uncontained hyper use of force – military force – in international relations, force that is plunging the world into an abyss of permanent conflicts...We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is

[100] Richard Sakwa,"Greater Russia: Is Moscow out to Subvert the West?" *International Politics* (2020).
[101] Thomas Szayna et al., *The Emergence of Peer Competitors: a Framework for Analysis* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2001), 46-48.
[102] Sakwa, "Greater Russia: Is Moscow out to Subvert the West?"
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid.

> visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?[105]

Thus, Russia's rejection of universal norms falls in line with its vision of a multipolar world where Western interference (humanitarian or otherwise) is no longer normalized or routine.[106] While multipolarity does not eliminate insecurity or power competition, Russia sees it as a favorable alternative due to the threats posed by the Western-led order. Thus, by attempting to diffuse power away from the West and contesting universalist norms that justify intervention, Russia pursues its own security.

It is important to point out the inconsistency present between Russia's rhetoric and practices in its near abroad and beyond. Despite its posturing, Russia has directly intervened in favor of its interests in now-frozen conflicts in Georgia, Armenia/Azerbaijan, and Moldova and ongoing conflicts in Syria and Ukraine.[107] The specific methods of justification that the Kremlin employs for its domestic audience—for example, the protection of "compatriots" and the "Russian World" (*Russkiy mir)* in Ukraine and counterterrorism in Syria—lie outside of the scope of this discussion. However, when framed in terms of Russia's national security—where maintaining a strict buffer zone and opposing Western democracy-promotion are key—the inconsistency irons out. Russia's vehement defense of total sovereignty and rejection of universalist norms is not a principled stance. Rather, it reflects all of the interests discussed

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[105] Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," Speech, Munich, Germany, February 10, 2007.

[106] Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: the Return of Great Power Politics,* 15.

[107] All frozen conflicts in the former Soviet space currently maintain the presence of Russian peacekeeping troops. Frozen conflicts in the near abroad are helpful to Russia on two fronts: (1) they bar the host states from entry into the EU or NATO due to their instability and (2) they allow Russia to keep small pockets of troops throughout the near abroad. [Diana Dascalu, "Frozen Conflicts and Federalization: Russian Policy in Transnistria and Donbass," *Colombia Journal of International Affairs,* May 22, 2019.

previously: defense of the country, great power status, and multipolarity in place of Western preponderance.

**Interests in Practice: EU Vs. UN**

In pursuing national security, Russia hopes to achieve great power status and its perks, establish a multipolar world order, and re-establish norms of unconditional sovereignty. Understanding these interests provides context for divergent Russian attitudes towards certain international organizations (IOs). This section will focus on Russia's stance towards two major IOs—the UN (specifically, the Security Council) and the EU.

In 2016, Lavrov explained that cooperation with Western partners hinges on a "universal feeling of equality and equally guaranteed security."[108] As such, the UN and EU provide two ends of a spectrum for analysis: while the UNSC confirms Russia's desired status as a great power, the EU relegated Russia to the second-rate status of its post-Soviet neighbors and opposes Russia's view of the world. As a result, there is a large disparity in Russia's attitudes towards each organization. When examining diplomatic behavior within the UN, NATO-Russia Council, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, scholars found that Russian diplomats become agitated when the "indispensable" status of their role is disputed.[109] In fact, the diplomats consistently employed narratives that revealed a greater interest in status recognition than security management.[110] Obviously, interactions with IOs are largely dictated by rational interests, such as trade and military security. For example, Russia was the fifth largest importer of EU goods and the fourth largest exporter to the EU in 2019.[111] However, while a state's

[108] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 23.
[109] Schmitt, "How to Challenge an International Order," 940.
[110] Schmitt, "How to Challenge an International Order," 923.
[111] "EU and Russia in World Trade of Goods," *Eurostat*, March 2020.

rhetoric surrounding an IO may not match with its practical engagement, examining rhetoric on its face still grants valuable insight into the foreign policy priorities of a state. Russia's rhetorical support of IOs is highly dependent on the extent to which the IO recognizes Russia's desired status and falls in line with Russia's vision for the global order.

*Support of UN*

Russia desires an international order where its national security is maximized, including institutions that potentially limit Western power and intervention. As such, Russia strongly supports the UN (in particular, the UNSC) as the arbiter of international conflicts and crises. Every iteration of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept since 2000 has cited the UN Charter as the source of international law that forms the basis on which great powers should coordinate action. It is important to note that Russia's support of the UN Charter is based in a fundamentally strict and restrictionist interpretation—particularly Article 2, which affirms the sovereignty of all member states and forbids members from "[intervening] in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state."[112] This conditional support of the UN is reflected in Putin's 2007 Munich speech:

> I am convinced that the only mechanism that can make decisions about using military force as a last resort is the Charter of the United Nations. The use of force can only be considered legitimate if the decision is sanctioned by the UN. And we do not need to substitute NATO or the EU for the UN. When the UN will truly unite the forces of the international community and can really react to events in various countries, when we will leave behind this disdain for international law, then the situation will be able to change.[113]

Russia's support for the UN relies on the charter's prioritization of sovereignty. Russian delegates have consistently blocked the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from briefing

[112] Kuhrt, "Russia, the Responsibility to Protect and Intervention," 99.; "United Nations Charter," United Nations, accessed February 3, 2021.
[113] Putin, "Speech," 2007.

the UNSC, insisting that human rights issues are not a concern of international security. Russia consistently opposes any attempt to formally expand the scope and responsibilities of the UNSC and routinely rejects proposals for peacekeeping operations.[114] Thus, Russia supports the UN insofar as it can act as a platform to check Western actions and norms.

The other major source of Russia's support for the UN stems from its unique status as one of five permanent members of the UNSC. As part of the P5, the UN grants Russia status equal to the U.S. and China. Russia's veto power allows it to thwart international action in both states' internal affairs (i.e. Libya) and international conflicts in which Russia plays a part (i.e. Syria).[115] In this way, it is evident that while Russia has become increasingly vocal in its opposition of a Western-led unipolar order, this rejection does not encompass all institutions within the order. Russia supports the autonomous multilateralism established in 1945 but rejects the "exceptionalist" ideology of the 21st century liberal order, especially in tandem with the expansion of Western order.[116] While Russia challenges practices like R2P, it does not desire the abolishment of institutions that are compatible with its interest. As long as the UN falls in line with Russia's views of sovereignty and its own power status, Russia will continue to support its authority.

*Rejection of EU*

Earlier sections mention Russia's refusal to meaningfully engage in systems that fail to recognize it as a great power. This behavior is evidenced in Russia's evolving relationship with the EU. During Yeltsin's presidency (1991-1999), Russia expressed willingness towards European integration. The 1994 Partnership and Cooperation agreement developed formal

[114] Schmitt, "How to Challenge an International Order," 938.
[115] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 36.
[116] Sakwa, "Greater Russia: Is Moscow out to Subvert the West?"

structures of cooperation with the EU. However, this positive outlook began to sour with the Eastward expansion of the EU over the next decade, which included the addition of the Baltic states and several former Soviet satellites.[117] Moscow's displeasure at the EU's infringement into the near abroad can be seen in an official submission to the EU (written by then-Prime Minister Putin) in 1999:

> As a world power situated on two continents, Russia should retain its freedom to determine and implement its foreign and domestic policies, its status and advantages of a Euro-Asian state and largest country of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The 'development of partnership with the EU should contribute to consolidating Russia's role as the leading power in shaping a new system of interstate political and economic relations in the CIS area.'... Russia would 'oppose any attempts to hamper economic integration in the CIS [that may be made by the EU], including through 'special relations' with individual CIS member states to the detriment of Russia's interests.'[118]

Prospects for cooperation dimmed even further with the introduction of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). While the ENP explicitly states that it is distinct from formal enlargement, "this does not prejudge how relations between neighboring countries and the EU may develop in the future."[119] In 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was inaugurated as part of the ENP to "upgrade" the EU's relations with several of its Eastern neighbors. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are all included in the EaP.[120]

Initial conceptions of the ENP included Russia as an Eastern partner. However, the implication that Russia was on the same level as Armenia or Moldova as a mere "neighbor" to the EU was perceived as an insult and further complicated the partnership. In the words of then-Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Chizhov: "Russia is a large self-sufficient country with its own views on European and Euro-Atlantic integration. In contrast to some smaller Eastern

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[117] Radin and Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order,* 49.
[118] Blank, "The Sacred Monster: Russia as a Foreign Policy Actor," 89.
[119] "The European Neighborhood Policy," European Parliament: Fact Sheets on the European Union, January 2021.
[120] "The European Neighborhood Policy."

European or South Caucasus countries striving for EU-membership Russia is neither a subject nor an object of the European Neighborhood Policy."[121] Thus, Russia opted out of the ENP and demanded the more privileged status of "strategic partner" to the EU.[122] Unlike the UN, the EU did not afford Russia a privileged status.

Tension between the EU and Russia extends beyond this insult to Russia's desired status. In the wake of the Crimea Annexation, the EU (alongside the U.S.) imposed a slew of targeted sanctions on the Putin regime. While their true economic impact is still disputed and they have failed to induce regime change within Russia, the EU sanctions have succeeded in signaling Europe's condemnation of Russia's actions in Ukraine. In addition to targeted sanctions, Europe has barred Russia from attending G8 summits and suspended loans from the European Investment Bank.[123] In response, Putin imposed a ban on the import of a wide range of food products from the EU and other sanctioning states, which was renewed in 2019.[124] The EU imposed another round of sanctions in response to the poisoning of domestic political opponent Alexei Navalny in August 2020. In February 2021, Russia expelled diplomats from Sweden, Poland, and Germany, claiming that they took part in the pro-Navalny protests on January 23. EU-Russo relations have thus hit a major low since 2014, with no signs of thawing soon.

As established in previous sections, Russia simultaneously desires a system in which it can dictate terms within the near abroad but enjoy absolute sovereignty in regard to its own affairs. This vision fundamentally clashes with the EU's vision of a liberal order that emphasizes

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[121] Hiski Haukkala, "Russian Reactions to the European Neighborhood Policy," *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 5 (2008): 43.
[122] Haukkala, "Russian Reactions to the European Neighborhood Policy," 43.
[123] "Infographic – EU sanctions against Russia over time," Council of the European Union, November 25, 2020.
[124] "Russia Extended Food Import Ban Through End 2020," USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, July 4, 2019.

shared sovereignty, pluralism, democracy, and human rights.[125] This clash is understand on both ends; in a survey of EU member states that asked each states' understanding of Russia's differences with Europe, 22 (twice the amount of the second most common answer) states answered that "Russia is a challenge to Europe because it wants to do away with the post-Cold War Western-led international order and introduce a different system."[126] Similarly, the EU inherently rejects Russia's worldview that national sovereignty trumps all. The fact that bureaucrats in Brussels can determine business laws that affect Gazprom or policies regarding Russian minorities in the Baltics is unacceptable to Russia.[127] Thus, any success of the EU implicitly harms Russia's assertion that absolute national sovereignty is the proper norm of international conduct. In many ways, the EU as a tangible manifestation of ideals that Russia opposes. As such, the EU endorses a world order that Russia deems unacceptable to its national interests, and thus is the target of increasingly antagonistic rhetoric from Russian officials.

**Conclusion**

In order to analyze Russia's foreign policy response to the Covid-19 pandemic, this chapter has provided an overview of Russia major national interests. The four interests are: (1) defense of the country and regime, (2) great power status, (3) a multipolar international system, and (4) non-interference from Western powers. Russia's primary interest, ensuring the survival of the state and regime, is one of the most fundamental concepts in IR. Threat perception is tied to domestic and international sources alike. The likelihood of perceiving an action as a threat can be influenced by states' history, and a pattern of distrust between states in the past can negatively

[125] Kadri Liik, *Winning the Normative War with Russia: an EU-Russia Power Audit* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018).
[126] Liik, *Winning the Normative War with Russia.*
[127] Walter Mead and Sean Keeley, "The Eight Great Powers of 2017," *Hudson Institute,* January 24, 2017.

affect their current interactions. In Russia's case, its past contributes to contemporary practices of establishing a buffer region of neighboring states and opposition Western democracy promotion. Additionally, there is a link between domestic support and foreign policy outcomes, a relationship which is increased in regimes that tie their legitimation to foreign policy. In turn, foreign policy can be influenced by the legitimizing narratives and ideals pushed forth by a regime as well as the necessity to garner public support.

Great power status —Russia's second national interest—is a concept that carries significant saliency in Russian foreign policy and domestic culture alike. Beyond the basic implications of the term (economic and military might), the Russian conception of great power includes recognition from other states that grants Russia a privileged status. This privileged status includes possessing a meaningful impact on international decisions and protecting national interests. As Russia was denied such privileges within the Western unipolar order, it committed to the promotion of a multi-polar world order in which it would stand as one of the influential centers of the globe. Beyond its relevance to Russian foreign policy, Russia's great power aspirations have proven a rich resource for domestic regime legitimation and public support.

Russia's third foreign policy objective is to dismantle Western preponderance; as such, Russia pushes its vision of a multipolar international system in opposition to U.S.-led unipolarity. In line with the Primakov Doctrine of the 1990s, Russia has continuously advocated for the establishment of a multipolar world order in its foreign policy documents and international posturing. While Russia briefly exhibited a willingness to cooperate within the Western unipolar order, several Western actions in the 21st century convinced Moscow that a Western-led order poses too many threats to Russian national interests and, more fundamentally, Russia's ability to pursue its national interests. In this way, undermining the West serves as a

method of pursuing Russia's own power gain; a weakened West strengthens Russia's ability to pursue its own interests. Therefore, Russia in the 21st century has embraced an increasingly anti-Western position, a position that is reflected by its antagonistic domestic rhetoric.

Lastly, Russia's opposition to Western interference and advocacy for absolute state sovereignty in the international system is fueled by its desire for security from threats both at home and abroad. The West's push of universal liberal-democracy, institutional expansion, and conditional sovereignty in the name of humanitarian intervention contributed to Russia's hostility towards the norms of the LIO. Therefore, Russia has taken strong foreign policy actions to counter Western influence. In this way, Russia's vocal support of state sovereignty stands at odds with its own conduct abroad. However, when viewed through the lens of Russia's security interests, the contradiction can be understood. All in all, Russia supports a traditional norm of sovereignty insofar as it limits the ability of the West to compromise Russia's security, particularly in the near abroad.

Finally, this chapter demonstrated how Russia's national interests translate into its relations with IOs. When dealing with IOs, Russia's rhetorical support is primarily contingent upon status recognition and accommodation of Russian autonomy on the world stage. The UN is favored by Russia due to its recognition of Russia's unique status and its structural assurance of sovereignty—an assurance that is only boosted by Russia's veto power. On the other end of the spectrum, the EU has increasingly clashed with Russia because of its refusal to acknowledge Russia's special status and its support of norms that oppose Russia's interests. Universal human rights, democracy, and extreme political integration all clash with the Russian foreign policy objectives outlined throughout this chapter. Therefore, Russia's pursuit of its self-interest is reflected in which IOs it rhetorically favors and which it opposes.

This chapter has demonstrated examples of how Russia's foreign policy objectives bleed into its interactions on the world stage. Fundamentally, Russian posturing and practices all support national security, but in distinct and recognizable ways. In Russia's view, achieving great power status and its privileges, replacing Western preponderance with multipolarity, and overturning norms of humanitarian intervention and democracy promotion all increase national security. All of these objectives are underscored by opposition to the West. As such, Russian domestic and international rhetoric alike have taken an anti-West turn, and its foreign policy objectives are underscored by opposition to the West. Ultimately, all of Russia's national interests work towards increasing Russia's global power and status, primarily by means of undermining the West. Given the pandemic's potential to disrupt the international system and this ultimate objective, Russia's foreign policy actions in the midst of the pandemic provide a rich avenue for analysis. Thus, Chapter 2 discusses Russia's foreign policy responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and how those responses reflect its national interests.

## CHAPTER 2: RUSSIAN PANDEMIC RESPONSES

Chapter 1 identifies four major national interests that drive Russian foreign policy: (1) defense of the country and regime, (2) great power status, (3) a multipolar international system, and (4) non-interference from Western powers. These interests are all united by an ultimate objective of increasing Russia's global power and status. Because Russia perceives Western preponderance and its own national interests as fundamentally in conflict, Russia has formulated its pursuit of power and security in terms of reducing the West's. Understanding Russia's national interests and the disruptive nature of the Covid-19 pandemic thus begs the question of how Russia acted in pursuit of its goals during the pandemic. There, this chapter provides an in-depth overview of Russia's responses to the pandemic and how these responses relate to its national interests. The five main responses covered in this chapter are: (1) the development and global distribution of Sputnik V, (2) Russia's framing of itself and the West, (3) information warfare, (4) Russia's domestic response, and (5) posturing at the UN

### Sputnik V

The clearest example of Russia's foreign policy response to the pandemic lies in the development and distribution of its first vaccine, Sputnik V. Especially in 2021, vaccines have become the key resource in combatting Covid-19—Western-developed vaccines like Pfizer-BioNTech (Pfizer), Oxford-AstraZeneca (AstraZeneca), and Moderna have led the globe in total doses administered, and Chinese vaccines like Sinopharm and Sinovac have gained traction as alternatives for a primarily non-Western market.[128] The multi-faceted value of producing and

[128] "Vaccine development: vaccines approved for use and in clinical trials," Our World in Data, accessed March 24, 2021.

exporting a vaccine during a global pandemic was not lost on Russia. Sputnik V is beneficial to Russian foreign policy on multiple fronts—besides the potential commercial profits, the efficacy and distribution of the vaccine grants Russia a much-needed soft power boost, provides the opportunity to expand global diplomatic influence, and supports several pre-existing Russian narratives regarding the West and the deficiency of the LIO.[129] The name of the vaccine itself—an obvious reference to the Soviet-era Sputnik satellite, the first man-made object to enter outer space—reflects Russia's grand narrative surrounding the vaccine: that Sputnik V stands as a testament to Russia's leading role in science and technology, a position superior to the West. "Sputnik is entering new orbits," declared a state television report in reference to a delivery in Argentina.[130] Indeed, Sputnik V has provided a major foreign policy tool for Russia in the midst of the global pandemic.

On 11 August 2020, Russia became the first country in the world to approve a Covid-19 vaccine for widespread public use. While Russia has since developed two other vaccines (EpiVacCorona and CoviVac) and approved them for domestic emergency use, Sputnik V is currently Russia's sole export vaccine and is the at center of Russia's international strategies.[131] The vaccine was developed by the Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology in Moscow and bankrolled by Russia's sovereign wealth fund, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF). Immediately after Sputnik V's authorization, Russia was widely condemned by the global scientific community due to the lack of completed Phase III trials before approving the vaccine for widespread use. In fact, as of the Sputnik V's initial approval,

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[129] Soft power, coined by Joseph Nye, is the ability to attract and co-opt (rather than coerce) other actors into changing their behavior. This attraction stems from resources like culture, ideology, or institutions that can be appealing to others. [Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153-71.]

[130] Andrew Kramer, "Russia Is Offering to Export Hundreds of Millions of Vaccine Doses, but Can It Deliver?" *The New York Times*, February 19, 2021.

[131] Polina Ivanova, "Russia approves its third Covid-19 vaccine, CoviVac," *Reuters,* February 20, 2021.

only 76 volunteers had received the vaccine in early trials, and no official results of those trials had been published.[132] However, nearly a month after Sputnik V's approval in August, Gamaleya researches published positive results of the Phase I/II trials in British medical journal *The Lancet*.[133] On October 17, Phase II/III trials were launched in India. Despite the lack of complete data regarding the vaccine's efficacy, Belarus was the first country outside of Russia to approve the vaccine on December 21.[134] 14 other countries soon followed suit.[135]

However, the true watershed moment for Sputnik V's success came in February 2021. A large scale, peer-reviewed study also published by *The Lancet* showed that Sputnik V was 91.6% effective in preventing symptomatic Covid-19 and offered complete protection in severe cases.[136] These results posed a major victory for Moscow, dispelling the early criticisms of Russia's vaccine effort and elevating Sputnik V near the level of the Western Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech shots—with a ~95% efficacy rate—and above Oxford/AstraZeneca—with an efficacy rate between 62-90%.[137] With a much-coveted stamp of approval from the global scientific community and redemption from past criticisms, Russia poured significant effort into the promotion and distribution of its vaccine across the globe.

*Sputnik V Distribution*

By all accounts, Russia's export of Sputnik V has been a smashing success. The RDIF is the main entity responsible for promoting Sputnik V abroad and negotiating sales and is led by

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[132] Ewen Callaway, "Russia's fast-track coronavirus vaccine draws outrage over safety," Nature, August 11, 2020.
[133] Georgi Kantchev, "Russian Coronavirus Vaccine Trials Post Positive Early Data," *Wall Street Journal,* September 4, 2020.
[134] "Belarus Registers Sputnik V Vaccine, in First Outside Russia – RDIF," *Reuters*, December 21, 2020.
[135] See Figure 1. https://tass.com/economy/1251395
[136] Georgi Kantchev, "Russian Covid-19 Vaccine Was Highly Effective in Trial, Boosting Moscow's Rollout Ambitions," *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2021.
[137] Kantchev, "Russian Covid-19 Vaccine Was Highly Effective in Trial, Boosting Moscow's Rollout Ambitions."

CEO Kirill Dmitriev.[138] As of 1 April 2021, the vaccine has been approved for use in 59 countries with a total population of over 1.4 billion people and is gaining new partnerships every day.[139] According to data compiled from RDIF press releases by statista.com, over 325 million doses of Sputnik V have been ordered from Russia or agreed to be produced abroad.[140] However, it is important to note that national approval is different than actually administering a vaccine; the AstraZeneca and Pfizer shots have actually been administered in the most countries—86 and 78, respectively. Sputnik V has only registered administered doses in 20 countries.[141]

In many ways, Sputnik V is optimal for sale to low- and middle-income countries. Thanks to its adenoviral vector technology, Sputnik V can be stored at 36-46 degrees Fahrenheit, rather than the -95 degree Fahrenheit storage required of mRNA vaccines like Pfizer and Moderna.[142] Sputnik V is competitively priced at $10 a dose, cheaper than Pfizer and Moderna's mRNA vaccines. The low cost and easier storage may make Sputnik V more attractive to less wealthy countries that lack the infrastructure required for mRNA vaccines.[143] With the majority of Pfizer, AstraZeneca, and Moderna doses being bought by Western nations, Sputnik V provides a cheap, readily available alternative for poorer states.[144]

The RDIF's ability to market Sputnik V to low- and middle-income countries is boosted by the global scramble for a finite number of doses. Western "vaccine nationalism" and production delays from the major pharmaceutical countries have left the majority of the

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[138] Carlo Martuscelli and Helen Collis, "Moscow Gains New Leverage with Coronavirus Vaccine Breakthrough," *POLITICO*, February 2, 2021.
[139] See Figure 1. [@sputnikvaccine, "Panama becomes the 59th country to authorize #SputnikV," Twitter, April 1, 2021.]
[140] "Sputnik V Vaccine Exports from Russia by Country," Statista, accessed April 5, 2021.
[141] See Figure 2. Only countries that report doses administered were counted. ["Coronavirus (Covid-19) Vaccinations," Our World in Data, accessed March 31, 2021.]
[142] Kantchev, "Russian Covid-19 Vaccine Was Highly Effective in Trial, Boosting Moscow's Rollout Ambitions."
[143] Martuscelli and Collis, "Moscow Gains New Leverage with Coronavirus Vaccine Breakthrough."
[144] Ryan Dube and Georgi Kantchev, "Argentina Is a Testing Ground for Moscow's Global Vaccine Drive," *Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2021.

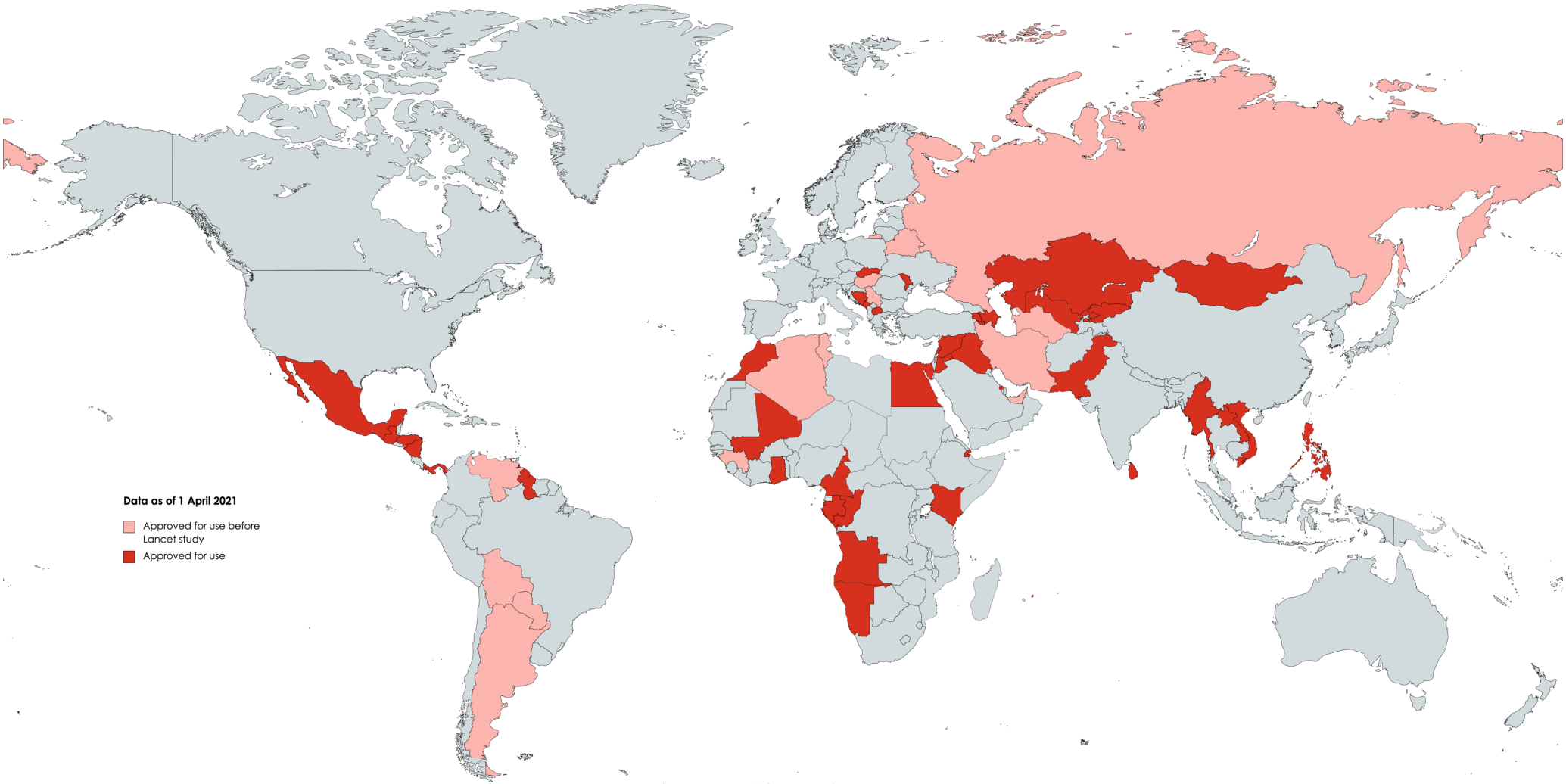


**Figure 1**

Countries that have approved Sputnik V for domestic use:

Russia, Belarus, Argentina, Bolivia, Serbia, Algeria, Palestine, Venezuela, Paraguay, Turkmenistan, Hungary, UAE, Iran, Republic of Guinea, Tunisia, Armenia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Republika Srpska, Lebanon, Myanmar, Pakistan, Mongolia, Bahrain, Montenegro, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Gabon, San-Marino, Ghana, Syria, Kyrgyzstan, Guyana, Egypt, Honduras, Guatemala, Moldova, Slovakia, Angola, Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Laos, Iraq, North Macedonia, Kenya, Morocco, Jordan, Namibia, Azerbaijan, Panama, Philippines, Cameroon, Seychelles, Mauritius, Vietnam, Antigua and Barbuda and Mali.

Countries that approved vaccine before *Lancet* article:

Belarus, Argentina, Bolivia, Serbia, Algeria, Palestine, Venezuela, Paraguay, Turkmenistan, Hungary, UAE, Iran, Guinea, and Tunisia.

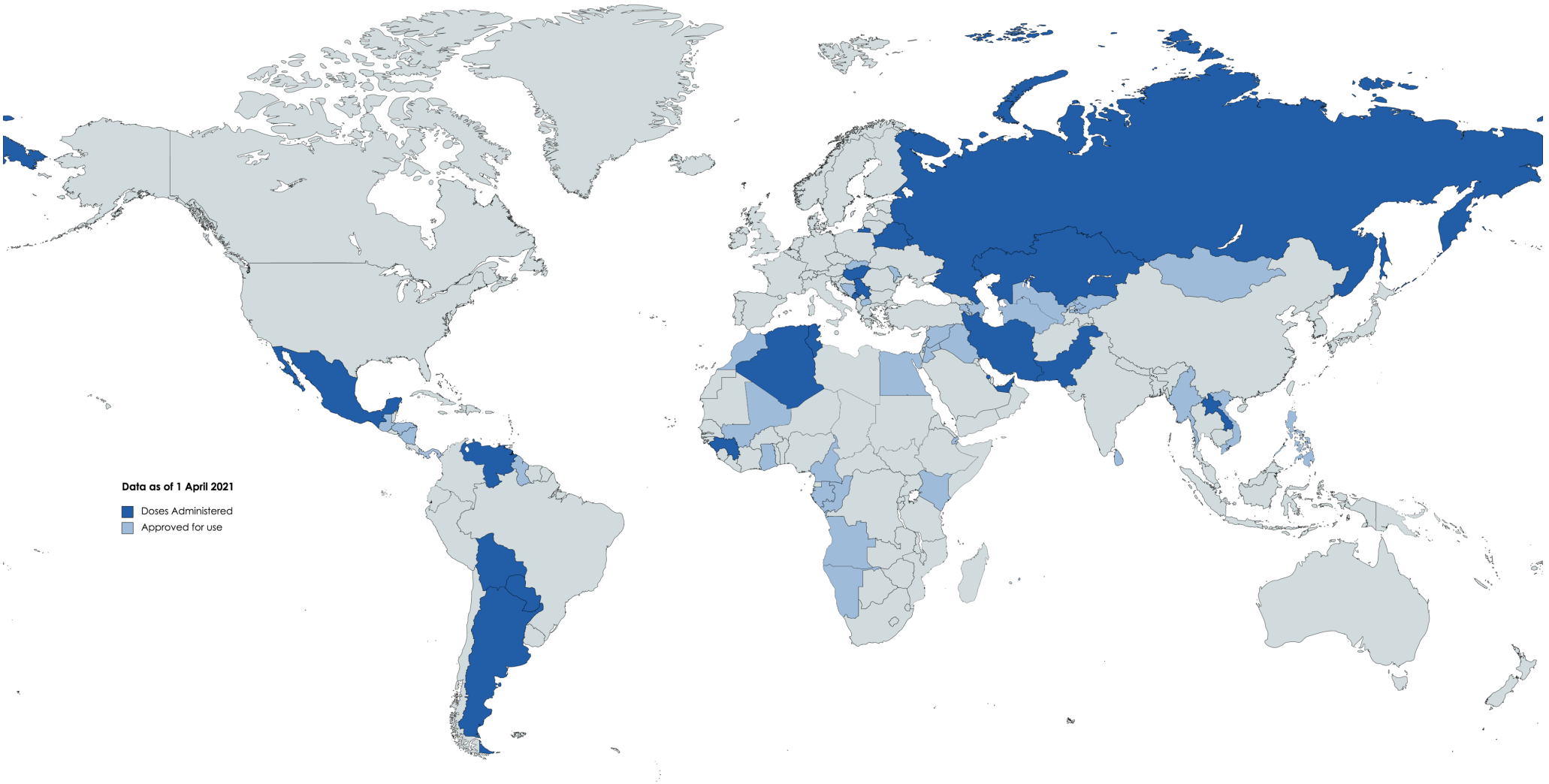


**Figure 2 – Countries that have administered Sputnik V**

Russia, Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, Guinea, Algeria, Tunisia, Iran, Pakistan, UAE, Serbia, Hungary, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Laos, Bahrain, Montenegro, San Marino

globe desperate for a supplier, a fact reflected in the choice of 15 countries to approve Sputnik V for use before knowing the results of its Phase III trials. As a result, regions like Latin America (with the vaccine approved in 10 countries) have become a valuable market for Russia.[145] According to Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin America program at the Woodrow Wilson Institute, "the bottom line is that countries are putting aside ideology, and looking for cost-effective, and effective vaccines where they can get them. And this one will certainly, I think, help Russia's diplomatic presence in the region, which has been a goal of the Putin government for the last two decades."[146] In January 2021, Argentina become the first foreign country to begin mass-inoculation using Sputnik V, with President Alberto Fernandez receiving an injection in a show of faith. An Argentina expert at the Woodrow Wilson Center stated: "This was a decision born of desperation by a government that had failed to secure for the Argentine people access to more reliable and effective vaccines."[147]

According to the RDIF, more than 50 countries have requested a total of 2.4 billion doses of Sputnik V.[148] Russian officials say that Russia is targeting a 30% share of the global Covid-19 vaccine market.[149] This objective is helped by an excess supply of the vaccine due to a production boom and the relative disinterest of Russians to get the vaccine; a pharmaceutical logistics expert estimated that 30% of Sputnik V shots produced will be ready for export.[150] However, a potential hiccup in Russia's grand plans may lie in its relatively limited capacity to

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[145] Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela, Paraguay, Mexico, Nicaragua, Guyana, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama. [@sputnikvaccine, "Panama becomes the 59th country to authorize #SputnikV."]
[146] Jenny Ravelo, "Interactive: Middle-Income Countries Rush to Get Russian COVID-19 Vaccine," Devex, February 24, 2021.
[147] Dube and Kantchev, "Argentina Is a Testing Ground for Moscow's Global Vaccine Drive."
[148] As this figure comes from the RDIF, it may be taken with a grain of salt. ["Vaccine Diplomacy: Putin Seeks to Leverage Sputnik v to Build Russia's Global Influence," MarketWatch, March 7, 2021.'
[149] Kantchev, "Russian Covid-19 Vaccine Was Highly Effective in Trial, Boosting Moscow's Rollout Ambitions."
[150] "Looming Supply Glut of Russia's Sputnik v Vaccine Could Pave Way for Exports," *The Moscow Times*, February 19, 2021.

manufacture vaccines; Russia must largely rely on foreign production.[151] Thus far, Russia has reportedly signed deals to produce Sputnik V with manufacturers in Italy, Turkey, South Korea, China, India, Brazil, Belarus, Serbia, and Kazakhstan.[152] Whether Russia can avoid the supply issues faced by other pharmaceutical companies like AstraZeneca remains to be seen.

*The EU Market*

Sputnik V is increasingly becoming a divisive issue within the EU; while the prominent stance among officials is hesitance in approving and importing the vaccine, several officials have begun entertaining the idea. Charles Michel, President of the European Council, cast doubt on Russia's ultimate goals with Sputnik V: "We should not let ourselves be misled by China and Russia, both regimes with less desirable values than ours, as they organise highly limited but widely publicised operations to supply vaccines to others. Europe will not use vaccines for propaganda purposes."[153] EU framework requires that the European Medicines Agency (EMA) provide a centralized approval before biologically-derived treatments can be distributed and used within the bloc. Currently, the EU has approved three shots—from Pfizer, Moderna, and AstraZeneca. However, on 4 March 2021 the EMA announced that it had begun a "rolling review" of Sputnik V, providing no estimation for how long the review would take. As Sputnik V is the first non-Western vaccine to be reviewed, the EMA stated that production sites outside of the EU must be inspected.[154] Dmitriev expressed that Russia could provide 50 million doses of Sputnik V to Europe in June, if approved. However, many EU officials remain skeptical, wary of

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[151] Kramer, "Russia Is Offering to Export Hundreds of Millions of Vaccine Doses, but Can It Deliver?"

[152] As of 1 April 2021. ["Russia's RDIF Signs Vaccine Production Deal with Turkey - Ifax." *Reuters*, January 23, 2021.; "RDIF and 'Torlak' Institute agree to produce Sputnik V vaccine in Serbia." *RDIF,* March 23, 2021.; "Sputnik v to Be Produced in Italy Even without EMA Authorization — Commerce Chamber Head," *TASS*, March 9, 2021.]

[153] Francesco Guarascio, John Chalmers, and Emilio Parodi, "Unthinkable? EU Considers Getting a Vaccine Boost from Russia's Sputnik," *Reuters*, March 15, 2021.

[154] As of 1 April 2021, rolling review is still ongoing with no sign of result. [Sergei Vedyashkin, "EU Starts Approval Process for Russia's Sputnik V Vaccine," *The Moscow Times,* March 4, 2021.]

the vaccine's soft power implications.[155] EMA senior official Christa Wirthumer-Hoche described approval of Sputnik V as "somewhat comparable to Russian roulette," a statement that sparked outrage in Moscow and moved Sputnik V's Twitter account to demand an apology.[156]

Perhaps most notable with regard to the EU is the decision of Hungary to approve Sputnik V for use on 22 January 2021 despite a lack of EMA approval. At that point, Sputnik V had not even received the Phase III endorsement from *The Lancet*.[157] Fellow EU member Slovakia followed in Hungary's footsteps, receiving a shipment of 2 million vaccines on 1 March 2021.[158] The Czech Republic and Austria are reportedly interested in Sputnik V as well and in talks to purchase doses.[159] On top of this blow to EU authority, on 9 March 2021 the Italian-Russian Chamber of Commerce (IRCC) announced an agreement between the RDIF and Adienne Pharma & Biotech to produce Sputnik V in Italy. IRCC president Vincenzo Trani said that production would occur regardless of the EMA's decision on the approval of Sputnik V for use in the EU: "Yes, of course. It's important to understand that the production process has nothing to do with vaccine sales, they are two different things. I think that if it is not authorized [in the EU] there are many other places where this vaccine is desperately needed."[160] Reportedly, the RDIF is in talks with Italy to spread production to its ReiThera plant near Rome, the country's largest.[161] The RDIF claimed in March that it has reached agreements with Spain,

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[155] Vedyashkin, "EU Starts Approval Process for Russia's Sputnik V Vaccine."
[156] "Sputnik V Makers Want EMA Apology over 'Russian Roulette' Comment," *DW*, March 9, 2021.
[157] Mantuscelli and Collis, "Moscow Gains New Leverage with Coronavirus Vaccine Breakthrough."
[158] "Slovakia Receives First Shipment of Russia's Sputnik v Vaccine," *The Moscow Times,* March 1, 2021.
[159] Guarascio, Chalmers, and Parodi, "Unthinkable? EU Considers Getting a Vaccine Boost from Russia's Sputnik," *Reuters*, March 15, 2021.; "Austria Likely to Order Russian Sputnik V Vaccine Next Week, Kurz Says," *Reuters*, March 31, 2021.
[160] "Sputnik v to Be Produced in Italy Even without EMA Authorization."
[161] Guarascio, Chalmers, and Parodi, "Unthinkable? EU Considers Getting a Vaccine Boost from Russia's Sputnik."

France, and Germany to produce Sputnik V "once the approval is granted by the EMA" but failed to specify companies—the veracity of this claim remains undetermined.[162]

Similarly, many officials support approval of Sputnik V by the EMA. Obviously, Hungary and Slovakia are in favor. Several Italian and German officials support the approval of Sputnik V for the bloc. Italy's health minister stated "If a vaccine works and the regulators tell us that it is safe, nationality is of little interest to me. Italy is ready to collaborate with the Russian government."[163] Italy's Campania region has signed an agreement to purchase Sputnik V on the condition that the EMA approves it.[164] Many heads of German regions argue to ignore political and ideological considerations when evaluating vaccines. In reference to the EMA's rolling review, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated, "As far as the Russian vaccine is concerned, I share the opinion that we should use any vaccine approved by the EMA."[165] French industry minister Agnes Pannier-Runancher stated in an interview that "Any vaccine that's ready and that presents the safety and efficacy conditions is welcome in Europe. We have an interest in having the maximum of different vaccines and volumes."[166] Thus, the unlawful approval of Sputnik V by Hungary and Slovakia, the production of the vaccine in Italy and potentially elsewhere, and rhetorical acceptance of Sputnik V's use in the EU reveal a softening of the bloc's stance against Russian diplomacy and possible division within the bloc.

The increasing willingness of EU members to work with Russia—despite their fraught relationship—is largely due to the EU's troubled vaccination rollout. Compared to other Western

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[162] "Russia Says Sputnik v Production Deals Reached in Key EU States," *The Moscow Times*, March 15, 2021.
[163] Guarascio, Chalmers, and Parodi, "Unthinkable? EU Considers Getting a Vaccine Boost from Russia's Sputnik."
[164] "Austria Likely to Order Russian Sputnik V Vaccine Next Week."
[165] Martuscelli and Collis, "Moscow Gains New Leverage with Coronavirus Vaccine Breakthrough."; "Merkel Says Sputnik v Purchases Possible If EU Fails to Make Common Decision," *TASS*, March 19, 2021.
[166] Henry Meyer, "Countries are Lining up for Russia's Once-Scorned Sputnik Vaccine After Strong Efficacy Results," *Fortune*, February 8, 2021.

countries, the EU is off to a relatively slow start in acquiring and administering vaccines. As of 9 April 2021, the EU has fully vaccinated just 6% of its 450 million population, compared to 10.3% in the U.K., 20.4% in the U.S., and 56.9% in Israel—but more than Canada's 2.1%. When comparing proportions of the population that have received at least one dose, the disparity becomes greater, with the EU at 14.9%, Canada at 18%, the U.K. at 47.1%, the U.S. at 34.2%, and Israel at 61.4%.[167] Unlike the U.K., which began vaccination with the Pfizer shot on 8 December 2020, the EU delayed immunization efforts by slowing negotiations in order to push down prices and signing deals with manufacturers that have yet to produce approved shots. In negotiations, the European Commission focused on driving down vaccine prices and ensuring that companies would remain liable for potential side effects—an approach not shared by the U.S. and UK. As a result, the U.S. signed purchasing contracts between May and July 2020, while the EU did not until late August through November.[168] Similarly, the EMA trailed counterpart organizations in authorizing vaccine use, despite their ultimate decisions closely following American and British rulings. All of these factors contributed to the EU's position at the end of the line for distribution. With production bottlenecks within both Pfizer and AstraZeneca, the EU's vaccination goals for 2021 are severely hampered.[169] As of April 2021, AstraZeneca had only delivered 30% of its promised 90 million doses for the first quarter of the year.[170] Despite this, EU member countries have 231.3% of their populations covered by vaccine contracts.[171] The issue is actually receiving the purchased shots in a timely manner.

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[167] "How many COVID-19 vaccination doses have been administered?" Our World in Data, accessed April 9, 2021.
[168] Bojan Pancevski and Laurence Norman, "How Europe Tripped in Covid-19 Vaccine Race," *Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2021.
[169] Pancevski and Norman, "How Europe Tripped in Covid-19 Vaccine Race."
[170] "Coronavirus: EU 'Not Ready' to Share COVID Vaccines with Poorer Countries," *DW,* March 21, 2021.
[171] "Share of Population Covered by Covid Vaccine Contracts by Country 2021," Statista, accessed February 12, 2021.

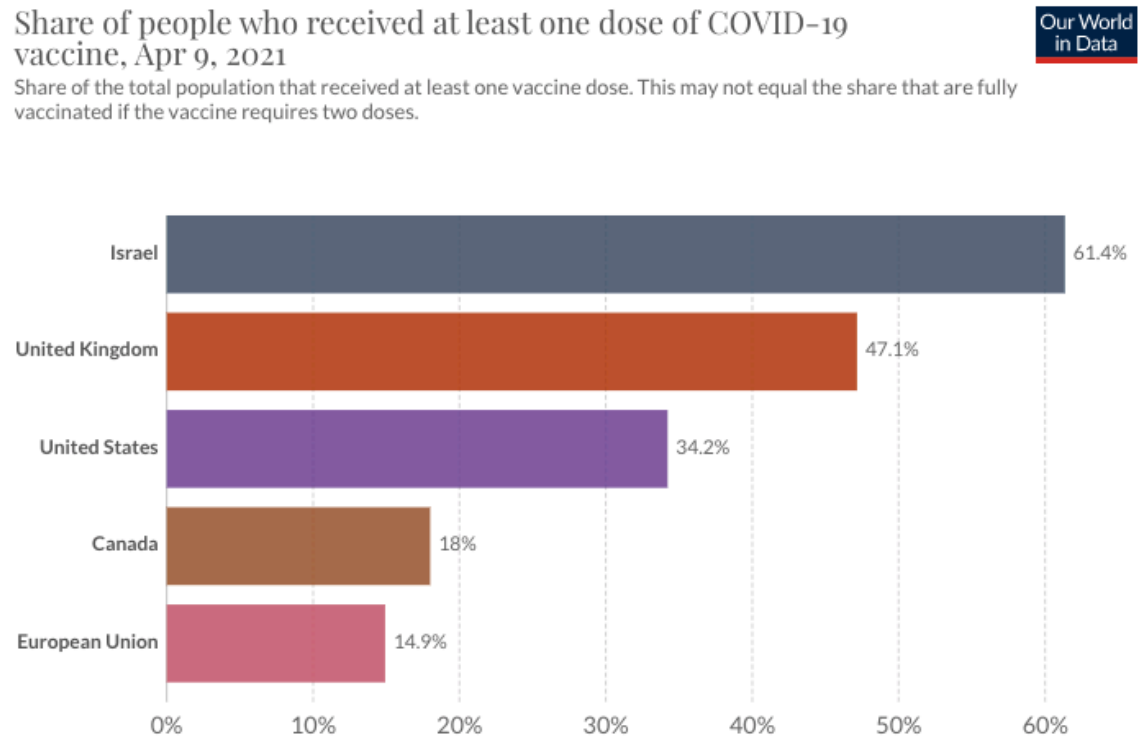



**Figure 3**

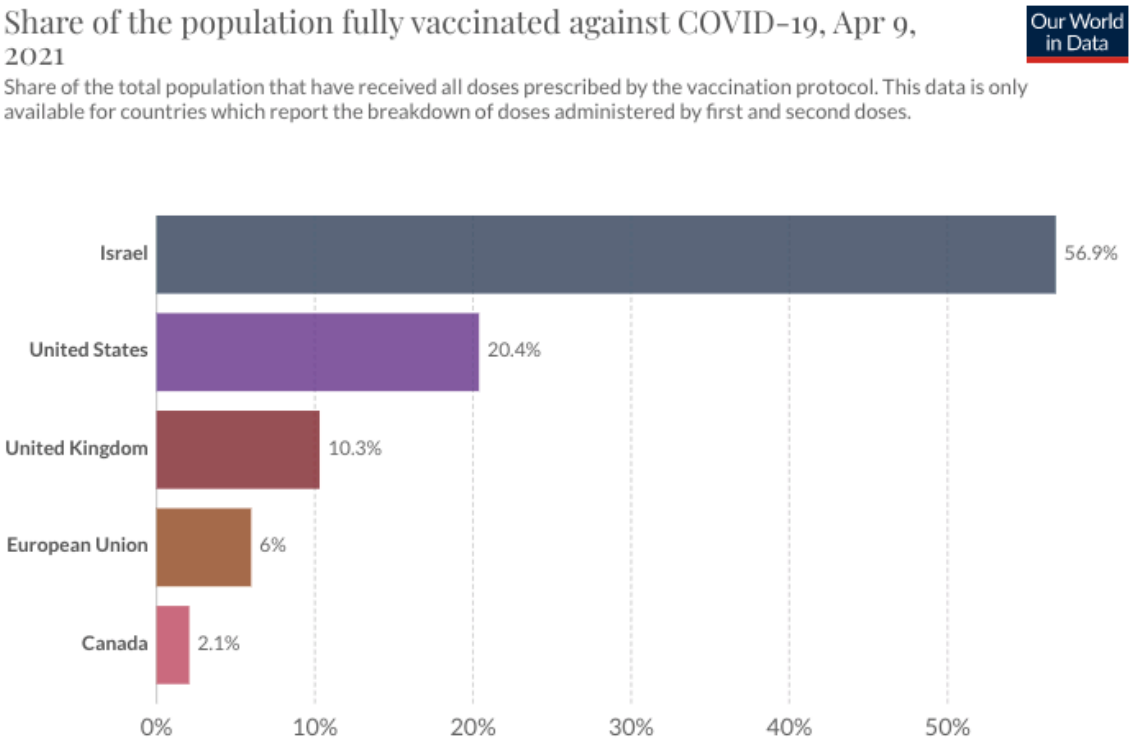



**Figure 4**

Furthermore, these issues have harmed the EU's plans to aid global vaccination efforts. Initially, the EU pledged to provide developing countries with vaccines. However, after delays in obtaining and distributing vaccines within its own borders, the EU's promises have fallen flat. In the face of a potential third wave, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that the EU would no longer share vaccines with other countries until production issues were fixed. This reneging has sparked discontent among many of these middle- to low-income countries.[172] In an interview about the EU and its vaccine promises, Agnes Binagwaho—Former Health Minister of Rwanda—said: "Be frank and say: 'my people first.' Don't lie to me and say: 'We will be equal.'...We just see that your word, we cannot count on it. And that's not good."[173] In this way, the EU has taken a hit to its reputation and perceived reliability. Despite its broken export promises, the EU has invested $2.6 billion into the COVAX initiative (discussed below). Regardless, the EU's struggles with vaccine procurement allow Russia to target countries both within and outside the bloc as potential Sputnik V buyers.

*COVAX*

Another large export opportunity for Russia manifested in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in light of the issues faced by COVAX (Covax). Covax is one of three pillars of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator launched by the World Health Organization (WHO), European Commission, and France in April 2020. Covax is coordinated by Gavi, the vaccine alliance, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), and the WHO and is bankrolled by contributions to its funding mechanism, Covax AMC, which procures funding from Official Development Assistance, the private sector, and philanthropy.[174] Covax

[172] Coronavirus: EU 'Not Ready' to Share COVID Vaccines with Poorer Countries."
[173] "How Is the EU's Promise of Vaccine Solidarity Holding Up?" *DW*, January 29, 2021.
[174] https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/gavi-Covax-amc-explained

stands as the only institutional effort devoted to ensuring equitable global vaccine access and is guided by the premise that such global access is necessary in defeating Covid-19; vaccines cannot be limited to high-income countries.[175] As such, Covax supports the R&D and manufacturing of vaccines and acts as a platform to negotiate their pricing. 92 low- and middle-income countries have joined the Covax initiative in addition to several contributing high-income countries. The initial goal of the effort was to secure 2 billion available doses by the end of 2021 in order to distribute vaccines to 20% of the populations of the 92 low- and middle-income countries.[176]

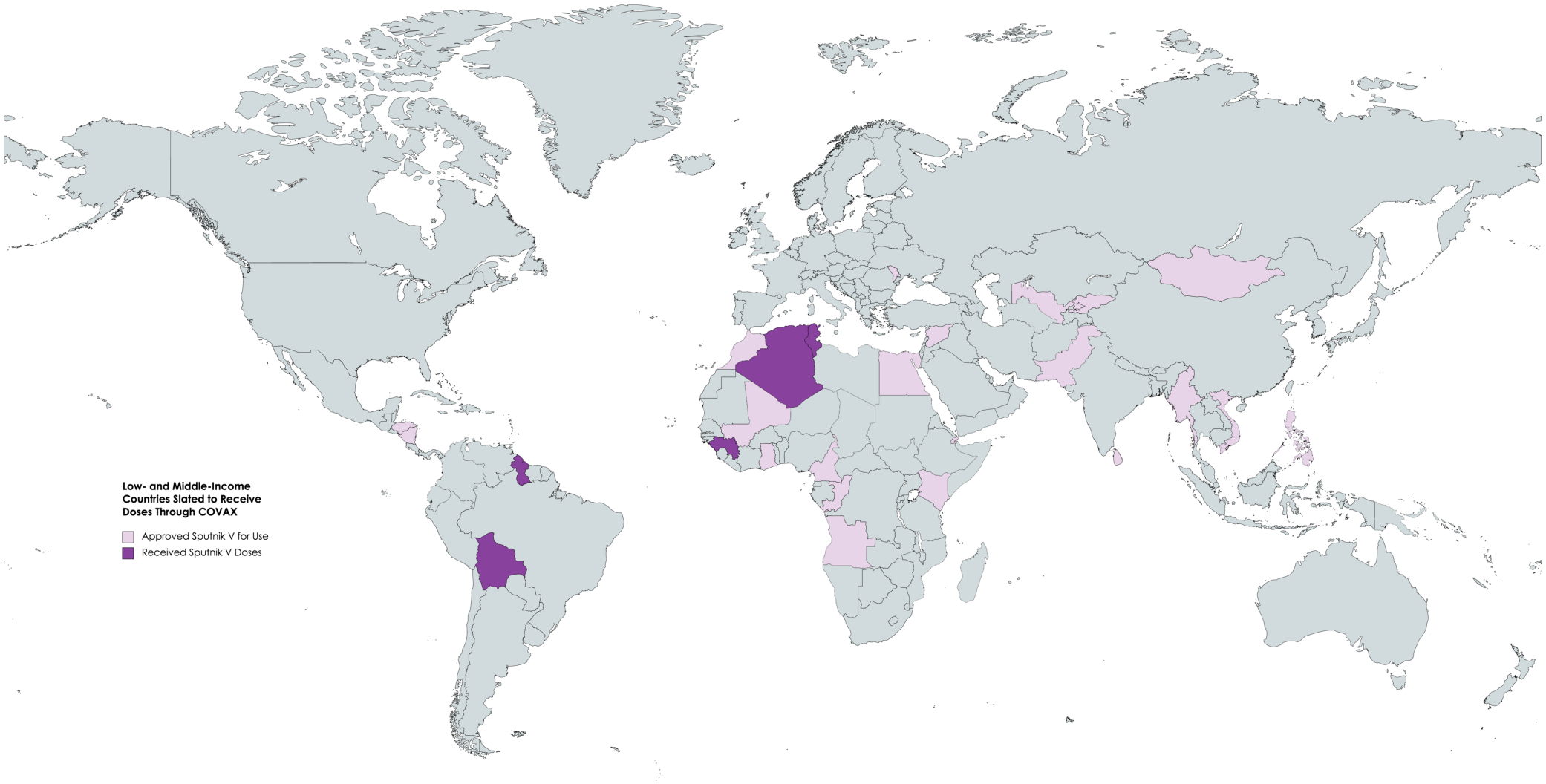
Despite the platform's promises, vaccine hoarding and supply shortages limited Covax's initial ability to acquire the necessary doses. In February, the WHO released a statement describing how vaccine hoarding threatens the supply of vaccines for low- and middle-income countries provided by Covax. While monetary contributions like the EU's are appreciated, Covax requires actual vaccines to accomplish its objectives.[177] Given this, many countries and regions that are registered with Covax turned elsewhere to ensure acquisitions. For example, while Covax has promised to provide for the vaccination of 20% of populations in African countries, the African Union (AU) is aiming to vaccinate at least 60% in 2021. In January 2021, the AU's vaccine acquisition task force secured 270 million vaccines directly from Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, and AstraZeneca. Individual countries like Egypt, Morocco, and Guinea have turned to bilateral negotiations, purchasing the Sinopharm or Sputnik V vaccine directly.[178] Similarly, 27 of the 92 low- and middle-countries that are slated to receive doses through Covax

[175] https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/Covax-explained
[176] https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/Covax-explained
[177] https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-who-Covax/vaccine-hoarding-threatens-global-supply-via-Covax-who-idUSKBN2AQ2O5
[178] https://www.devex.com/news/african-union-secures-first-batch-of-covid-19-vaccines-9891

have approved Sputnik V domestically, and 5 have actually received Sputnik V doses.[179] Thus, hesitations over Covax's initial difficulties in procuring vaccines have left a market for Russia to target. Russia sees any opportunity to export Sputnik V as an opportunity for financial, diplomatic, and reputational gain.

Russia prefers such bilateral negotiations over collective action like Covax. Kirill Dmitriev stated in a press briefing that Russia will largely rely on bilateral negotiations and direct supply of Sputnik V: "We will be working with Covax, but definitely we will not be substituting Covax for the approach we've been using till now to basically supply vaccines to countries directly."[180] On 23 March 2021, the RDIF officially applied for Sputnik V to participate in Covax.[181] However, Dmitriev clarified that while the RDIF welcomes cooperation with Covax, Russia will still prioritize direct supplies of Sputnik V.[182] It appears that Russia views the distribution of Sputnik V, regardless of mechanism, as an ultimate win. Despite Covax's troubled rollout, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana received the first Covax shipments on March 1, 2021, and the platform has delivered many doses to other countries since.[183] On 2 March 2021, Covax released its first round of allocations, outlining delivery of 237 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine.[184] Thus, while Covax seems to be regaining its footing, the initial perception of its troubles still provided Russia opportunities for bilateral deal-making with many

[179] See Figure 5 for specific countries. ["Commitment Agreements," COVAX, December 15, 2020.; sputnikvaccine, Twitter Post, "Panama becomes the 59th country to authorize #SputnikV."; "Sputnik V Vaccine Exports from Russia by Country." Statista, accessed April 5, 2021.]
[180] "COVAX Will Be a 'Small Part' of Russia's Sputnik v Portfolio, Fund CEO Says," *Devex*, January 22, 2021.
[181] Results still pending as of April 2021. ["Russia Applied for Participation of Sputnik v Vaccine in COVAX," *TASS*, March 23, 2021.]
[182] "Russia Requests Inclusion of Sputnik V in COVAX Mechanism," *teleSUR*, March 23, 2021.
[183] "The First COVAX Vaccinations Begin," GAVI, March 1, 2021.
[184] "First Round of Allocation," The COVAX Facility, March 2, 2021.




# Figure 5

Countries that have approved SpV:
Bolivia, Algeria, Guinea, Tunisia, Nicaragua, Myanmar, Pakistan, Mongolia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Republic of the Congo, Uzbekistan, Ghana, Syria, Kyrgyzstan, Guyana, Egypt, Honduras, Moldova, Angola, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Morocco, Philippines, Cameroon, Vietnam, and Mali.

Countries that have received doses of SpV:
Algeria, Bolivia, Guinea, Guyana, and Tunisia.

low- and middle-income countries and damaged faith in the efficacy of such multilateral mechanisms.

**Covid-19 and Political Framing**

The pandemic provided Russia with several opportunities from a political perspective. Sputnik V's medical efficacy granted Russia a much-needed soft power boost in the global conscience, and its distribution portrayed Russia as a Good Samaritan of sorts. Providing "foreign aid" to Western countries allowed Russia to juxtapose the seeming helplessness of Western countries (and, by extension, their liberal-democratic institutions) with Russia's competence, while also contributing to the Good Samaritan perception. These narratives were bolstered by Western vaccine nationalism, which plays into Russia's pre-existing narrative that state interests should trump multilateralism and that the liberal international order is not fit to dictate global affairs. Similarly, perceived failures of the West during the pandemic add credence to these arguments; if the West is unable to effectively coordinate a response to such global crises, then the current global order should be revised. These are the primary narratives that Russia has pushed, using outcomes from the pandemic to bolster them.

*Soft Power Boost*

For Russia, the greatest outcome of the pandemic lies in the soft power boost provided by Sputnik V's ultimate success. In his 1990 piece "Soft Power," Joseph Nye describes a type of power distinct from the traditional understanding of coercion—as Robert Dahl explained, the ability of A to "get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" through primarily military and economic means.[185] Instead, soft power in international politics involves one state getting

[185] Robert Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 203.

other states to want what it wants, rather than controlling outcomes via force. Soft power can be accomplished through resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions; the more attractive a state's culture and ideology are to outside parties, the more willing the outside parties are to follow the wishes of the source state. The more attractive and popular a state's institutions, the more likely it is that other parties will direct their activities in line with the institutions, buying the founder state influence over state practices without resorting to coercion.[186] Examples of soft power include the global renown for and international enrollment in the American higher education system, or the global dissemination of American cultural values through foreign consumption of American media.

In this way, Sputnik V has become a soft power resource for Russia, as it projects an image of a modern country with highly effective scientific institutions and a competent regime. The success and distribution of the vaccine gave Moscow a much-needed soft power boost, especially in the wake of Alexei Navalny's poisoning and arrest and the unfolding of the SolarWinds cyberattack.[187] For once, international news surrounding Russia was not centered on its rogue and revisionist tendencies, domestic autocracy, or "backwardness," but rather on its scientific prowess; as Dmitri Trenin put it, Sputnik V helped Russia with its "enormous image problem." [188] Russian outlets are able to constantly report on the distribution or approval of

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[186] Nye, "Soft Power," 166-167.

[187] Alexei Navalny is an outspoken domestic critic of Putin. In August 2020, Navalny nearly died from a nerve agent attack while on a plane flying from Siberia to Moscow. Upon an emergency landing, Navalny was airlifted to Germany for medical treatment. When he returned to Russia in January 2021, Navalny was immediately detained, sparking mass protests.
The SolarWinds cyberattack was announced in December 2020 by U.S. cybersecurity firm FireEye. The adversary, identified as "likely Russian in origin" by U.S. intelligence agencies, his malware in a software update for SolarWinds, a software company. SolarWinds has thousands of high-profile clients, including U.S. federal agencies. In retaliation, President Biden placed new sanctions on several Russian individuals and assets. ["Alexei Navalny: EU and US Demand Release of Poisoned Putin Critic," *BBC,* January 19, 2021.; Robert Knake, "Why the SolarWinds Hack Is a Wake-up Call," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 9, 2021.]

[188] Dmitri Trenin,"The Russian Federation: Inside and Out," *Center on National Security,* November 19, 2020.

Sputnik V across the globe. Russia's global vaccine distribution also puts forth an image of a Russia with a social conscience, another aspect of good press that Russia has been sorely missing.[189] When introducing a "Sputnik V" side event at the UNGA, permanent representative Vassily Nebenzia described how Russia "[built] on its scientific, industrial and clinical experience" to create the vaccine, and how Russia has been "actively contributing to global and regional efforts to fight Covid-19, providing assistance to the most affected countries."[190] Understanding the massive soft power potential of Sputnik V, the motivations behind its unorthodox and rushed approval become clear. Upon opening Sputnik V's official website, the very first piece of information listed is "the first registered Covid-19 vaccine." Kirill Dmitriev echoed this sentiment, stating "It's a Sputnik movement. Americans were surprised when they heard Sputnik's beeping. It's the same with this vaccine. Russia will have got there first."[191] The angle has been applied to the other two vaccines that Russia has developed for domestic use, with Putin stressing "major scientific achievement" and how "we are the only country that already has three vaccines of its own, which are domestically developed."[192]

Therefore, Russia is projecting its achievements on a global scale in a manner very similar to the Soviet Union.[193] This projection can be seen in the global marketing by the RDIF and in its attempts to attain equal status with the Western vaccines through approval by the EMA or WHO. Putin offered Sputnik V for voluntary vaccination of the UN staff.[194] These soft power gains are not restricted to an international audience—the speed and efficacy of Sputnik V is a

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[189] "Russia, China Use COVID Vaccines to Increase Global Influence," *DW,* February 8, 2021.
[190] "Statement by Vassily Nebenzia...in Response to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, December 2, 2020.
[191] "Sputnik V," Sputnikvaccine.com, accessed February 9, 2021.
[192] "'Major Achievement': Putin Notes Russia as Only Nation with Three Domestic COVID Vaccines," *TASS*, February 8, 2021.
[193] Dmitri Trenin,"The Russian Federation: Inside and Out."
[194] "Statement by Vassily Nebenzia...in Response to the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic."

boon to Putin's domestic image, projecting the image of Russia as a capable, modern country. State television channels report extensively on Sputnik V's delivery to other countries.[195] The novel necessity of the Covid-19 vaccine has also presented a massive opportunity to Russia. While previously Russia's relevant exports were largely limited to the energy sector, the introduction of a novel virus allowed Russia to enter an entirely new market. Even better, this market was limited to a small number of actors that possessed the scientific capability to produce an effective vaccine. In this way, Sputnik V—despite its initial criticism and skepticism—has turned into an invaluable soft power resource for Russia.

Sputnik V has also granted Russia political capital. The ability of Russia to supply an effective, cheap vaccine—especially in the wake of the EU and Covax's stumbling—boosted Russia's international diplomacy, particularly in Latin America. Such "vaccine diplomacy"—the use of vaccines to improve a diplomatic relationship—is acknowledged by the U.S. The Department of Health & Human Services 2020 Annual Report identified "combatting malign influences in the Americas" as one of the Office of Global Affairs' (OGA) objective and described how the OGA worked to persuade Brazil to reject the Russian vaccine.[196] Regardless, Brazil purchased 10 million doses of Sputnik V and has signed a contract to produce the vaccine domestically.[197] Similarly, Russia has been able to conduct vaccine diplomacy in the Middle East. According to *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, Israeli PM Netanyahu paid Russia to provide Syria with vaccines in exchange for the safe return of an Israeli women held prisoner in Syria. Netanyahu stated that no Israeli vaccines were exchanged but confirmed

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[195] Meyer, "Countries are Lining up for Russia's Once-Scorned Sputnik Vaccine After Strong Efficacy Results."
[196] "2020 Annual Report," Department of Health and Human Services USA, 48
[197] Joedson Alves, "Russia Slams U.S. Over Brazil Coronavirus Vaccine Pressure," *The Moscow Times,* March 16, 2021.

speaking with President Putin to hammer out the deal.[198] This more unorthodox exchange highlights how vaccines can be used as political currency. Thus, the development of Sputnik V has granted Russia a much-needed soft power boost, and its distribution has boosted Russia's diplomacy and political currency.

Sputnik V is not the only mechanism that Russia has employed to improve its image. In March 2020, following a phone call between Italian PM Giuseppe Conte and Putin and the absence of direct aid from the EU, Russia sent Italy 9 military aircraft, medical supplies, and over 100 medical experts to combat Italy's worsening crisis at the outset of the pandemic. This move was clearly designed to project a three-pronged narrative surrounding Russia: (1) the regime's competence insofar as having "spare" supplies to send to Italy, (2) the goodwill of the regime to help out a country that was suffering acutely under the pandemic, and (3) the failure of the West to handle the pandemic on its own and its need to rely on Russian aid. However, according to an Italian official in *La Stampa,* some 80% of the delivered supplies were "useless or of little use" to Italy—for example, equipment for bacteriological disinfection rather than ventilators.[199] Similarly, on 1 April 2020, a Russian shipment of PPE, ventilators, and other medical supplies arrived in New York City. Press Secretary Dmitri Peskov claimed that President Trump "accepted humanitarian assistance with gratitude" over a phone call with Putin. *Russia Today* characterized the shipment as "a gift from the Kremlin to its coronavirus-stricken rival."[200] However, a subsequent statement during U.S. State Department press release clarified that the equipment was purchased—not aid. Regardless of the exact truth, Russian entities

[198] Dov Lieber and Jared Malsin, "Israel Dodges Questions over Vaccine-For-Prisoner Swap with Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, February 21, 2021.

[199] Elisabeth Braw, "Beware of Bad Samaritans," *Foreign Policy,* March 30, 2020.

[200] Gigi Gigitashvili, "Russia's Covid-19 'Humanitarian Aid' Comes at a Price," *Emerging Europe,* May 8, 2020.

exploited the delivery. The twitter hashtag #Russiahelps registered its peak use on 1 April 2020, and analysis revealed that official Russian accounts like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Mission in the UN were the hashtag's main amplifiers. Television station *Rossiya 1* called the shipment "rescue cargo," *Russkaya Pravda* wrote how the U.S. and Europe had no choice but to turn to Russia, and *Vzglyad* claimed how the dire situation in the U.S. was "a direct consequence of the carelessness of the American authorities" and a result of America's poor healthcare system, making Russia's support very valuable.[201] Yet again, Russia aimed to present itself as a Good Samaritan to the struggling West.

*Western Failings*

Moscow's framing of the New York delivery reflects one of the other major frames of Russia's Covid-19 response—the ineptitude of the West's response to the pandemic, demonstrative of inherent flaws in the liberal international order. As discussed in Chapter 1, failures of the Western-led liberal order grant credibility to Putin's own regime and his alternate vision of a multipolar world; perceived Western ineptitude empowers Russia and strengthens its rhetorical position.[202] By nature, international status is scarce—if all states had equal status, the concept would be meaningless. In this way, international status and competition for it is often a zero-sum game. As one state loses status, another gains.[203] Thus, it is within Moscow's interest to amplify awareness of Western failures to its domestic audience and the international system alike. The Western weaknesses with regard to Covid-19 that Russia have been able to exploit are (1) the high infection and mortality rates in the West and (2) the failure of the West to orchestrate a coordinated global response.

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[201] Gigitashvili, "Russia's Covid-19 'Humanitarian Aid' Comes at a Price."
[202] Bobo Lo, "Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia and the West," Lowy Institute, July 29, 2020.
[203] Ambrosio, "The Russo-American Dispute over the Invasion of Iraq," 1192.

Implicit within the legitimacy of the liberal international order is the conclusion that liberal democratic states are not only the most wealthy and humane, but also the most competent and innovative. As such, relatively low rates of Covid-19 infections and mortalities (the most common metrics used to measure the effects of the pandemic) project competence in handling the pandemic and the existence of strong infrastructure and institutions. However, as of March 2021, the U.S. has recorded over 2x the mortality rate per 1 million population for Covid-19 as Russia: 1659.61 and 658.67, respectively. Many other Western countries are near the top, with Belgium at 1975.65, the U.K. at 1868.34, and Italy at 1785.14.[204] These high figures severely undercut the standing and clout of the West with regard to global governance. Similarly, any apparent competency by non-Western regimes like Russia or China further begs the question: if the "poster boys" of liberal democratic governance could not handle one of the largest global challenges yet, then why would the liberal West remain a model for governance?[205] Of course, the unique demographic circumstances and institutional restraints of each country affect Covid-19 policy and statistics—liberal democracies are not able to impose the same level of direct control on their populations as authoritarian regimes, and countries with higher population densities or elderly populations face greater challenges. A detailed analysis of the unique causes and contributing factors for mortality rates lies outside of the scope of this paper, and the reported data is taken at face value.[206] However, the larger takeaway—that the response of the West to the Coronavirus crisis massively harmed its legitimacy—stands. As put by the Lowy Institute: "It scarcely matters whether there are mitigating factors or that others are also at fault. What the rest of the world (and their own populations) sees is incapacity and weakness."[207]

[204] "Daily Confirmed Deaths per Million," Our World in Data, accessed March 28, 2021.
[205] Lo, "Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia and the West."
[206] See section "Domestic Response" for a discussion of the controversy surrounding Russia's reported statistics.
[207] Lo, "Global Order in the Shadow of the Coronavirus: China, Russia and the West."

Similarly, in response to a global crisis under the current system, the West typically assumes a leadership role, utilizing its resources and expertise to organize multilateral solutions. However, as evidenced by the issues plaguing the EU and Covax, the West has failed to organize a coherent or clearly competent response to the pandemic—at least in the eyes of outside low- and middle-income countries. Russia has taken advantage of the shortcoming both practically—with its aggressive marketing and distribution of Sputnik V—and rhetorically. In Putin's 2020 address to the UNGA, he stressed how Russia has been "actively contributing to global and regional counter-Covid-19 efforts, providing assistance to most affected states both bilaterally and within multilateral formats" in contrast to "cases showing the deficit in humanity and, if you will, kindness in the relations at the official inter-State level"—a clear shot at the West.[208] However impossible the standard may seem, every failure of the West to project competence and leadership grants an opportunity for rivals like Russia and China to chip away at the legitimacy of the current global order. French President Emmanuel Macron addressed this concern at the Munich Security Conference, saying how too slow of a response in Africa would cause a turn to Russia and China, making the strength of the West "a concept, but not a reality."[209] For Russia, weakening perceptions of such a reality is beneficial to its own interests.

One of the West's largest shortcomings with regard to the pandemic was its inability to lead a coordinated, collaborative effort against the virus. A major cause of this failure is vaccine nationalism, defined as a country's strict prioritization of its own population over more global or collective efforts to achieve vaccination. Vaccine nationalism can be seen in the West's near monopoly on purchasing vaccines, particularly those developed in the West. As of February

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[208] "Video Address by President of Russia Vladimir Putin to the 75th Anniversary Session of the United Nations General Assembly," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, September 22, 2020.
[209] Kramer, "Russia Is Offering to Export Hundreds of Millions of Vaccine Doses, but Can It Deliver?"

2021, about 95% of all vaccinations had taken place in just 10 countries.[210] Most Western and high-income countries have secured more doses than they have people. For example, the UK and Canada have 339.6% and 335.4% of their populations covered by vaccine contracts, compared to 5% in Albania, Ethiopia, and Bangladesh.[211] Such hoarding of vaccines not only hurts the humanitarian, collaborative image of the West; it also has the potential to cause practical problems. The WHO has repeatedly urged UN members to take a collective approach to vaccine distribution, stating how "the inequitable distribution of vaccines is not just a moral outrage, it's also economically and epidemiologically self-defeating."[212] The very nature of a pandemic—transnational and indiscriminate—means that the inoculation of only a handful of countries will not solve the problem. As a seller of a cheap, effective vaccine, these truths are not unwelcome to Russia. Western vaccine nationalism is useful to Russia on two fronts: (1) it provides Russia with supply and demand gaps to fill, and (2) it reinforces Russian rhetoric that opposes multilateral action and prioritizes national interest above all else.

Beyond the West's relative wealth and possession of top pharmaceutical companies, disparities in vaccine distribution are fueled by specific legislation within Western countries. On 8 December 2020, Donald Trump signed an executive order ensuring priority access to vaccines for the American public, essentially banning the export of vaccines procured by the U.S. until every American who wanted the vaccine had received it.[213] President Biden has more or less followed this approach, initially denying requests from AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson to loan doses to the European Union—despite the fact that tens and millions of AstraZeneca doses are sitting unused in the U.S., currently unapproved for use by the FDA. This decision sparked

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[210] "Coronavirus: EU Confirms New Vaccine Export Controls," *BBC,* January 29, 2021.
[211] "Share of Population Covered by Covid Vaccine Contracts by Country 2021," Statista, accessed March 9, 2021.
[212] "Inequity of COVID-19 Vaccines Grows 'More Grotesque Every Day' – WHO Chief," *UN News,* March 22, 2021.
[213] "Coronavirus Digest: Trump Orders Priority Vaccine Access for US," *DW*, December 8, 2020.

frustration among the EU.[214] However, as of Spring 2021, Biden is reportedly in the process of finalizing plans to loan millions of doses to Mexico and Canada, potentially signaling a more collaborate approach in the near future.[215]

The U.S. is not the only country to enact anti-export legislation. In January 2021, the EU announced export controls on vaccines produced within the bloc, allowing member countries the ability to deny vaccine exports if the company producing them has not honored existing contracts with the EU. The European Commission stated: "The protection and safety of our citizens is a priority and the challenges we now face left us with no choice but to act."[216] However, lower- and middle- income countries that are party to Covax are exempt from the export controls. This decision was sparked by a dispute with AstraZeneca, which has encountered problems with delayed vaccine rollout and suffered production glitches at plants. [217] While the EU initially expected to receive 100 million doses by the end of March, the expectation dropped to 40 million within the same month.[218] In March 2021, Italy took advantage of this new framework and blocked the export of 250,000 AstraZeneca doses from an Italian plant to Australia.[219] Therefore, beyond securing the majority of vaccines through purchases and contracts, the West has prioritized internal action over global leadership through institutionalized measures that slow global distribution.

Such vaccine nationalism grants Russia rich rhetorical and practical opportunities. The failure of institutions like the EU and Covax to supply a sufficient amount of vaccines globally

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[214] Noah Weiland and Rebecca Robbins, "The U.S. Is Sitting on Tens of Millions of Vaccine Doses the World Needs," *The New York Times,* March 11, 2021.
[215] Tamara Keith, "Biden Takes First Jab at Vaccine Diplomacy, Sharing Doses with Mexico, Canada," *NPR*, March 19, 2021.
[216] "Coronavirus: EU Confirms New Vaccine Export Controls."
[217] Ibid.
[218] "Covid-19: Australia Asks European Commission to Review Italy's Vaccine Block," *BBC.* March 5, 2021.
[219] "Covid-19: Australia Asks European Commission to Review Italy's Vaccine Block."

has left gaps in the market for Sputnik V to fill, while also undermining global confidence in the EU. Practically, a lack of vaccine supply within the EU itself has caused some member states to defy EU legislation by importing Sputnik V, and other states have expressed willingness to follow in their footsteps. The decisions of Hungary and Slovakia to prioritize their own interests over collaboration with the EU provides Russia with real-life examples to support its vision of national interest above all, and within one of the strongest examples of modern multilateral institutions. Also, with the West largely looking inward, rivals like Russia and China are able to step in as potential global leaders. As put by analyst Paul Stronski: "Russia aims to increase its clout, refurbish its image, and assert itself on key international issues where retreating Western power has created vacuums."[220]

Similarly, the U.S.'s lack of vaccine support for geopolitical allies like Ukraine left a sore spot for Russia to poke. While Ukraine is scheduled to receive doses from the Covax program, the shots were not scheduled to arrive until March 2021—not to mention Covax's overall trouble in securing doses. Ukraine, already caught in Russian crosshairs, became the target of Russian media in the absence of U.S. or UN support.[221] Russian outlets highlighted the unreliability of Ukraine's Western allies while offering Sputnik V as an alternative—an option that is essentially impossible for Ukraine. "[The vaccine] is so politicized it cannot be used," said the former director of Ukraine's national security council. "There is no green lighting here. It would be impossible to do it."[222] Russian media has framed President Zelensky's stance as a conscious decision to let Ukrainians die caused by anti-Russian stubbornness. One such article described

[220] Stronski and Sokolsky, "The Return of Global Russia."
[221] Maria Varenikova, "In Vaccine Geopolitics, a Great Game Played with Ukrainians' Health," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2021.
[222] Varenikova, "In Vaccine Geopolitics, a Great Game Played with Ukrainians' Health."

Ukraine's rejection of Sputnik V as willful destruction of the Ukrainian people.[223] Sputniknews.com published a story (debunked by the EU's disinformation database) claiming that Ukrainians flocked in large numbers to Russia to get vaccinated against Covid-19.[224] In late December 2020, Ukraine secured a deal with Chinese manufacturer Sinovac Biotech for 1.9 million doses. But that success does not take away from Russia's rhetorical victory in terms of sowing discord in Ukraine and flaunting the failure of its Western allies.

## Information Warfare

The pandemic has provided Russia with another means of undermining the West and boosting its own status: influencing information. In a time of constantly changing information and high anxiety, information warfare is particularly potent. Russia has utilized information resources to sow doubt regarding the competence of Western institutions in handling the pandemic, particularly the EU. This information campaign involves disinformation, often aimed at the safety of Western vaccines and the origins of the virus. Similarly, Russia has utilized social media to promote Sputnik V internationally in ways that Western vaccines cannot. Both strategies ultimately support Russia's central narrative that the LIO is not the most fit to lead the international system, and that Russia's system is superior.

### *Narrative Promotion*

In order to pursue its national interests in the pandemic, Russia has engaged in information and disinformation campaigns primarily aimed to decrease confidence in Western vaccines. It is important to note the difference between types of information. Disinformation is

[223] "Disinfo: The Rejection of the Russian Vaccine Is a Planned Destruction of the Ukrainian People," EU vs DISINFORMATION, December 30, 2020.
[224] "Disinfo: Ukrainians Are Massively Travelling to Russia Get Vaccinated with Sputnik V," EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 24, 2021.

the practice of deliberately crafting and spreading false information with the intention of causing harm—disinformation is often motivated by political, financial, or social reasons.[225] In the case of Russia, disinformation is spread with the goal of polluting and blurring discourse in such a way that the public begins to doubt facts. The pandemic has provided especially fertile ground for disinformation due to widespread anxieties about the virus, making the public more conspiracy minded.[226] On the other hand, while many narratives promoted by Russian media are crafted with political intent (such as undermining the West), the information is not necessarily false. For example, pointing to the relatively high rates of Covid-19 mortality in Western countries or criticizing vaccine nationalism is not disinformation—the inherently political nature of some information does not automatically qualify it as disinformation, regardless of the source's intention. Russia has made use of both legitimate and fraudulent information in their promotion of anti-Western narratives during the pandemic.

Much of Russia's information warfare has focused on polluting pandemic-related information, aiming to undermine audiences' trust in official information via confusion or wariness. The U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center has identified a Russian intelligence agency campaign to undermine confidence in Western vaccines, including Pfizer. Allegedly, four publications that act as fronts for Russian intelligence have released content over-emphasizing the risk of Western vaccines' side effects, questioning their efficacy, and claiming that their approval process was rushed.[227] A disinformation campaign casts doubts on the origin of the virus, pointing fingers at shadowy global elites (or the "Deep State") who will

[225] Wesley Moy and Kacper Gradon. "COVID-19 Effects and Russian Disinformation," *Homeland Security Affairs* 16 (2020).
[226] Moy and Gradon, "COVID-19 Effects and Russian Disinformation."
[227] Michael Gordon and Dustin Volz, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say," *Wall Street Journal,* March 7, 2021.

use methods like microchipping to control the masses, Pentagon-funded biological laboratories, globalist Judeo-Masonic forces, or even Bill Gates. Another angle frames the virus as a genetically manufactured bioweapon.[228] Similar articles claim that the U.S. has used the pandemic to interfere in the internal affairs of countries like Belarus.[229] Such disinformation has run rampant on Twitter and Russian media foreign language subsidiaries. To respond to such tactics, the EU created a database that identifies and debunks disinformation stories from across the web—as of 31 March 2021, a keyword search for "coronavirus" narrowed to Russian sources flags 279 results.

After Sputnik V's creation, Russia's information campaigns have become more targeted and focused on promoting specific narratives rather than simply blurring discourse. These campaigns support four broad narratives: (1) the West is actively trying to discredit Sputnik V through disinformation to counter Russia geopolitically, (2) Sputnik V is superior to Western vaccines and Western vaccines are unsafe, (3) the EU is prioritizing geopolitics over the health of its citizens by refusing to approve Sputnik V, and (4) the EU has failed to respond competently to the pandemic, leaving countries to go their own way and foreshadowing the EU's imminent collapse. While the first two narratives primarily rely on disinformation, the last two often utilize legitimate, objective information about Western pandemic responses to support subjective conclusions. Stories released in 2020 focused heavily on NATO's supposed campaign

[228] "Disinfo: There Is Good Reason to Think Bill Gates Invented the Coronavirus," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 28, 2021.; "Disinfo: The Pandemic Is an Operation to Forward the Interests of the Global Elites," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 28, 2021.; "Disinfo: Globalists Are Imposing Vaccination to Rule the World, yet the West Is Doomed," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 5, 2021.; "Disinfo: Pentagon-Funded Biological Laboratories Involved in Creation of Coronavirus," EU vs DISINFORMATION, March 19, 2020.; "Disinfo: COVID-19 Is a Multi-Purpose Biological Weapon," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 16, 2021.; "Disinfo: Sputnik v Vaccine Destroyed the Plans of Globalists and Judeo Masonic Forces," EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 3, 2021."

[229] "Disinfo: The US Used the Pandemic to Interfere in the Affairs of Other Countries like Belarus," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 18, 2021.

to discredit Sputnik V in an effort to contain Russia. Since Sputnik V's application for approval by the EMA in 2021, the stories increasingly targeted the EU's alleged rejection of the vaccine for purely political reasons. In this vein, multiple Russian outlets have pushed the narrative that the West is planning a massive information campaign to discredit Sputnik V, staging mass deaths that it will blame on the vaccine.[230] By using this angle, Russia intends to frame Western leaders and efforts as intrinsically untrustworthy, sowing distrust within target populations.

The second major narrative undermines the safety of Western vaccines, especially in comparison to Sputnik V. Russian media consistently pushed stories placing Sputnik V's efficacy above 90% before the Phase III results were published in February 2021.[231] One story argues that because the Western pharmaceutical companies are driven by profits, they are willing to accept a certain amount of side effects as long as the vaccine is ultimately profitable.[232] Other stories state that 7 elderly people in Spain, 23 in Norway, 41 in Austria, and 64 in Sweden died as a result of side effects of the Pfizer vaccine, despite there being no found link between the deaths and the vaccine.[233] Russia has launched this disinformation campaign in a grand scale in Latin America. *Russia Today* and *Sputnik*—both of which are very popular in Latin America—are circulating hundreds of links to Spanish-language stories questioning the safety and efficacy of Western vaccines.[234] Such disinformation grants Russia a potential edge in the global vaccine

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[230] "Disinfo: West Preparing Large-Scale Smear Campaign Against Russian Vaccine, Including Fake Footage Of Mass Patient Deaths," EU vs DISINFORMATION, March 12, 2021.
[231] "Disinfo: Sputnik V Is World's First Coronavirus Vaccine with over 90% Efficacy," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 14, 2021.
[232] "Disinfo: Vaccines Produced by Western Pharmaceutical Companies Are More Dangerous than the Sputnik v as the Private Businesses Are Driven by Profits," EU vs DISINFORMATION, December 5, 2020.
[233] "Disinfo: 41 Dead in Austria after Getting Pfizer/BioNtech Vaccine.;" EU vs DISINFORMATION, March 3, 2021.; "Disinfo: The Pfizer Vaccine Is Killing People in Spain and Norway." EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 2, 2021.; "Disinfo: 64 People Have Died in Sweden from Side Effects of Vaccination," EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 12, 2021.
[234] Sheera Frenkel, Maria Abi-Habib, and Julian Barnes, "Russian Campaign Promotes Homegrown Vaccine and Undercuts Rivals," *The New York Times*, February 5, 2021.

race by casting doubt on its competitors.

The third major narrative claims that the EU and Western countries are choosing political opposition to Russia over the health of its citizens by refusing to approve Sputnik V. Unlike the previous narratives, this one primarily draws upon legitimate information to then construct a highly biased conclusion. Regardless, bias does not automatically equal disinformation. These stories claim that the EU's hesitations in approving Sputnik V stem from widespread Russophobia and geopolitical competition with Russia. [235] These stories also frame the EU as placing geopolitics above the well-being of its citizens, leaving its citizens to suffer.[236] Another article from geopolitica.ru describes how Russia was far superior to the West in handling the pandemic, shown by the lower death tally, and how Western leaders are weak and incompetent.[237] Thus, this narrative utilizes truths about the deficiencies of Western pandemic responses to undermine trust in elected officials and the intentions of the EU.

Lastly, Russian-based media supports the narrative that the EU is deeply divided and facing collapse. Again, this narrative draws upon legitimate facts to support a subjective conclusion. Russia frames the pandemic as another nail in the coffin of EU stability, as countries are dissatisfied with the EU's response and will act in their independent interest. In October 2020, Putin stated that: "only a viable state can act effectively in a crisis – contrary to the reasoning of those who claim that the role of the state in the global world is decreasing."[238] Hungary's approval of Sputnik V without overarching EMA approval was a massive political

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[235] "Disinfo: The Campaign Against "Sputnik V" Is In Full Swing," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 20, 2021.
[236] "Disinfo: EU Prohibits Countries from Saving Its Citizens from COVID-19," EU vs DISINFORMATION, December 8, 2020.; "Disinfo: EMA's Delay in Approving Sputnik v Is Political," EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 18, 2021.
[237] "Disinfo: Russia's Handling of the COVID-19 Pandemic Has Been Very Effective, While Western Nations Reacted Hysterically and Ineffectively to the Pandemic," EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 2, 2021.
[238] Kadri Liik, "Russia's Relative Resilience: Why Putin Feels Vindicated by the Pandemic," *European Council on Foreign Relations,* December 17, 2020.

victory, and provided a springboard for further disinformation regarding the EU, like claims that Brussels will have to reach out for Russian help due to chaos in the EU.[239] Similar stories emphasize how individual EU countries are willing to approve Sputnik V despite the EU's stubborn refusal, including Sweden, France, Finland, and Poland.[240] The overall purpose of this narrative is to undermine the legitimacy of the European system and LIO in general. As such, articles in this category often contrast Russia and China's success in handling the pandemic to the failure of the West.[241] Russian information warfare promotes perceptions that are conducive to Russia's foreign policy objectives, namely boosting status via Sputnik V and undermining the LIO.

Moscow's use of targeted information demonstrates how technology has led to new methods of geopolitical conflict. Empirical studies based in power-transition theory from the 1980s and 1990s showed that challenges to the hegemon normally occur only if the challenger possesses at least 80% of the hegemon's power—a threshold that Russia falls short of in conventional terms.[242] In light of this disparity, status-quo disruptors like Russia often participate in so-called "tolerance warfare" to challenge the hegemon through asymmetric means. The International Institute for Strategic Studies defines tolerance warfare as "the persistent effort to test the tolerances for different forms of aggression against settled states. It is the effort to push back lines of resistance, probe weaknesses, assert rights unilaterally, break rules, establish new

[239] "Disinfo: Russia Will Have to Help Brussels with the Vaccination because of the Chaos in the EU," EU vs DISINFORMATION, January 25, 2020.
[240] "Disinfo: Sweden Will Buy Russian Vaccine against COVID-19." EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 4, 2021.; "Disinfo: Macron Allowed the Use of Sputnik v Vaccine in France," EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 4, 2021.; "Disinfo: Poland Will Buy Russian Vaccine Sputnik V," EU vs DISINFORMATION, March 5, 2021.; "Disinfo: Finns Choosing Sputnik v for Vaccination," EU vs DISINFORMATION, February 25, 2021.
[241] "Disinfo: Response Measures to Coronavirus Demonstrate the Decline of the US and the EU." EU vs DISINFORMATION, March 16, 2021.
[242] Szayna et al, *The Emergence of Peer Competitors: a Framework for Analysis,* 48.

facts on the ground, and gain systematic tactical advantage over hesitant opponents."[243] Examples of tolerance warfare include Russia's testing of the boundaries of military involvement in Ukraine, Syria, and its near abroad. In these instances, Russia acts in ways that directly challenges U.S. interests, but in an asymmetric manner that makes full reprisal by the U.S. improbable.

Tolerance warfare also applies to disinformation, a tactic that only becomes more fruitful with the spread of information technology. In 2013, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov described how non-military means of conflict have exceeded the efficacy of military force in many cases. Information warfare—whether by means of legitimate or false information—can be used to undermine a target's legitimacy in the eyes of its own population, ultimately compromising the target's strength.[244] Thus, asymmetric tactics like disinformation are a valuable tool for Russia, which desires the compromise the LIO and, by extension, the institutions that comprise it. In this way, Covid-19-centric information campaigns are a form of tolerance warfare aimed at the West.

*Social Media*

Another information resource that Russia has harnessed is social media, primarily Twitter, to promote Sputnik V internationally. Sputnik V currently has a Facebook page, Youtube channel, and Twitter handle (which is blue-check-verified). The Twitter bio reads: "Sputnik V is the world's first registered Covid-19 vaccine with proven 91.6% efficacy, developed by the Gamaleya R.I. Registered in over 58 countries." A pinned tweet at the top of the account's feed contains the results of *The Lancet* study that confirms Sputnik V's 91.6% efficacy and advertises the vaccine's refrigeration storage and <$10 price point. Every

[243] John Chipman, "A New Geopolitical Challenge to the Rules-Based Order," IISS, November 16, 2018.
[244] Moy and Gradon, "COVID-19 Effects and Russian Disinformation."

authorization or purchase of Sputnik V by a foreign country is commemorated with a tweet, in addition to general updates about its production and sale.

A common theme of Sputnik V's tweets is the international desire for and approval of the vaccine. One tweet boasts of a survey in Argentina where 82% of respondents said they would choose to be vaccinated with Sputnik V.[245] A similar post cites a poll in which 70% of surveyed Austrians support the purchase of Sputnik V.[246] Another tweet praised an Italian artist for creating a 13,000 square meter image of a vaccine flask in a field. The artist called the work "an improvisation inspired by the current agenda since the Russian vaccine will soon be produced in Italy and everyone talks about its safety and efficacy."[247] The account also reposted a poll that placed Russia as the most trusted vaccine producer in the world alongside the U.S. and Sputnik V as the world's most recognized vaccine.[248] On Youtube, a video titled "V is for Victory" shows people around the world holding their hands up with their fingers in the V sign, showcasing their joy in receiving Sputnik V.[249]

A high percentage of tweets (particularly after Sputnik V's application to the EMA) portray the overwhelming willingness of European citizens to receive the vaccine despite the EU's narrow-minded opposition to it. Many tweets repost stories detailing the desire of officials and leaders within several countries to collaborate on Sputnik V, including Germany, France, Austria, Italy, and individual EU officials.[250] Similarly, several opinion pieces from European

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[245] @sputnikvaccine, "In this ongoing informal poll..." Twitter, March 27, 2021.
[246] @sputnikvaccine, "An Austrian poll..." Twitter, March 31, 2021, 6:50 a.m.
[247] @sputnikvaccine, "Italian land artist..." Twitter, March 16, 2021, 12:44 p.m.
[248] @sputnikvaccine, "Markets Insider: Russia is the most trusted vaccine producer alongside the US..." Twitter, March 24, 2021, 10:28 a.m.
[249] Sputnik V, "V is for Victory," Youtube Video, :49, December 28, 2020.
[250] @sputnikvaccine. "Express: EU rebellion - Italian regional leaders ignore Brussels' snub of Russian Sputnik V jab." Twitter, March 29, 2021, 9:46 a.m.; @sputnikvaccine, "EU Parliament member @BriceHortefeux questions whether the EU Commission agrees with @ThierryBreton that Europe does not need #SputnikV..." Twitter, March 30, 2021, 1:44 a.m.; @sputnikvaccine, "OE24: Austria wants to buy 1 mln Sputnik V doses..." Twitter, March 30,

authors supporting the approval of Sputnik V in the EU are retweeted. In this way, Russia is utilizing social media to broadcast and increase soft power gains made by way of its vaccine.

The majority of Sputnik V's tweets are positive promotion of the vaccine, but some do take a more contentious approach. While not as pointed as the disinformation discussed above, several posts undermine Western vaccines. One tweet cites a CDC study that placed Pfizer and Moderna efficacy rates slightly below Sputnik V at 90%, making Sputnik V "the most efficient vaccine in the world."[251] Another tweet emphasizes scientists' discovery of a possible rare autoimmune reaction to the AstraZeneca shot, resulting in blood clotting.[252] A report from the German Marshall Fund found that of thousands of Russian government and state media tweets, 86% mentioning Pfizer and 76% mentioning Moderna were coded as negative.[253] These stories do not necessarily count as mis- or disinformation, and many are cited from Western sources. However, the account's choice of which stories to promote clearly support the disinformation narratives discussed above.

On its own, there is nothing unusual about promotion of a product on social media. However, Sputnik V is the only vaccine with Twitter, Youtube, and Facebook accounts. Western biological products are limited in their marketing and advertising capabilities by FDA and EMA regulations. The RDIF faces no such boundaries. The only potential content for Western companies to share is unbiased information about studies and efficacy—hardly as glamorous

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2021, 5:33 a.m.; @sputnikvaccine, "President Putin, Chancellor Merkel and President Macron discussed vaccine cooperation..." Twitter, March 30, 2021, 3:32 p.m.

[251] @sputnikvaccine, "Is Sputnik V now the most efficient vaccine in the world..." Twitter, March 29, 2021, 11:03 a.m.

[252] This tweet would not be considered disinformation, as the study was widely accepted by the international community. [@sputnikvaccine, "WSJ: Scientists say they found cause of rare blood clotting linked to AstraZeneca vaccine." Twitter, March 20, 2021, 9:43 a.m."]

[253] Gordon and Volz, "Russian Disinformation Campaign Aims to Undermine Confidence in Pfizer, Other Covid-19 Vaccines, U.S. Officials Say."

Sputnik V's feed. According to the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy, Sputnik V's twitter analytics reveal high levels of engagement.[254] In this sense, Russia has an edge over Western vaccines in new media outreach. Through savvy use of anti-Western narratives, malignant disinformation, and curated positivity online, Russia has harnessed information resources to support its objectives during the pandemic—particularly surrounding Sputnik V.

**Domestic Response**

While a full overview and analysis of Russia's domestic response to the pandemic will not be included in this paper, several aspects of Russia's domestic policy are relevant to understanding its broader foreign policy objectives. Analysis will focus on centralized policies and figures like Putin rather than regional measures, where most Covid-19 policy manifested. The most directly relevant involves controversial official data for total deaths and, more recently, total vaccinations. Just as vaccine nationalism and hoarding provide an opportunity for Russia to criticize the Western liberal order, perceived incompetence of Western regimes—expressed in high infection rates and total mortalities—serves Russia's rhetorical objectives. However, in order to meaningfully denounce Western regimes, to an extent Russia must juxtapose its own competence. Thus, the next section will give a brief overview of Russia's own domestic response and the controversies surrounding its Covid-19 statistics.

*Overview*

Relative to most of the West, Russia's domestic Covid-19 policies have been mild. The regime's initial response to the virus was fairly strong—a coronavirus headquarters was created

[254] Adrian Croft, "Russia Has an Unlikely New Social Media Star: Its Sputnik COVID Vaccine," *Fortune*, March 24, 2021.

on 27 January 2020, and Russia closed its Chinese border three days later. In April 2020, Putin declared a paid "non-working month" as part of a six-week shutdown, designed to keep the public at home.[255] During the following months, however, Putin remained uncharacteristically far from the limelight in handling the crisis. Official comments have been rare, and the Kremlin largely passed all responsibility in handling the virus and determining measures to regional leaders.[256] Unlike several other countries, Putin rejected a second lockdown in Fall 2020, despite the second wave of the virus. Experts have cited several potential motivations for Putin's lukewarm approach, including shielding Putin from unpopularity that might result from strong anti-Covid-19 measures (and the economic hardships that would accompany them) and Putin's strong desire to conduct the 75th Victory Day celebration and nation-wide referendum on constitutional amendments undisturbed.[257] The constitutional referendum included amendments that would allow Putin to legally remain in office until 2036.[258] Both events were delayed but ultimately held in summer 2020.

The scape-goat hypothesis is strengthened by a loaded statement made by Putin to regional governors in November 2020: "Colleagues, you have received broad powers for implementing anti-pandemic measures. And nobody has relieved you of personal responsibility for the adopted measures — I really do hope that they were adopted on time."[259] According to analyst Abbas Gallyamov, the governors face a lose-lose situation as the public will be frustrated

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[255] Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia's Putin Orders Non-Working Month to Curb Coronavirus," *AP News,* April 2, 2020.
[256] Fabrice Deprez, "Russia's Confusing COVID-19 Response*," Foreign Policy Research Institute,* April 7, 2020.
[257] The Victory Day Parade celebrated the 75th anniversary of the USSR's defeat of Nazi Germany. The annual parade is one of Russia's biggest public holidays and is seen as a way to spark public patriotism. As such, the parade was rescheduled to occur just a week prior to the nationwide constitutional referendum vote. [Deprez, "Russia's Confusing COVID-19 Response*."*; "The Impact of COVID-19 on Russia's Politics and Foreign Policy," Clingendael, May 26, 2020.]
[258] Another amendment defined marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman, reinforcing Putin's traditionalist turn.
[259] Daria Litvinova, "Russia's Health System under Strain as the Virus Surges Back," *AP News,* November 22, 2020.

by lack of a strong response, but the governors lack the funds to mitigate the hardships of closures due to centralization of finances.[260] Certainly, implementing potentially unpopular measures personally is a dilemma that Putin was likely eager to avoid, especially given the constitutional referendum occurring in the summer. As put by Ivan Krastev, "authoritarians only enjoy those crises they have manufactured themselves. They need enemies to defeat, not problems to solve. The freedom authoritarian leaders cherish most is the freedom to choose which crises merit a response."[261] Putin's refusal to issue strong statements regarding Covid-19, enact or even suggest national protocols, or cancel mass events that were helpful to his position suggest a lack of genuine prioritization of the pandemic as a leader, especially in instances where the pandemic directly clashed with his self-interest.

In most Russian regions, measures included mask mandates, limited hours for bars and restaurants, self-isolation of the elderly, forbidding mass public events, and mandating a certain percentage of employees work from home.[262] The strictest region was Moscow, under the leadership of Mayor Sergei Sobyanin. Sobyanin's measures included a lockdown until June 2020 (allegedly lifted to allow the Victory Day Parade and constitutional referendum to take place), a mask mandate, a stay-at-home order for individuals over the age of 65, a freeze on "social cards" that grant discounted fares and free travel on public transport to students and pensioners, and a provision for businesses to keep 30% of their employees working remotely. [263] Perhaps ironically, Muscovites polled in December 2020 rated Sobyanin the "Moscow politician or

[260] Litvinova, "Russia's Health System under Strain as the Virus Surges Back."
[261] Liik, "Russia's Relative Resilience: Why Putin Feels Vindicated by the Pandemic."
[262] Litvinova, "Russia's Health System under Strain as the Virus Surges Back."
[263] As of December 2020, social card holders that receive the vaccine will regain their privileges. The stay-at-home order for the elderly was lifted on 8 March 2021. From 27 January 2021, businesses in Moscow are free to decide whether employees return to the workplace, although keeping 30% of employees working remotely is advised. ["Legal & Commercial Implications of Coronavirus (COVID-19) in Russia," *CMS,* accessed March 20, 2021.]

public figure who you trust the most" at 19%, with Putin following at 18%.[264] This is not to paint an overly simplistic picture—while Sobyanin's decisive measures were initially supported by most Muscovites, public support largely waned by the end of spring 2020. The economic downturn caused by Sobyanin's lockdowns caused strife among the Russian public, who have already experienced increased economic hardships in the wake of sanctions sparked by the Crimea Annexation.[265] According to data from the Levada Centre, Putin's approval rating as president hit an all-time low in April 2020 at 59% approval, down from 68% in January 2020. His rating hovered at 60% until September, where it rebounded to 69%. As of January 2021, his approval rating sits at 64%.[266] Similarly, Russians' trust in Putin hit a 14-year low of 28% in April 2020. These ratings come among criticism of Putin's decentralized Covid-19 response and failure to prevent economic collapse during lockdown.[267] Several Russia scholars have noted the importance of economic performance to the Russian population—analysis of polling data shows a strong relationship between Russians' perceptions of the economy and presidential popularity. Just like liberal democracies, citizens in competitive autocracies often evaluate their leaders based on economic conditions.[268] Creating worse economic conditions through Covid-19 measures cuts against Putin's interests as a leader who, while autocratic, still relies on some level of public support. Given the lack of any evident personal conviction on Putin's part regarding Covid-19 and the negative effects the pandemic and related measures have had on his popularity, Putin is likely hoping to return to "normal" life as soon as possible.

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[264] Putin typically leads these polls. ["Levada Center: Sobyanin Tops List of Most Trusted Politicians in Moscow," *Meduza*, December 22, 2020.]
[265] "It's All Sobyanin's Fault How Moscow's Mayor Tried to Tackle the Coronavirus but Ended up at Odds with Putin," *Meduza*, June 24, 2020.
[266] "Vladimir Putin's approval rating in Russia monthly 1999-2021," Statista.
[267] "Putin's Approval Rating Drops to Historic Low: Poll," *The Moscow Times,* May 6, 2020.
[268] Treisman, "Presidential Popularity in a Hybrid Regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin," 607.

*Controversial Statistics*

While enacting strict anti-Covid-19 measures can lead to political costs at home, failing to effectively mitigate the spread and mortality of the virus can lead to reputational costs abroad. High infection and mortality rates (as seen in the West) can harm an actor's international and external status. By the same token, lower numbers and effective policy can boost a regime's legitimacy. Therefore, Russian officials have often referenced their relatively low mortality rates in comparison to the U.S. and many EU countries. In May 2020, despite ranking second in global infections, Russian statistics placed it 18th on the list of mortality, with just over 2,300 deaths total.[269] As of April 2021, the picture is not as flattering—Russia ranking fifth in total reported cases (4.47 million) and seventh in total deaths (96,123) worldwide.[270] Russia's most favorable statistic is in its deaths per million population, where it places 57th.[271] Officials have framed this relative success as a result of competent policy. In an address to the UNGA, Russia's Minister of Healthcare Mikhail Murashko spoke of Russia's domestic response: "We took proactive steps: clear protocols of Covid-19 detection and prevention, as well as timely medical assistance allowed us to avoid the worst-case scenario of the pandemic."[272] Peskov described Russia's healthcare system as "very effective in proving its high-mobilization potential."[273] However, several discrepancies with Russia's data have been pointed out by domestic and international critics alike.

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[269] Charles Maynes, "Russia Defends Its Tally of Coronavirus Deaths after Reports of Undercounting," *NPR*, May 14, 2020.
[270] The U.S., Brazil, India, and France were 1-4 on total cases. The U.S., Brazil, Mexico, India, U.K., and Italy were 1-6 on total deaths. ["Cases and Deaths." Our World in Data. Accessed April 1, 2021.]
[271] "Daily Confirmed Deaths per Million," Our World in Data, accessed April 1, 2021.
[272] "Statement by Mikhail Murashko," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, December 3, 2020.
[273] "Russia's Excess Death Spike a 'Harsh Reality' of Coronavirus, Kremlin Says," *The Moscow Times*, February 10, 2021.

As early as May 2020, Western media outlets like *The New York Times* and *Financial Times* questioned the accuracy of Russia's Covid-19 statistics. Several independent analysts in Russia echoed this suspicion. On paper, the discrepancy comes from Russia's methodology in collecting mortality data—deaths are only coded as Covid-19 deaths if post-mortem examinations list the virus as the main cause of death. Therefore, other deaths that may be linked to Covid-19 but did not list it as the main cause are not counted in the official total.[274] Despite criticism, Russia has stuck to this method. The WHO provided support for the Kremlin, as Dr. Mejita Vujnovic—head of WHO's Russian office—stated: "We have no complaints about the statistics being provided by Russia. ... No major concerns have been conveyed about the Russian methodology."[275] On the other hand, Russia recorded a 16 year high of over 337,000 excess deaths in 2020—a number calculated by comparing deaths within a given year and the past average. In fact, Russia recorded 63% more deaths in 2020 than in 2019. In most European countries, officially-coded Covid-19 deaths account for ~90% of excess deaths, while Russia is closer to 15%.[276] In December 2020, Deputy Prime Minister Tatiana Golikova stated that around 81% of excess deaths in 2020 "can be attributed to Covid-19 and the effects of the virus."[277] Thus, calculations more in line with Western standards, where deaths are automatically counted in the Covid-19 toll if the deceased tested positive, would place Russia's total deaths as of December 2020 to 186,000, third behind the U.S. and Brazil.[278] Therefore, even by only using

[274] "Russian Covid Deaths Three Times the Official Toll," *BBC,* December 29, 2020.
[275] Pjotr Sauer and Jake Cordell, "Is the WHO Too Soft on Russia?" *The Moscow Times,* November 24, 2020.
[276] Jake Cordell, "Russia Has One of the World's Highest Excess Death Rates. Why Aren't Russians Angrier?" *The Moscow Times,* February 18, 2021.
[277] "Russian Covid Deaths Three Times the Official Toll."
[278] "Russian Covid Deaths Three Times the Official Toll."; Pjotr Sauer, "Russia Is Boasting about Low Coronavirus Deaths. The Numbers Are Deceiving," *The Moscow Times,* May 8, 2020.

figures explicitly supported by Kremlin officials, Russia's relative standing in global pandemic responses is severely harmed.

As is typical in international relations, proving true motivations behind state practices is a Sisyphean task. This paper is not claiming that a desire for international standing was the key motivator for Russia's misleading statistics. In fact, several experts outright doubt this—author Mark Galeotti suggests that regional officials' fear of sending up bad news to Moscow is a possible factor.[279] Another potential explanation is a desire to undersell the effects of the pandemic to the Russian public in order to avoid further restrictive measures and, as a result, economic hardship. Poll work by the Levada Centre reveals that Russians are more concerned about the economic consequences of the virus than the health consequences. Such priorities are strengthened by state media's perpetual underreporting of Covid-19 cases and deaths and the personal nature of economic hardship. A spring 2020 survey found that 60% of households claimed to lose income as a result of the economic crisis, while only 14% said they knew somebody who had caught the virus.[280] Some analysts have described the 2021 protests in support of Alexei Navalny as fueled in part by public discontent from the economic hardships and lack of government financial support during the pandemic.[281] Whatever the true cause may be, the fact remains that Russia's official Covid-19 statistics are, if not blatantly incorrect, wildly misleading when compared to the statistics of other countries. Regardless of the means, Russia's initially low mortality rate provided political fodder, as Russian public figures praised the country's handling of the virus on national TV and a UN permanent representative boasted of Russia's low mortality rate.[282] In late 2020, Golikova declared how "mortality rates are 7.5 times

[279] "The Impact of COVID-19 on Russia's Politics and Foreign Policy."
[280] Cordell, "Russia Has One of the World's Highest Excess Death Rates."
[281] Ibid.
[282] Sauer, "Russia Is Boasting about Low Coronavirus Deaths."

lower in Russia than the world as a whole."[283] In this way, the desire of Russia to portray itself as more competent than the West in the context of the pandemic is evident.

Much like Russia's mortality statistics, Russia's vaccination tallies have become the target of suspicion. Currently, Russia aims to vaccinate 60% of its population by July. Reaching this target is highly unlikely and would require increasing the current vaccination rate from a few thousand injections a day to over 700,000.[284] Russia does not post regular official data on vaccination progress, citing health privacy (already a bad sign for transparency). However, on 22 March 2021 Putin announced that 6.3 million Russians (~5% of the total population) had received the first dose of a vaccination.[285] Yet several independent statisticians are wary of officials' claims. When Russia's official coronavirus Twitter account announced in January 2021 that over 1.5 million people had been vaccinated, several independent analysts—including Alexander Dragan of Moscow—doubted the truth of the claim. Dragan's doubts spring from the discrepancies between the national tally and regionally reported data, which is more precise. According to Dragan, the combined tally of regions that account for 59% of Russia's population only registered 111,000 vaccinations—only 7.4% of the reported national tally.[286] An extrapolated analysis of the entire country—endorsed by a community of independent statisticians—estimates that "300,000 at best" had actually been vaccinated as of January 11. There are multiple potential reasons for this discrepancy—Mikhail Tamm, a Moscow statistician, suggested that the numbers are part of a campaign to make Sputnik V look good internationally. Alexei Rashka, a demographer, believes the inconsistencies are part of a "propaganda and

[283] Sauer and Cordell, "Is the WHO Too Soft on Russia?"
[284] Sarah Rainsford, "Coronavirus: Russia's Putin Gets Vaccine but without Cameras," *BBC,* March 23, 2021.
[285] "Despite Early Start, Russia Says Only 1.5% Population Vaccinated," *The Moscow Times*, February 10, 2021.
[286] Jake Cordell, "Russia Says It Has Vaccinated 1.5M. Some Experts Think the Numbers Don't Add Up," *The Moscow Times,* January 14, 2021.

disinformation campaign" to cover the "growing incompetence" of the vaccine rollout.[287] Dragan theorized that the inflated numbers might be designed to increase domestic confidence in the vaccine, as "somebody is much more likely to agree to be vaccinated if they realize that hundreds of thousands or millions of people have already done it."[288] If this is the case, anecdotal evidence casts doubt on its efficacy. Interviews with the Russian public reveal an overall disinterest in the vaccine and pandemic measures in general, and fully stocked vaccination sites across Moscow are frequently empty.[289]

Doubts about the rate of accuracy of reported vaccinations are boosted by broad hesitance within the Russian population to get the vaccine. According to a January 2021 Gallup Poll that surveyed 42,598 respondents from 47 countries (of which approximately 1,500 were Russian), the Russian population is among the world's most skeptical towards Covid-19 vaccinations, with only 30% of Russians saying they believed that most of their compatriots would receive the vaccine if it was widely available and proven effective. This compares to a global average of about 50% of respondents agreeing.[290] A March 2021 Levada Centre poll found that *The Lancet*'s endorsement of the vaccine did nothing to boost domestic confidence, with the percentage of Russian's willing to receive Sputnik V sticking at 30. Experts cite a cultural distrust of the state and its administrations, paired with the mild media coverage and lack of strong restrictions since Spring 2020 as the major contributing factors to Russians' disinterest. [291]

[287] Cordell, "Russia Says It Has Vaccinated 1.5M. Some Experts Think the Numbers Don't Add Up."
[288] Cordell, "Russia Says It Has Vaccinated 1.5M. Some Experts Think the Numbers Don't Add Up."
[289] Kramer, "Russia Is Offering to Export Hundreds of Millions of Vaccine Doses, but Can It Deliver?"; "Why Many in Russia Are Reluctant to Have Sputnik Vaccine," *BBC,* March 3, 2021.
[290] "Russia among World's Most Coronavirus Vaccine-Skeptic Countries – Gallup," *The Moscow Times*, January 22, 2021.
[291] "Why Many in Russia Are Reluctant to Have Sputnik Vaccine."

Distrust of the vaccine was deepened by the speed at which Sputnik V was originally approved, before the validation of the global scientific community.[292]

To make matters worse, Putin did not receive a vaccine until 23 March 2021, despite Sputnik V's domestic vaccination campaign beginning in early December 2020. When Putin was finally vaccinated, which of the three Russian vaccines he received was not specified. Even stranger, the shot happened behind closed doors and absent of cameras. Regarding proof of his vaccination, Putin said that the public would have to "take our word for it."[293] Putin's lackadaisical—or even reluctant—attitude towards vaccination stands in contrast to his enthusiastic support of Sputnik V abroad. Similarly, this lack of leadership by example with regard to vaccination did not help the public's distrust of vaccines nor the public's lack of urgency to get vaccinated. This contrast has led many to question Putin's priorities related to Coronavirus and vaccine supplies.

Within the EU, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen voiced this concern: "We still wonder why Russia is offering, theoretically, millions and millions of doses while not sufficiently progressing in vaccinating its own people. This question should be answered."[294] When placed in the context of Russia's goal to secure a 30% share of the global Covid-19 vaccine market and Russia's estimate that 30% of all Sputnik V shots will be used for exports, it appears that there is no interest within the Putin regime to truly prioritize domestic vaccination.[295] According to scientific analytics company Airfinity, by March 2021 Russia had sent 3.7 million of a total 10.7 million Sputnik V doses produced abroad, leaving only 7 million

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[292] "Looming Supply Glut of Russia's Sputnik v Vaccine Could Pave Way for Exports."
[293] Rainsford, "Russia's Putin Gets Vaccine but without Cameras."
[294] Kramer, "Russia Is Offering to Export Hundreds of Millions of Vaccine Doses, but Can It Deliver?"
[295] "Looming Supply Glut of Russia's Sputnik v Vaccine Could Pave Way for Exports."; Kantchev,"Russian Covid-19 Vaccine Was Highly Effective in Trial, Boosting Moscow's Rollout Ambitions."

for its population of 145 million.[296] Similarly, the delivery of "foreign aid"—including PPE—to countries like the U.S. and Italy when regions of Russia itself were struggling with equipment shortages suggests an outward image prioritization by the Kremlin.[297] Despite this upside down prioritization, there has been no clear sign of backlash in Russia over the mass export of Sputnik V, likely due to the Russian public's disinterest in getting vaccinated in the first place.[298] Whatever the case, Sputnik V is far more popular abroad than at home.

**UN Posturing**

The ways in which Russia pursues its ultimate goals within the pandemic can also be revealed through statements and resolutions made at the UN. The pandemic allows Russia to advocate for goals that it already possesses, but within the frame of fighting the effects of Covid-19. Russia prefers organizing global pandemic measures through the UN due to the UN's structural recognition of sovereignty and Russia's permanent veto power in the UNSC. An April 2020 draft resolution penned by Russia "[recognizes] the leading role of the WHO in combating the pandemic" and the "consent of states to cooperate." When Russia supported another draft resolution in September 2020, it identified "multilateral cooperation in addressing the pandemic ... in accordance with the UN charter" as the "key passage in [Russia's] initiative on Covid-19 resolution."[299] By working through the UN, Russia's national interests theoretically will not be infringed upon. Russia has pursued such national interests at the UN during the pandemic. The three major goals enfolded in UNSC Resolutions and Russia's UN statements are further

[296] Croft, "Russia Has an Unlikely New Social Media Star."
[297] Andrew Higgins, "After Months of Denial, Russia Admits the Virus Is Taking Hold," *The New York Times*, April 10, 2020.
[298] Kramer, "Russia Is Offering to Export Hundreds of Millions of Vaccine Doses, but Can It Deliver?"
[299] "Statement by Dmitry Chumakov..." Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, September 11, 2020.

distribution of Sputnik V, the cease of anti-Assad hostilities in Syria, and the termination of unilateral sanctions.

*Global Vaccination Campaign*

On 26 February 2021, the UNSC passed Resolution 2565, which stressed the need for international solidarity in fighting the pandemic and called for collaboration on global vaccination efforts (ironically, the resolution also condemned disinformation about vaccines). Resolution 2565 also calls for a general and immediate cessation of armed hostilities worldwide (excluding counterterrorism efforts) and unhindered humanitarian access for medical personnel to conduct vaccinations.[300] Resolution 2565 largely mirrors the previous UNSC Resolution 2532—passed unanimously on 1 July 2020—that also called for a global ceasefire of hostilities. The major difference, given their timing, is 2565's inclusion of global vaccination efforts—particularly to low- and middle-income countries—as a focal point.[301] Traditionally, Russia is wary of expanding the UNSC agenda to indirect security issues (such as climate change). However, Resolution 2565's calls for global vaccination efforts, a global ceasefire of hostilities, and humanitarian access for vaccination all support Russian objectives. Thus, including Covid-19 on the UNSC agenda is in Russia's interest.

Additionally, the outlined pandemic efforts fall under the purview of the UN and WHO, two organizations which Russia views as non-threatening to their sovereignty. Like the UN, Russia is willing to work with the WHO as it is inherently limited in the ability to intervene in state affairs due to financial and structural constraints.[302] In a statement to the UNSC, Russian Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia stated that while "formally a pandemic is

[300] "Resolution 3565 (2021)," United Nations Security Council, February 26, 2021.
[301] "Resolution 3565 (2021)."; "Resolution 2532 (2020)," United Nations Security Council, July 1, 2020.
[302] Sauer and Cordell, "Is the WHO Too Soft on Russia?"

not the agenda of the Security Council, ... it may affect the way we operate and adopt decisions. ...UN must play a pivotal role here. It is important that we all support WHO as the main specialized UN agency, help it to coordinate global measures and listen to its recommendations."[303] Several press releases repeat this endorsement of the UN and WHO as the leading mechanisms in coordinating a pandemic response. Russia has reason to support the WHO beyond its structural limitations. As far back as September 2020—when scientific suspicion of Sputnik V still ran high—the WHO thanked Russia for their work on the vaccine. "The WHO greatly appreciates the efforts that the Russian Federation has made to develop a vaccine against Covid-19, namely Sputnik V. Once again I want to thank Russia for its excellent efforts to create a safe and effective vaccine," said Hans Kluge, Regional Director for Europe at the WHO.[304] Kluge also cited Russia's commitment to global solidarity. Resolution 2565 also repeats Russia's support of Covax, but in a manner secondary to bilateral vaccine deals. In a press release discussing the resolution, the Russian delegation "[urged] the UN to consider all available options to ensure universal access to Covid-19 vaccines and response to the pandemic" in addition to Covax.[305] Another statement reiterated Sputnik V's convenient transportation and storage and invited localized production deals and general cooperation with other countries.[306] Therefore, inclusion of the anti-Coronavirus measures on the UNSC provides a larger platform for Russia to promote and distribute its vaccine.

*"Counterterrorism"*

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[303] "Statement by Vassily Nebenzia...on Covid-19" Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, April 9, 2020.
[304] Evgeny Mikhaylov, "WHO Thanks Russia for Developing 'Safe and Effective Sputnik v Vaccine', Regional Head Says," *Sputnik International*, September 21, 2020.
[305] "Concerning the Adoption of the UNSC Resolution on COVID-19 Vaccination in Situations of Armed Conflict," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, February 26, 2021.
[306] "Statement by...Evgeny Varganov...on Equitable Global Access to Covid-19 Vaccines," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, March 26, 2021.

The second agenda folded into Resolution 2565 relates to its involvement in the Syria conflict. In Syria, Russia has military intervened in support of President Bashar al-Assad regime, while the U.S. has supported anti-Assad rebel groups.[307] While Russia is ostensibly involved in Syria to engage in counterterrorism against ISIS, many characterize its true intentions as ensuring the survival of the pro-Russia al-Assad regime. As such, Russia has fought against Western-backed rebel groups in the region.[308] A recent statement by Nebenzia condemned "external forces" that "[stirred] up the situation in Syria, ... [aiming] to overthrow the legitimate authorities and reform the country as they saw fit." On the other hand, Russia's "decisive support" supported the legitimate Assad regime and "[broke] the backbone of ISIL."[309] This consistent narrative supports Russia's attempts to paint its involvement in Syria as legal and the U.S.'s as illegal. On 24 March 2020, the Russian Foreign Ministry clarified that the ceasefire was "primarily addressed to the nations, which illegally use military force outside of their national borders."[310] Another press release references the "illegal presence of the United States" in Syria's Northeast while expressing Russia's commitment to "resolutely suppress" terrorist activities.[311] A press release explaining Russia's vote in favor of Resolutions 2532 states that Moscow "[considered] it extremely important that the text of the resolution clearly states that the humanitarian pause and cessation of hostilities do not apply to counter-terrorism operations"—

[307] "Civil War in Syria," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed April 7, 2021.
[308] Robert Souza and Bryan Williams. "The Consequences of Russia's 'Counterterrorism' Campaign in Syria," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 11 (2016).
[309] "Statement by...Vassily Nebenzia...on the Political Situation in Syria," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, March 15, 2021.
[310] "Foreign Ministry Statement in View of the Spread of the COVID-19 Epidemic," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, March 24, 2020.
[311] "Statement by Vassily Nebenzia...on the Situation in Syria," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, July 23, 2020.

the press release for Resolution 2565 echoes this sentiment.[312] Thus, the resolutions' call for a cease in hostilities can be twisted to support Russia's objectives in Syria.

*Termination of Sanctions*

Russia's third objective is the suspension of unilateral Western sanctions. Since the 2014 Crimea Annexation, Russia has been continuously hit by a slew of targeted sanctions. This objective also ties into the Syria conflict. Russia has consistently condemned Western sanctions against Syria, citing the decision of "the political opponents of Damascus...to take the country by starvation" and that "ordinary Syrians are suffering collective punishment."[313] In this vein, Russia has argued that the illegal Western presence in Syria and unilateral sanctions have prevented the arrival of humanitarian aid and vaccines to Syrian citizens, an argument that is repeated consistently in statements throughout 2020 and 2021. This angle is referenced in an article flagged as disinformation by the EU database, which claims Western sanctions on Syria are preventing the arrival of vaccines. The EU rejected this claim, noting how sanctions were carefully designed to allow the arrival of humanitarian aid during the pandemic.[314] Certainly, sanctions—even carefully targeted ones—can lead to humanitarian suffering within the target population, causing criticism of sanctions among many scholars and activists. Regardless, Russia's rhetorical use of Syrian suffering rings hollow in the face of its support for the oppressive Assad regime and Russia's attempts to cover up the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against its own citizens.[315] Russian references to Syrian suffering during the pandemic

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[312] "Explanation of Vote on a Draft Resolution on COVID-19," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, July 1, 2020.; "Concerning the Adoption of the UNSC Resolution on COVID-19 Vaccination in Situations of Armed Conflict,"

[313] "Statement by...Vassily Nebenzia...on the Political Situation in Syria," March 15, 2021.

[314] "Disinfo: Sanctions Are Preventing the Arrival of Vaccines in Syria," EU vs DISINFORMATION, March 8, 2021.

[315] Ben Hubbard, "Syria Used Chemical Weapons 3 Times in One Week, Watchdog Says," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2020.

are aimed at a grander objective: dismantling unilateral sanctions entirely.

At the UN, Russia typically frames this argument in reference to developing countries. This has remained true during the pandemic. In April 2020, Nebenzia argued that unilateral and multilateral sanctions imposed without UN approval should be lifted. "Developing countries face enormous challenges and should be assisted first and foremost. UN is the best platform to coordinate such assistance. In this context we call on everybody to lift all non-UN multilateral or unilateral coercive measures and sanctions against developing countries. We can't help with one hand and harm with another," Nebenzia said during a UNSC session.[316] A March 2020 statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry read: "the current conditions offer no justification for unilateral coercive measures, including economic restrictions, which are a severe impediment on the authorities' efforts to protect the health of their populations."[317]

Russia has attempted to codify a termination of sanctions more than once. In April 2020, Russia pushed a UNGA resolution draft urging solidarity in countering the spread of coronavirus. Notably, unlike the text proposed by Ghana, Indonesia, Lichtenstein, Norway, Singapore, and Switzerland, Russia's text envisioned: "providing assistance to the most vulnerable states, especially developing countries; rejection of trade wars and unilateral sanctions adopted without the mandate of the UN Security Council, in order to ensure early access to food and medication..."[318] Upon failure to achieve consensus on the resolution—a move led by the U.S., UK, Georgia, Ukraine, and EU (dubbed "a number of Western countries and some of their henchmen")[319]—Russia responded:

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[316] "Statement by Vassily Nebenzia...on Covid-19" April 9, 2020.
[317] "Foreign Ministry Statement in View of the Spread of the COVID-19 Epidemic."
[318] "Press Release on Consideration by the UN General Assembly of a Declaration on Solidarity in Countering COVID-19 Pandemic," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, April 2, 2020.
[319] "Press-Release with Regard to the Statement of the Group of 77 and China on Combating COVID-19 Pandemic," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, April 7, 2020.

> We regret that a small group of states championing sanctions-based policy appeared unready to respond to the call of the UN Secretary-General and refused to cast aside politicized approaches and interests. As a result, it will be much more difficult to give a global and solidary response to the threat of the new pandemic. A great number of people, in the developing countries in the first place, might be affected.[320]

Later on in April, a Russia-proposed resolution draft on Covid-19 solidarity with similar demands was again blocked by Western states. A press release responded: "[Western states] clearly demonstrated thar their calls for solidarity and providing help to countries with limited resources in order to combat Covid-19 were nothing more than a propaganda maneuver."[321] Yet again in September 2020, Russia supported the adoption of a UNGA draft resolution and stated: "Russia fully supports the unequivocal call ... to refrain from unilateral coercive measures against developing countries ... Time will show that if the voices of those who suffer and the international law are ignored, it can only lead to greater problems."[322] In pursuing the termination of sanctions, Russia is also able to frame the West as immoral and in violation of international principles.

In line with this offensive against offensive against unilateral sanctions, Putin has proposed the implementation of "green corridors" to help fight the pandemic. In a September 2020 address to the UNGA, Putin stated:

> I would like to draw attention once again to Russia's proposal to create so-called 'green corridors' free from trade wars and sanctions, primarily for essential goods, food, medicine and personal protective equipment needed to fight the pandemic. In general, freeing the world trade from barriers, bans, restrictions and illegitimate sanctions would be of great help in revitalizing global growth and reducing unemployment.[323]

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[320] "Press Release on Consideration by the UN General Assembly...on Solidarity in Countering COVID-19 Pandemic."
[321] "Press Release on Consideration by the UN General Assembly...on Solidarity in Countering COVID-19 Pandemic."
[322] "Statement by Dmitry Chumakov..." September 11, 2020.
[323] "Video Address by...Vladimir Putin to the 75th Anniversary Session of the United Nations General Assembly."

Notably, RDIF is on a US Treasury sanctions list.[324] In this way, supporting a Resolution 2565, which stressed the importance of global vaccine distribution, implies that U.S. sanctions on RDIF are harmful to global vaccination efforts. While Russia's proposed resolution and UN statements do not explicitly argue for the termination of unilateral sanctions against itself, its argument that sanctions must go through the UN to be legitimate would create a scenario where Russia has permanent veto power against any sanctions proposed at the UN, thus indirectly shielding Russia from sanctions. Similarly, Putin's proposed green corridors would almost certainly include entities like the RDIF, freeing it of sanctions. In this way, Russia has used aspects of the pandemic to pursue a foreign policy challenge that has plagued Russia since 2014.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of Russia's international pandemic responses and the ways in which these responses promote Russia's national interests. All in all, Russia's pandemic responses were formulated to support Russia's ultimate objective of increasing its global power and status. Figure 6 (below) provides a graphic of the multiple facets of Russian national interests and pandemic responses that intersect.

The central component of Russia's response to the coronavirus is Sputnik V. Developed in Moscow, Sputnik V was the first vaccine in the world approved for public use. The vaccine's very name reveals the role that Russia hopes the vaccine will play—a sign of Russia's scientific excellence and a trailblazer for the future. While its premature approval—before Phase III clinical trials had even begun—in August 2020 caused great skepticism and criticism within the global scientific community, Sputnik V was redeemed by Phase III trial results published in *The*

[324] Gigitashvili, "Russia's Covid-19 'Humanitarian Aid' Comes at a Price."

**National Interests**

| Pandemic Responses | Multipolarity (Opposition to West) | Defense of Country and Regime | Great Power Visions | Non-interference and Sovereignty |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sputnik V** | -Targeting EU states for export | | -SpV development<br>-SpV distribution | -Bilateral deal-making<br>-Targeting EU states for export |
| **Political Framing** | -Western struggles<br>-Vaccine Nationalism | -SpV as regime legitimation<br>-Western struggles as regime legitimation | -Soft power boost from SpV and foreign aid<br>-Western struggles | -Vaccine nationalism |
| **Information Warfare** | -Anti-Western narratives<br>-Tolerance warfare | | -Social media promotion | -Anti-EU narratives |
| **Domestic Response** | -"Low" case numbers | -Limited domestic response<br>-Victory Day Parade and Constitutional Referendum<br>-"Low" case numbers as regime legitimation | -"Low" case numbers | |
| **UN Posturing** | -Support of UN/WHO as main response coordinator | | -Support of UN/WHO as main response coordinator | -Opposition to unilateral sanctions<br>-Opposition to Western presence in Syria<br>-Support of UN/WHO as main response coordinator<br>-Bilateral deal-making |

**Figure 6 - Links Between National Interests & Pandemic Responses**

*Lancet* that revealed a 91.6% efficacy. The vaccine's low price point and non-demanding storage requirements make Sputnik V an attractive option for low- and middle-income countries. This market has been expanded by the shortcomings of alternative mechanisms in providing low- and middle-income countries with vaccine access. Both the EU and Covax, which promised to work towards global equitable vaccine access, encountered issues with vaccine procurement and thus were not able to fulfil their initial promises—although Covax has recovered considerably. In particular, Latin America—a region where Russia has traditionally lacked connections—has become a valuable vaccine export market for Russia, paving the way for potential new friendships. Similarly, countries within the EU are increasingly open to importing Sputnik V as the EU continues to stumble in procuring sufficient doses.

In this way, Sputnik V has allowed Russia to pursue great power status and multipolarity. Supplying the vaccine to areas in need helps Moscow increase global influence through making new diplomatic connections. Creating new relationships across the globe—especially in the absence of Western outreach—is a potential step towards increased status and influence. Additionally, any cracks in the EU's cohesion (expressed in countries defying EU authority by purchasing Sputnik V) implicitly supports Russia multipolar worldview, where power is diffused away from the West. Russia wants to undermine the EU and EMA's legitimacy and deepen divisions in the EU. Similarly, prioritizing bilateral deal-making with Sputnik V (especially regarding EU members) reflects a system where states are the primary arbiters of decisions (rather than being subject to supra-state authority like the EMA. Failures of multilateralism are beneficial to Russia both practically (leaving open vaccine markets) and rhetorically (supporting its sovereignty doctrine). Thus, Sputnik V has aided Russia in pursuing great power status and a multipolar world order.

Second, Russia has utilized outcomes of the pandemic for political framing purposes. The pandemic has granted Russia opportunities on several fronts to support well-established narratives and address previous deficiencies. The medical efficacy and global distribution of Sputnik V has helped Russia patch up its tattered image by portraying a country of advanced scientific capabilities and global conscience—a great power on par with the West. As a new resource, Sputnik V provided a unique opportunity to pursue soft power gains. Russia's "foreign aid" was designed to serve that same narrative while also juxtaposing the competence of Western governments in handling the pandemic to domestic and international audiences. This juxtaposition was helped further by the relatively high case numbers and mortality rates recorded in much of the West. Such perceived Western ineptitude is a massive rhetorical opportunity for Russia, as flaws in the current LIO help undermine it, theoretically increasing Russia's security through a weakened West.

Similarly, a loss in Western status is a potential gain in Russian status, aiding in Russia's quest for great power recognition. As such, it is within Russia's interest to promote any failures of the West with regard to the pandemic, including case and mortality statistics and its failure to coordinate a global response. This practice is useful to both international and domestic audiences; as a large part of Putin's domestic regime legitimation hinges on anti-Western rhetoric, pushing narratives of Western failures (especially in contrast to Russian success) supports Putin at home. Finally, the practice of vaccine nationalism inadvertently supports Putin's ideals of a global order where state interests rank supreme and the norm of absolute sovereignty is upheld. If states default to national interests in crises, then why should states let their sovereignty be infringed upon in the first place? Therefore, Russia has been able to harness several outcomes of the pandemic to support pre-existing narratives.

Third, in a time of great uncertainty and information overload, Russia has taken advantage of information resources to pursue its national interests. By aggressively pushing disinformation undermining the safety of Western vaccines and the decisions and intentions of Western leaders, Russia is aiming to simultaneously position Sputnik V as the vaccine of choice while promoting narratives of Western failures that point to a systemic decline of the LIO at large. On the other side of the spectrum, Russia is utilizing a positive information campaign through Sputnik V's social media accounts, primarily Twitter. While not as nefarious as the disinformation campaign, Russia's lack of pharmaceutical advertising regulations allows these accounts to push opinionated narratives to an extent that is impossible for Western vaccines. As such, Sputnik V's social media accounts push stories that cast doubt upon the safety of Western vaccines and that describe Sputnik V's extreme popularity across the world and in the EU, suggesting that EU leadership would forsake the will of its people and member states by denying Sputnik V approval. In this way, Russia has harnessed two information-based strategies to project narratives that align with Russia's foreign policy interests, including the rightful primacy of state sovereignty, Russia's competence and wide popularity (great power status), and the demise of the current global order (in line with Russia's multipolar vision).

Fourth, Russia's domestic response is linked to its foreign policy objectives insofar as it reveals a disparity in the Kremlin's dedication to domestic and international coronavirus measures. While Russia has gone to great lengths to promote Sputnik V abroad, the regime has consistently underemphasized the pandemic at home to avoid the necessity of strict measures that cause economic hardship for the Russian public. Similarly, reported tallies of Covid-19 mortalities and vaccinations are highly misleading, if not intentionally reduced. However they came to be, these lowered numbers help Russia claim superiority to the West (which largely has

the worst numbers) in its response to the pandemic, lending credence to Russia's criticism of the LIO. Similarly, the Russian population's general disinterest in getting vaccinated leaves a high proportion of Sputnik V available for export, a situation that supports foreign policy interests. Therefore, several aspects of Russia's domestic response are linked to its international interests, as the prioritization of pandemic measures—at least from Putin—appears aimed outwards.

In this way, Russia's domestic response was affected by the need to defend the Putin regime. Putin requires a certain amount of public support in order to maintain patronal support. Underemphasizing the pandemic at home (helped by inaccurate mortality and vaccination statistics) has allowed Putin to largely avoid implementing costly measures. Lower case numbers than Western counterparts also promote a legitimizing narrative to domestic audiences. Additionally, the decision to go ahead with the 2020 Constitutional Referendum and Victory Day Parade (both of which contribute to the security of the Putin regime) reflect a prioritization of defending the regime. The accompanying criticism of the Western order supports Russia's desire to establish a multipolar world and gain status from its relatively more competent response. In this way, Russia's domestic response reflects the national interests of defending the regime, gaining great power status, and promoting multipolarity.

Lastly, through resolutions (passed and proposed alike) and official statements at the UN, Russia has molded aspects of the pandemic to support national interests. Reviewing UN documents is especially relevant given Russia's preference for acting through the UN on international matters, a trend which has continued into the pandemic. Russia has pursued greater distribution of Sputnik V, the cease of Western activities in Syria, and the broad termination of Western unilateral sanctions. By pursuing pandemic-related measures through the UN and WHO, Russia acts in line with its interests of multipolarity, non-interference, and great power

status. Using the pandemic as justification to oppose unilateral sanctions and intervention in Syria allows Russian to pursue its interests while simultaneously framing Western actions in a negative light. The alleged illegality of the Western presence in Syria and unilateral sanctions—in addition to the humanitarian harm caused by those actions—support Russia's portrayal of the LIO as unjust. In this way, Russia has utilized the pandemic to reframe multiple pre-existing national interests.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to determine the major actions Russia has taken during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and to analyze how these actions relate to Russia's national interests. Russia's four major national interests are: (1) defense of the country and regime, (2) great power status, (3) a multipolar international system, and (4) non-interference from Western powers. These interests are all united by an ultimate objective of increasing Russia's global power and status. Because Russia perceives Western preponderance and its own national interests as fundamentally in conflict, Russia has largely formulated its pursuit of power and security in terms of reducing the West's. Chapter 2 examines Russia's major responses to the pandemic, including: (1) Russia's development and global distribution of Sputnik V, (2) Russia's framing of itself and the West, (3) Russia's use of information warfare, (4) Russia's domestic response, and (5) Russia's posturing at the UN. Analyzing these actions during the pandemic with Russia's national interests in mind reveals that all of Russia's responses serve pre-existing interests and support the ultimate goal of increasing Russia's global power and status.[325] In some cases, Russia incorporated the pandemic itself as a justification for outcomes that fall in line with pre-existing interests. All in all, Russia's pandemic response was formulated to increase its power and status on the world stage, largely by means of reducing Western power and status.

In this way, this paper has provided insight into a state's behavior during one of the most impactful international events in recent history. The Covid-19 pandemic has delivered a formidable shock to the international system, only amplified by its effect on the global economy. As with past strategic shocks, the pandemic carries great potential to exacerbate weaknesses in the current international system and to accelerate power transitions within the system. Most

[325] See Figure 6 for a graphic depicting how Russia's national interests and pandemic responses intersect.

scholarly analysis in response to the pandemic has focused on the geopolitical tug-of-war between the U.S. and China. However, Russia provides a valuable subject of research given its similar rivalry with the U.S., well-documented opposition to Western preponderance, and desire for power transition. As a state that would like to see its own power increased and Western power diminished, Russia has molded its responses to the pandemic to support this vision and related national interests.

Therefore, the pandemic has provided a useful platform for Russia to double down on its views of the international system. As put by Russia analyst Kadri Liik: "Instinctively, [Putin] is nationalist, unilateralist, and transactional....For him, this is how the world works, and he wants to be vindicated. He wants to be able to tell the West that he has always been right."[326] In many ways, the pandemic has allowed Moscow to take part in such vindication, or at least to push narratives that support Putin's worldview. This vindication does not stem entirely from Russian responses and framing; as evidenced by multiple purchases of Sputnik V in the EU (absent of EU approval), the phenomenon of vaccine nationalism, and the West's essential retreat from global leadership regarding the pandemic, the international system largely pursued national solutions at the expensive of multilateral cooperation. "The fragility of globalism has been underscored as the international community grows more fractious and the liberal order recedes," wrote Dmitri Trenin in March 2020. "The state has reasserted itself as the prime actor on the global scene."[327] Liik echoed this sentiment, noting how "the reemergence of internal border controls between EU countries has been read in Moscow as more proof that the EU is not coping with the challenges

[326] Liik, "Russia's Relative Resilience: Why Putin Feels Vindicated by the Pandemic."
[327] Ibid.

of the modern era...Russia may interpret recent events as confirming the wisdom of self-reliance in a globalised world driven by individual countries' self-interests."[328]

In this way, the pandemic has largely proven useful to Russia from a rhetorical perspective, allowing Moscow to cite real-world examples of its foreign policy philosophy. Similarly, the pandemic has granted Russia opportunities to portray itself as a great power on the world stage, a foreign policy strategy that serves Putin's domestic legitimation well. This opportunity has been embellished by the introduction of new necessities and realities in the international system. For example, the pandemic spawned a global vaccine market that did not exist in 2019—by creating a new resource in Sputnik V, Russia was able to pursue diplomatic, financial, and soft power gains through an entirely novel avenue. Thus, the pandemic has not only caused a disruption to the global system, but also created new realities within the global system for states to exploit. From a Western perspective, insight into Russia's pandemic responses is a reminder of how no foreign policy—and, to a lesser extent, domestic policy—exists in a vacuum. Russia's foreign policy is poised to take advantage of any opportunity left behind by the West and any opportunity to undermine the cohesion and standing of the liberal international order.[329] Therefore, the U.S. and its allies must carefully consider their own responses—and the perception it projects outward—when formulating crisis policy.

The largest avenue for continued research lies in evaluation of outcomes. This paper demonstrates the ways in which Russia designed its pandemic response to pursue its national interests, namely increasing its status and influence on the world stage. However, besides figures relating to Sputnik V's distribution, there is not sufficient information at the time to analyze the success of Russia's efforts. For example, while this paper revealed how Russia has been able to

[328] Ibid.
[329] Stronski and Sokolsky, "The Return of Global Russia: An Analytical Framework."

position Sputnik V as a soft power resource, the efficacy of this strategy is yet unknown. As such, will the pandemic result in a qualitative change in the international system and its structure? Will power distributions shift? More specifically, will Russia's pursuit of influence and counter-Western strategies amount to discernable outcomes, or will Russia's efforts boil down to little more than rhetoric? While Russia may reap great benefits from its efforts, it is also possible that the international system returns to the pre-pandemic status quo once the brunt of the pandemic has passed. Thus, these questions all pose potential avenues for research once more data regarding the pandemic's impact surfaces.

Similarly, Given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the opportunities it provides for status-quo disruption, analyses of other states' foreign policy responses using a similar format are a welcome addition to IR literature. Such a transformative event in the international system is rare, so understanding how states respond in relation to their pre-existing foreign policy objectives provides a valuable case study. Are other states as concerned with foreign policy objectives, or have most focused inward when dealing with the pandemic (as much of the West has)? Similarly, the EU's ultimate decision regarding approval or rejection of Sputnik V within the bloc will provide a rich avenue for future analysis. The decision is certainly a complex one—while some member states support Sputnik V approval, others view it as an undue victory for a regime that should be punished for bad actions like the poisoning and imprisonment of Alexei Navalny.[330] How will the EU balance these competing interests? Similarly, Hungary and Slovakia's decision to act independently of EU framework poses an interesting case study of national interest and multilateralism conflicting in times of crisis. Undoubtably, the full scope of the Covid-19 pandemic's impact will be a subject of research for years to come.

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[330] "Sputnik V: How Russia's Covid Vaccine Is Dividing Europe," *BBC,* April 16, 2021.

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# APPENDIX




**Figure 1**

Countries that have approved Sputnik V for domestic use:

Russia, Belarus, Argentina, Bolivia, Serbia, Algeria, Palestine, Venezuela, Paraguay, Turkmenistan, Hungary, UAE, Iran, Republic of Guinea, Tunisia, Armenia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Republika Srpska, Lebanon, Myanmar, Pakistan, Mongolia, Bahrain, Montenegro, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Gabon, San-Marino, Ghana, Syria, Kyrgyzstan, Guyana, Egypt, Honduras, Guatemala, Moldova, Slovakia, Angola, Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Laos, Iraq, North Macedonia, Kenya, Morocco, Jordan, Namibia, Azerbaijan, Panama, Philippines, Cameroon, Seychelles, Mauritius, Vietnam, Antigua and Barbuda and Mali.

Countries that approved vaccine before *Lancet* article:

Belarus, Argentina, Bolivia, Serbia, Algeria, Palestine, Venezuela, Paraguay, Turkmenistan, Hungary, UAE, Iran, Guinea, and Tunisia.

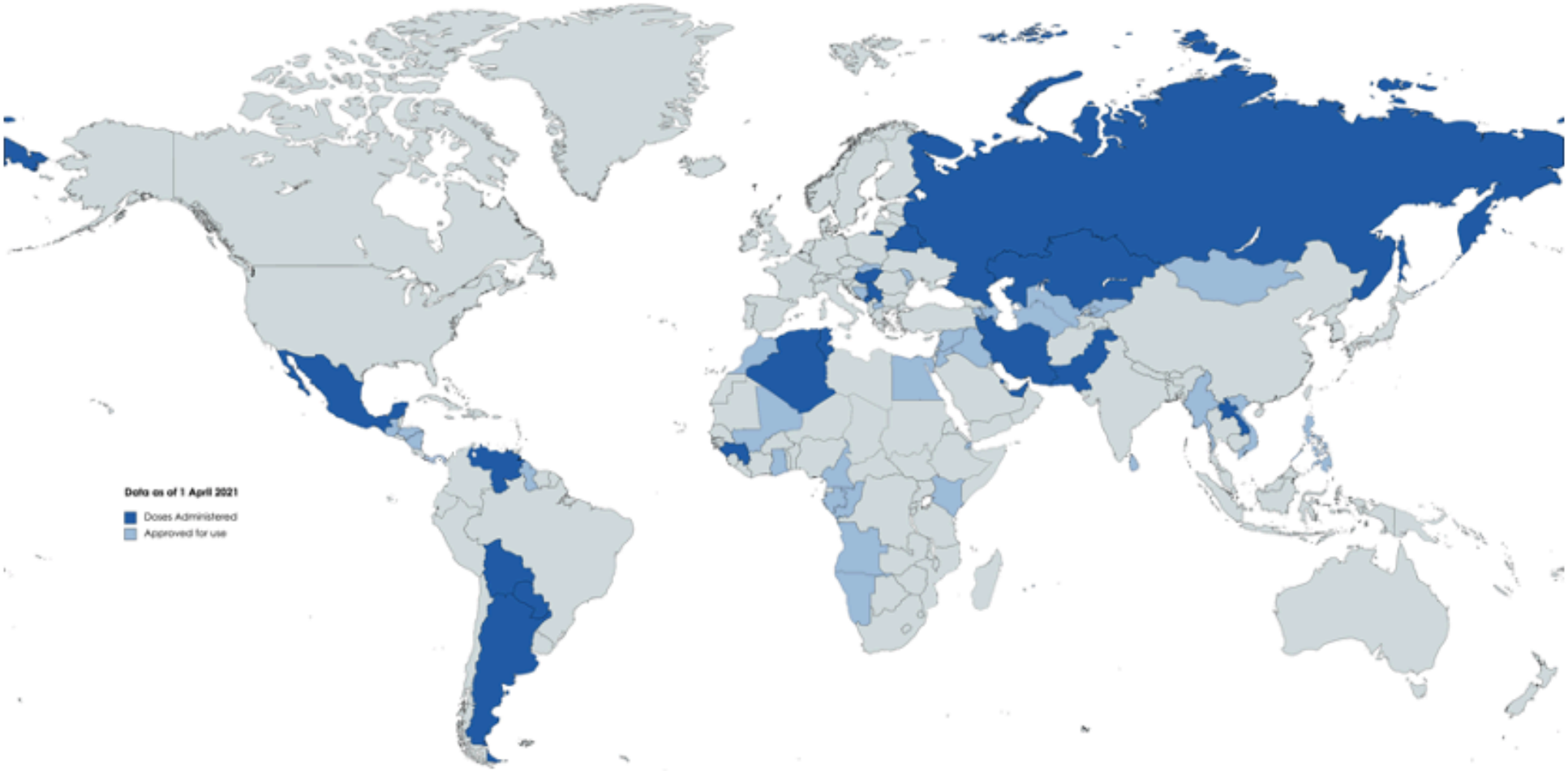


**Figure 2 – Countries that have administered Sputnik V**

Russia, Mexico, Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, Guinea, Algeria, Tunisia, Iran, Pakistan, UAE, Serbia, Hungary, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Laos, Bahrain, Montenegro, San Marino

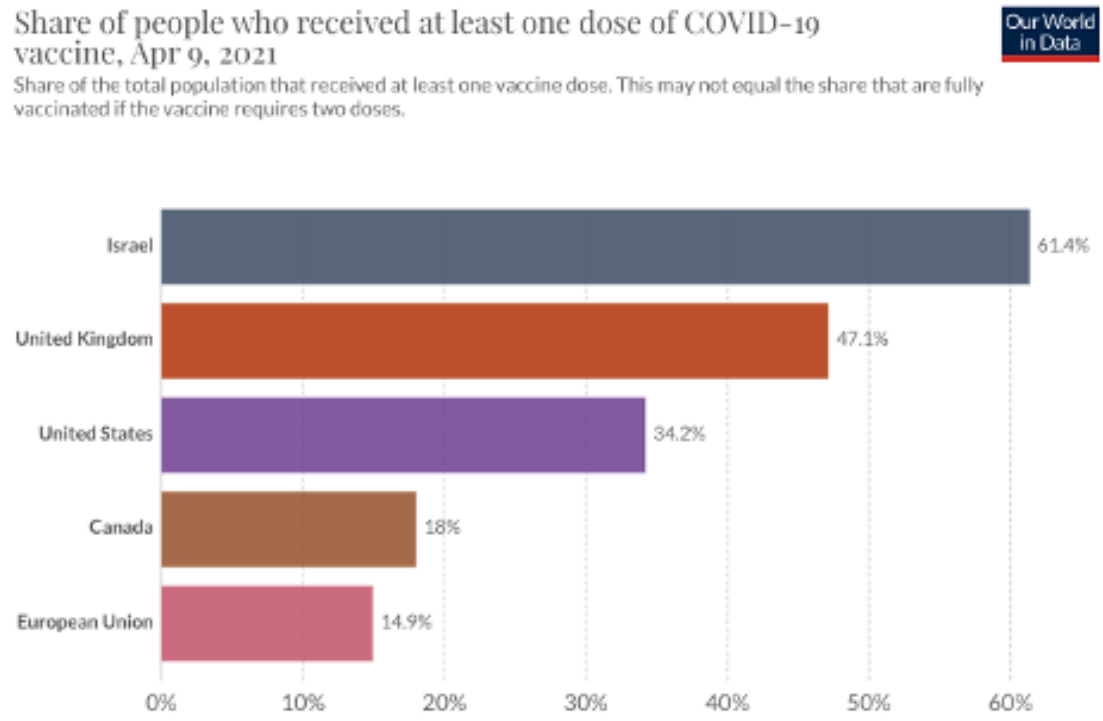


**Figure 3**

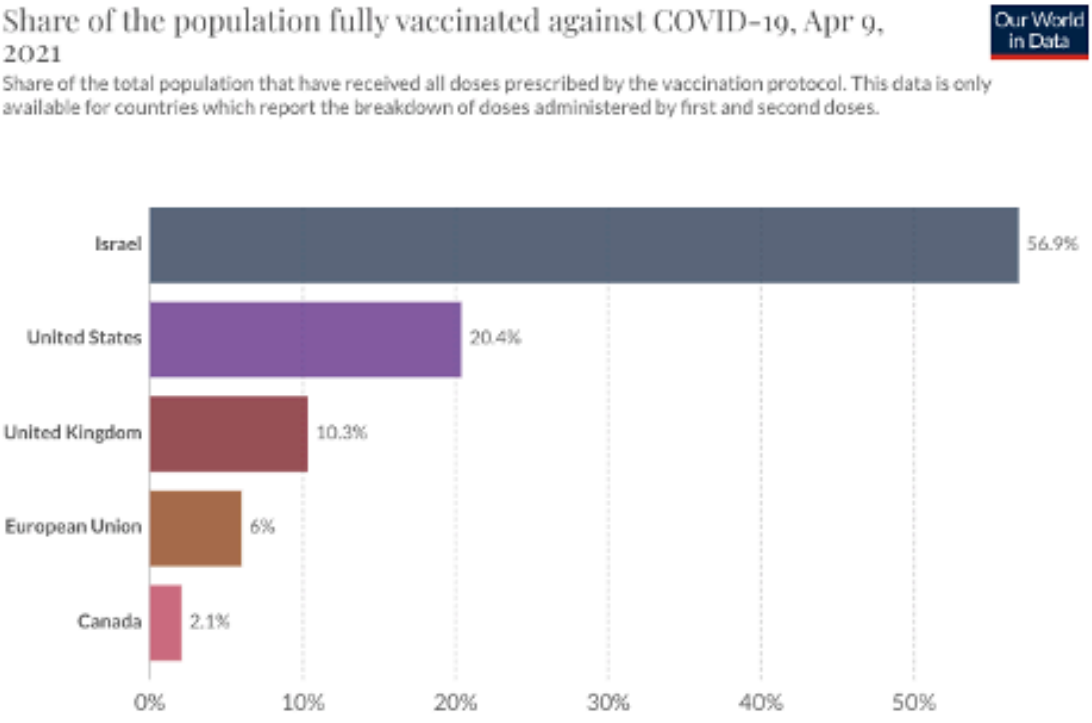


**Figure 4**

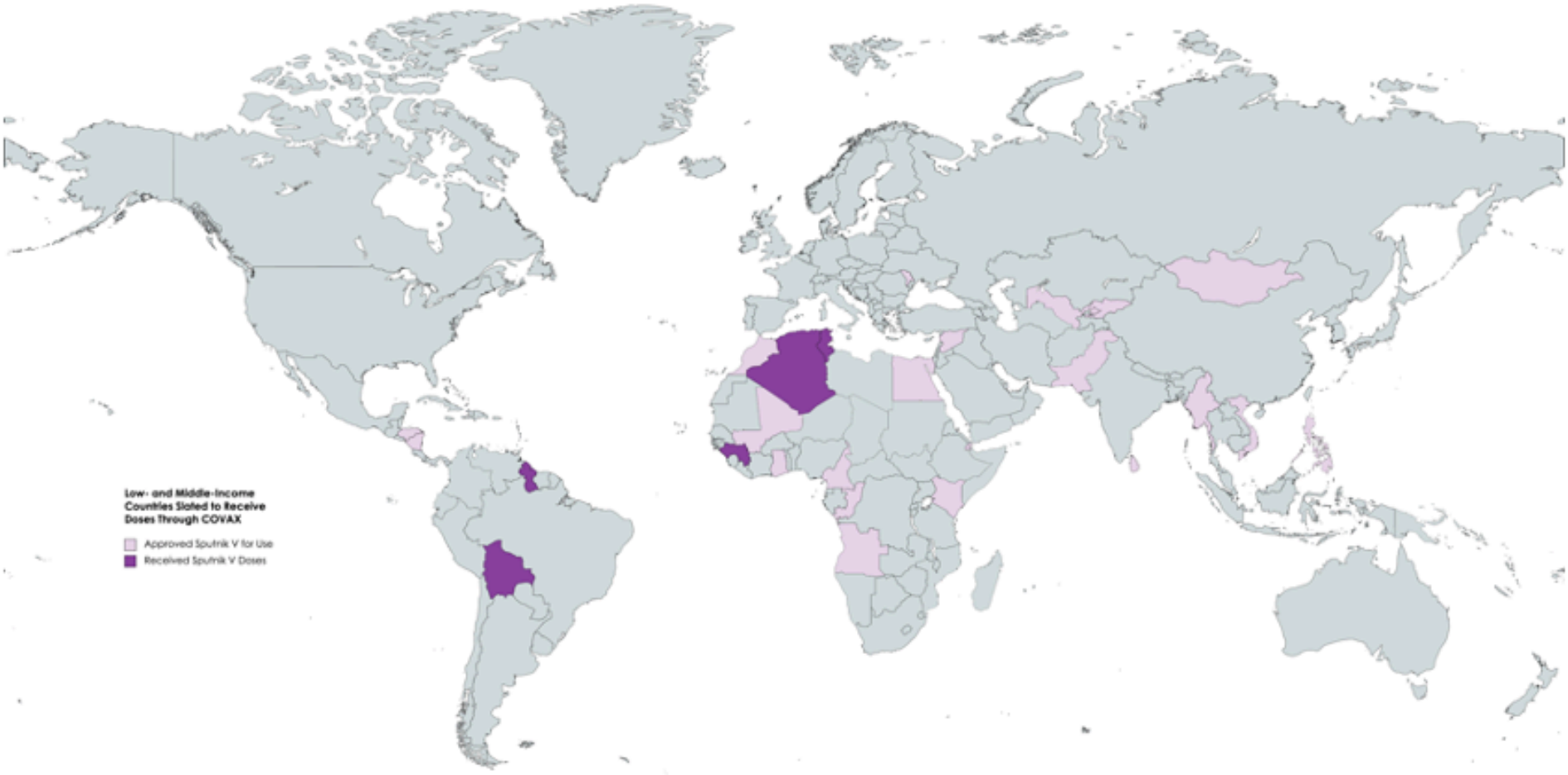


**Figure 5**

Countries that have approved SpV:
Bolivia, Algeria, Guinea, Tunisia, Nicaragua, Myanmar, Pakistan, Mongolia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Republic of the Congo, Uzbekistan, Ghana, Syria, Kyrgyzstan, Guyana, Egypt, Honduras, Moldova, Angola, Djibouti, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Morocco, Philippines, Cameroon, Vietnam, and Mali.

Countries that have received doses of SpV:
Algeria, Bolivia, Guinea, Guyana, and Tunisia.

**National Interests**

| Pandemic Responses | Multipolarity (Opposition to West) | Defense of Country and Regime | Great Power Visions | Non-interference and Sovereignty |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sputnik V** | -Targeting EU states for export | | -SpV development<br>-SpV distribution | -Bilateral deal-making<br>-Targeting EU states for export |
| **Political Framing** | -Western struggles<br>-Vaccine Nationalism | -SpV as regime legitimation<br>-Western struggles as regime legitimation | -Soft power boost from SpV and foreign aid<br>-Western struggles | -Vaccine nationalism |
| **Information Warfare** | -Anti-Western narratives<br>-Tolerance warfare | | -Social media promotion | -Anti-EU narratives |
| **Domestic Response** | -"Low" case numbers | -Limited domestic response<br>-Victory Day Parade and Constitutional Referendum<br>-"Low" case numbers as regime legitimation | -"Low" case numbers | |
| **UN Posturing** | -Support of UN/WHO as main response coordinator | | -Support of UN/WHO as main response coordinator | -Opposition to unilateral sanctions<br>-Opposition to Western presence in Syria<br>-Support of UN/WHO as main response coordinator<br>-Bilateral deal-making |

**Figure 6 - Links Between National Interests & Pandemic Responses**