

COMPASS Policy Brief

VACCINE DIPLOMACY IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES: WHERE DOES THE EU STAND?

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GCRF COMPASS: Comprehensive Capacity-Building in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Central Asia: research integration, impact governance & sustainable communities (ES/P010849/1)



Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
BACKGROUND.....	2
ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE.....	3
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.....	7
REFERENCES.....	8

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The University of Kent is one of the UK's leading academic institutions producing world-class research, rated internationally excellent and leading the way in many fields of study. The University is a semi-collegiate public research university based in Canterbury, United Kingdom. The University was granted its Royal Charter on 4 January 1965 and the following year Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent, was formally installed as the first Chancellor. The university has its main campus north of Canterbury situated within 300 acres (1.2 km²) of park land, housing over 6,000 students, as well as campuses in Medway and Tonbridge in Kent and European postgraduate centres in Brussels, Athens, Rome and Paris. The University is international, with students from 158 different nationalities and 41% of its academic and research staff being from outside the United Kingdom. It is a member of the Santander Network of European universities encouraging social and economic development.

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The Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) COMPASS project has been shortlisted for the **International Collaboration of the Year at the Times Higher Education (THE) Awards 2021**, widely known as 'the Oscars of Higher Education'.

VACCINE DIPLOMACY IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES: WHERE DOES THE EU STAND?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 outbreak has constituted a turning point in global affairs. In addition to the serious global public health crisis it triggered, the vaccine diplomacy has become another aspect of the growing geopolitical rivalries among great powers. The Eastern Partnership (EaP) states were also hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, which came on top of multiple challenges in the region. This policy brief discusses the EU's performance in supporting six Eastern Partnership countries in their fight against the Covid-19 crisis.¹ The brief examines the pandemic situation in the EaP countries and the EU support, and develops two policy recommendations. Accordingly, the EU has the capacity to (1) play an active role in vaccine diplomacy in Eastern Partnership countries; (2) invest in resilience and local partnership in Eastern neighbourhood beyond Covid-19. This would not only help addressing a serious health crisis, but also boost EU's claim to act as a responsible normative power in its neighbourhood and improve its credibility in the age of geopolitical tensions.

Keywords: vaccine diplomacy; Eastern Partnership countries; Covid-19; geopolitical rivalries; resilience; local ownership.

Abbreviations: EaP, Eastern Partnership; MENA, Middle East and North Africa.

BACKGROUND

The Covid-19 outbreak has constituted a turning point in global affairs. The pandemic posed unforeseen public health challenges. States all around the world implemented measures to stop the spread of the virus, imposed compulsory quarantines, and rushed for supplying protective equipment for their healthcare workers and citizens. Covid-19 pandemic disrupted supply chains, caused economic slowdown, and aggravated social anxiety. Furthermore, the side effects of the pandemic in international politics were far-reaching and substantial. The pandemic accelerated already existing geopolitical faultlines. Vaccine diplomacy, meaning the use of vaccines by producer states to gain political

¹ Although Belarus has been part of the EaP initiative since 2009, the country announced the suspension of its participation in the EaP on 28th of June.

influence over others, has become yet another instrument and a form of rivalry among major powers in regional and global politics.²

The power shifts to the non-Western countries, the relative decline of the US hegemony and the associated democratic backsliding across the world have been undermining multilateralism and international co-operation – a trend started before the pandemic.³ As expected, the Covid-19 crisis only exacerbated this trend. In the initial phases of the pandemic, several economically developed countries adopted a protectionist stance. For instance, Trump administration in the US failed to take active policy measures and hesitated to lead international community in supporting developing countries that struggle to supply protective equipment, medical masks, and vaccines. Some other western countries resorted to vaccine nationalism in later stages – rather than devising a global strategy to a global public health issue.

On the other hand, pandemic opened new space for key actors, such as China, the EU, Russia, and the US, to exert their influence through different means. The vaccine diplomacy has become a new battlefield in great power politics with significant repercussions in several regions such as Western Balkans and Middle East and North Africa.⁴

ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

The Eastern Partnership countries also hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic, which came on top of multiple challenges in the region. The last decade witnessed serious geopolitical tensions in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. The Georgian war in 2008, the Ukrainian crisis since 2014, the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020, and recent mass social protests in Belarus altogether posed serious challenges to the EU's partners in the region.

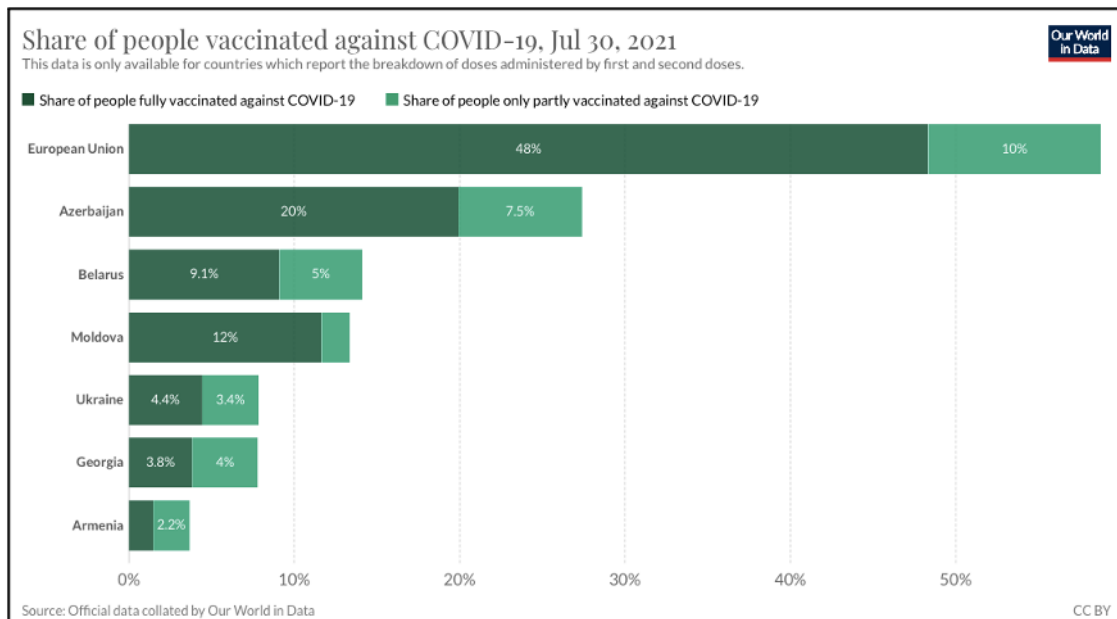
The pandemic, in such an adverse backdrop, further disturbed socio-political stability and economic prosperity in the region. The six Eastern partnership countries are lagging when it comes to

² In principle, vaccine diplomacy may take a benign form enabling more effective co-operation among vaccine producing states to deliver vaccines to the countries that do not have local production capabilities. In the case of Covid-19, however, vaccine diplomacy has taken a more competitive form feeding into the already existing geopolitical competition.

³ For instance, see Tanja A. Borzel and Michael Zurn, “Contestations of the Liberal International Order: From Liberal Multilateralism to Postnational Liberalism,” *International Organization* 75(2), 2021: 282 – 305.

⁴ Michael Jennings, “Vaccine diplomacy: how some countries are using COVID to enhance their soft power”, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/vaccine-diplomacy-how-some-countries-are-using-covid-to-enhance-their-soft-power-155697>

vaccination. For instance, according to *Our World in Data*, as of 30 July 2021, the EU member states managed to fully vaccinate almost half of their population, whereas almost 60 percent administered at least one dose. However, only 20 percent of the population were fully vaccinated in Azerbaijan. The figures are even lower in other Eastern partnership countries – 9.1 percent in Belarus; 12 percent in Moldova; 4.4 percent in Ukraine; 3.8 percent in Georgia; and just 1.5 percent in Armenia (see figure below).



Source: Our World in Data, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>

The reported Covid-19 cases are estimated to be far from reflecting the actual numbers across the world due to testing problems, statistical issues and incomplete reporting because of political concerns. However, even the official numbers suggest that the cumulate number of cases, as of the end of July 2021, are 2.33 million in Ukraine; 445 thousand in Belarus; 416 thousand in Georgia; 343 thousand in Azerbaijan; 259 thousand in Moldova; and 230 thousand in Armenia.⁵

Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the importance of more active support by the EU of the region. The EU launched Eastern Partnership in 2009 to develop extensive economic, trade, political, and civil society relations with six post-Soviet states through bilateral and multilateral platforms. The latest Eastern Partnership strategy revision in 2020 pledged “to make its [the EU’s] governance more

⁵ Data from *Our World in Data*, as of 30 July 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>

effective and tangible.”⁶ However, the Eastern Partnership has not worked as expected on several accounts as some of the declared aims were not entirely materialized.⁷ The partnership was initiated to improve good governance, rule of law and connectivity in six partner countries. Despite a decade has passed there appears limited improvement in rule of law and democratic governance in those countries.⁸

At the same time, in addition to Russia’s long-term presence since the dissolution of the USSR, China has also become much more influential in the region over the last decade.⁹ For example, the EU remained silent on the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict – the vacuum filled by Russia and to a lesser extent Turkey. More recently, Russia and China have acted more proactively in the EU’s neighbourhood to provide Covid-19 related assistance. Western Balkans, the region which is likely to be next in the EU membership queue, is a good example. The EU first delivered vaccines in the region in May 2021, but this came later than China and Russia exported vaccines to Serbia and other Western Balkan nations.¹⁰ As stated in an ECFR report, “the EU was criticised for its perceived inability to help neighbouring countries, while China and Russia made great show of delivering medical aid equipment and masks to Europe’s neighbours.”¹¹

Based on this background, vaccine diplomacy might be a chance for the EU to exert its actorness in the region through meaningful ways. The Eastern neighbours of the EU have expressed their interest in the vaccine support from the EU, except for Belarus. Lukashenko agreed with Russia to administer Sputnik V. Ukraine and Moldova, on the other hand, approached the EU to get much-needed vaccine support.¹² Azerbaijan reached a deal with China and the first batch of vaccines arrived on 1 April 2021. Chinese Ambassador to Azerbaijan stated that “China and Azerbaijan have been supporting each other in the COVID-19 pandemic, expressing hope that the Chinese vaccines would help Azerbaijan beat the virus

⁶ For a comprehensive analysis, see Elena Korosteleva, Irina Petrova and Igor Merheim-Eyre, “The Eastern Partnership 3.0: Change or Continuity?” 24 April 2020, <https://www.dahrendorf-forum.eu/the-eastern-partnership-3-0-change-or-continuity/>

⁷ For a systematic and up-to-date analysis on variegated democratic governance performance of EaP countries, see Michael Emerson, Denis Cenușă, Tamara Kovziridze, Veronika Movchan, eds., *The Struggle for Good Governance in Eastern Europe* (CEPS and Rowman & Littlefield International, 2021).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ A nuanced and country-specific analysis is warranted, though. For instance, arguably, Russia has become less influential in Georgia and Ukraine.

¹⁰ For a review see, Dusan Stojanovic, “EU delivers vaccine jabs to Balkans after China and Russia,” *AP News*, 4 May 2021.

¹¹ Asli Aydintaşbaş, Joanna Hosa, Tefta Kelmendi, Kadri Liik, Engjellushe Morina, Nicu Popescu, and Pavel Slunkin, “The geopolitics of covid vaccines in Europe’s eastern neighbourhood,” 27 January 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-geopolitics-of-covid-vaccines-in-europes-eastern-neighbourhood/>

¹² Ibid.

at an early date, and restore economic and social development.”¹³ Armenia used both Russia’s Sputnik V and AstraZeneca provided through COVAX scheme in March 2021.¹⁴ Based on the available vaccination data, Azerbaijan appears to be ahead of the other Eastern Partnership countries (see figure above).

The EU recently adopted a new strategy toward the region based “on the five long-term objectives, with resilience at its core.”¹⁵ As Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi stated, the EU’s “new agenda will support socioeconomic recovery after COVID-19 pandemic, strengthen economic relations and build trade routes between the EU and partner countries.”¹⁶ According to the renewed agenda, the EU will be granting €2.3 billion to boost recovery in the region “with a potential to mobilise up to €17 billion in public and private investments.”¹⁷ However, as the EU moved relatively slower than Russia and China in the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, thirteen EU member states asked for a more proactive EU approach to better support six Eastern Partnership countries.¹⁸ In their joint letter to the European Commission, according to *Euractiv*, the thirteen member states demanded the EU to “go beyond current initiatives and facilitate access to the vaccine to another important part of the European neighbourhood, such as the Eastern Partnership.”¹⁹ It is important for the EU to support Eastern Partnership countries because this would help stabilize EU’s neighbourhood. Also, given the fact that the EU’s model of governance is contested by Russia and China, the EU’s presence in Eastern Partnership countries will not only provide much-needed support for democratic governance in the region but also help the EU remain a credible actor in its neighborhood. Based on this background, the following section provides two policy recommendations for the EU to play a more proactive role in its Eastern neighbourhood.

¹³ “First batch of COVID-19 vaccines purchased from China arrives in Azerbaijan,” Xinhua, 1 April 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/asiapacific/2021-04/01/c_139853075.htm

¹⁴ RFERL, Armenia Gets First Batch Of AstraZeneca Vaccines Under COVAX Scheme,” 29 March 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/armenia-covid-vaccine-astrazeneca-covax/31175978.html>

¹⁵ “Eastern Partnership: a renewed agenda for recovery, resilience and reform underpinned by an Economic and Investment plan,” https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/ip_21_3367

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ These EU member states are Sweden, Estonia, Latvia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Croatia, Denmark, Romania, Finland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania.

¹⁹ Alexandra Brzozowski, “Thirteen countries call on EU to support Eastern Partnership vaccine efforts”, 6 January 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/thirteen-countries-call-on-eu-to-support-eastern-partnership-vaccine-efforts/>

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Play an active role in vaccine diplomacy in Eastern Partnership countries. In theory, the EU is well-positioned to make a difference in the region by playing an active role in vaccine diplomacy and can create positive impact by way of supplying protective equipment, vaccines, and logistical support through proper storage and effective distribution of vaccines. However, in the initial phases of the pandemic, the EU lagged behind other states – Russia and China in particular – in vaccine diplomacy due to ever-present collective action problems. As Juncos states, “the pandemic has patently illustrated global shifts of power and tested EU foreign policy once again.”²⁰ That being said, in terms of material capabilities, the EU is still among the most capable actors in the world. The EU member states could play a more visible role in Eastern Partnership countries through financial and medical support. This would not only help addressing a serious health crisis, but also boost the EU’s claim to act as a responsible power in its neighbourhood and improve its credibility in the age of geopolitical tensions.

Invest in resilience and local partnership in Eastern neighbourhood beyond Covid-19: As summarized in the previous section, the EU’s new plan to support recovery in Eastern Partnership countries after Covid-19 is an important step in the right direction as the region needs jobs, investments, and further economic connectivity with the EU single market. This new initiative should also come with a coherent political agenda clearly operationalizing “resilience” and “local ownership” as central concepts to ensure credible commitment on the part of the EU.²¹ The stop-go nature of the Eastern Partnership over the last decade did not help a lot to communicate a strong message and long-term plan, particularly when it comes to the political trajectory in Ukraine and Belarus. The EU should deepen partnership with non-state organizations in EaP countries and invest in institution-building by empowering local actors at a time when democratic backsliding and geopolitical contests have become more visible in the EU’s neighbourhood.

²⁰ Ana Juncos, “Vaccine Geopolitics and the EU’s Ailing Credibility in the Western Balkans,” 8 July 2021, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/07/08/vaccine-geopolitics-and-eu-s-ailing-credibility-in-western-balkans-pub-84900>

²¹ On “resilience” and “local ownership” in EU external governance see, Elena A. Korosteleva, “Paradigmatic or critical? Resilience as a new turn in EU governance for the neighbourhood,” *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 23(3), 2020: 682–700.

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