

The EU's response vs. Chinese vaccine diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe

Goran ILIK*, Vesna SHAPKOSKI**

Abstract

This paper analyses the initial critical points of the EU's weakness in quickly responding to the crisis and the Chinese assertiveness in using vaccine diplomacy to achieve European political objectives. With the case study based on indicative research on public opinion, the paper provides a more profound understanding of the impact of Chinese-related activities in the CEE region, particularly concerning EU coherence and solidarity. The paper concludes that the Chinese presence in Europe via "vaccine diplomacy" threatens the unity of the EU and the CEE region.

Keywords: pandemic, strategy, vaccine, power, China, EU

Introduction

Desperate times call for desperate measures. Domestic and foreign policies sometimes fail to amortize crises without significant consequences, especially if they come from areas naively placed in the category of issues that do not have critical supranational significance. Most national and international strategies and policies have been tested and analysed to operate under more or less normal circumstances. These strategies or policies fall into displacement when unforeseen situations cause change at all levels. When we think of the crisis that characterized our lifetime, we usually think of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disease that changed every aspect of our lives and brought the world as we knew it to an end. The COVID - 19 "has rapidly spread worldwide. It gained a pandemic status and is currently affecting, without distinction, the most (and the least) important world powers" (Piffer and Cruz, 2020, p. 56). Moreover "competition resulting from the coronavirus pandemic can take shape at the geopolitical and ideological level (...) the COVID - 19 pandemic and its management in European countries have also affected the European Union

* Goran ILIK is professor at the at the University St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola, North Macedonia; email: goran.ilik@uklo.edu.mk. ORCID: 0000-0003-3501-1386 (corresponding author)

** Vesna SHAPKOSKI is PhD(c) at the University St. Kliment Ohridski in Bitola, North Macedonia; e-mail: vesna.shapkoski@uklo.edu.mk. ORCID: 0000-0002-7705-2808

(...) Despite all the efforts made to strengthen this Union, it faces problems and challenges in internal cohesion and international mapping” (Ababakr, 2022, pp. 270-273).

The coronavirus outbreak has turned social life on its head, and we would not be far off the mark if we said it was the end of the world as we knew it. It was a blow to global institutions’ efficiency and capacity, among other things. They seem to have let down humanity when people needed joint action. Inevitably, one of the most vocal accusations was levelled against the European Union, alleging that it had abandoned its member states and those smaller and weaker countries who had relied on its assistance.

In the first two months of the COVID-19 outbreak, when transmission seemed to be a controllable threat within China’s borders, the European Commission (2020) acted following its values of solidarity and cooperation and decided to send aid to China in the form of medical supplies and equipment. At the time, this attitude was not widely known, and where it was, it received little attention because it seemed like a good move following the key objectives of the EU. As we later realized, those were the last seconds before the storm, which briefly reached a scale no one could have imagined. The epidemic swiftly became politicized as the virus swept Europe and the world. The pandemic became a driving force in China’s interactions with its most powerful adversaries and partners. When the pandemic hit Europe in the early months of 2020, practically every EU country followed its laws in a last-ditch effort to avoid calamity. While some quickly implemented medical equipment export limits, others, such as China, were forced to rely on supplies from other nations. Following the initial shock of the outbreak, the long-awaited vaccines came out. It was a route out of the pandemic for humanity and a way out of the EU’s terrible image following the initial failure. The plan was for the vaccine rollout to be a collaborative and comprehensive process showing the Union’s best light of cohesion and cooperation. One more time, that did not happen. Therefore, this research addresses the hypothesis that the fragility of the EU’s unity “pushes” EU/European countries toward other foreign influences, as is the case with China.

The main research questions elaborated on in the paper are:

RQ1: How did the EU fail to handle the pandemic-provoked crisis in 2020-2021?

RQ2: How did China use the initial EU weakness to increase its presence and influence in the CEE region as a particularly critical point?

The research provides a theoretical analysis of the EU’s initial pandemic response and the first major failure in Spain and Italy as the major blows to its coherence and solidarity. Furthermore, the theoretical analysis continues with the Chinese assertive (mask and) vaccine diplomacy as the primary tool to increase its presence in the most vulnerable European countries, particularly in the CEE countries. With the case study based on online research on public opinion, the research provides original indicative data on the impact of the EU’s handling of vaccine distribution in the CEE region on the public perception in the context of

China's vaccine diplomacy. Finally, the research provides conclusions on the most critical weaknesses of the EU in handling emerging crises, on the Chinese assertiveness in using this crisis to impose and increase its influence in the region and the way forward for the EU to learn from mistakes and strengthen its coherence and solidarity.

1. The first months of the pandemic as a threat to the solidarity and coherence of the EU

The EU is often defined as one of the most complex political actors, globally. This reference derives from the multi-level and very complicated institutional structures that it is made up of, making it an authentic invention that has formed its interpretation and arrangement of internal and external affairs. Solidarity is a value that underpins the EU and most member states. Many clauses in the EU treaties directly mention solidarity, including the Union's goals and purposes, and particular policies where the 'principle' or 'spirit' of solidarity is to be applied (European Commission, 2018, p. 5)

Coherence, or the capability to unite all of the EU's Member States into unified action, is another critical element. The coherence comes from "the necessity for harmonization of parallel functioning political areas and managing implications of structural complexity" (Hill and Smith, 2011, p. 102).

Since the coronavirus outbreak, practically every speech, declaration, meeting, and almost every phrase, including the word "COVID-19" have begun with the words "unprecedented", "unpredicted", or any other synonym that expresses humanity's surprise at the virus's presence. However, Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative, stated: "the coronavirus pandemic was predictable [because] infectious disease experts have warned us for years about the acceleration in the spread of epidemics. This is the third novel beta coronavirus in the past 20 years that has been able to cross the species barrier" (Borrell, 2020, p. 2). Consequently, the obvious question arises: How come we did not see this coming?

It took almost two months to move its bureaucratic machinery properly since the announcement of the global state of emergency of international concern on January 30. However, specific actions related to the threat in this period, such as activation of the IPCR¹, several meetings of the Health Council (Employment, Social Policy, Health, and Consumer Affairs Council) were taken and some recommendations on travelling in and out of the EU as well as assessments of the possible impact on different areas such as industry, education, etc. were made. However, none of these meant direct measures for rapid response to the spread of

¹ IPCR (Integrated Political Crisis Response) is the EU's framework for coordinating sectoral crises. Through this institution, the Presidency of the Council directs the political reaction to the crisis to the highest level.

the virus, although it was evident, every single day, that the numbers of infected and deceased people would only go higher. As a result, “the first instinct of Europe’s nations has been to turn inwards, closing borders and hoarding supplies without much thought for coordination” (Vestager, 2020).

One of the most vigorous blows to the EU’s coherence and solidarity happened on March 26, when Germany and the Netherlands stood out firmly against the initiative of Italy, Spain, Portugal, and France to issue common bonds to help finance an economic stimulus during a virtual summit of the European Council held by video conference (Rios *et al.*, 2020). As if this was not enough trouble, sharing medical equipment and border controls caused additional misunderstanding and opposed stands. This situation was followed by high politicians’ reactions on the EU and at the national level. The former European Parliament President, David Sassoli² raised the question of the disunity in the face of the pandemic, asking: “Countries that are still hesitant about this – whom will you sell your technology or tulips to if the European market is not protected?”. He posted this rhetorical question directed to Germany and the Netherlands on his Twitter profile, thus opposing “coronabonds” to re-launch the EU economy. This was the first of numerous reports that tracked critical occasions in the EU’s struggle to achieve unity and cohesion by following its fundamental principles.

When referring to the EU’s inability to assist its own countries in recovering from the crisis, many remarks and studies from this period will point to this specific issue. The upshot of this political saga was brought to light when the European Council forwarded it to the Eurogroup to react to the coronavirus’s economic consequences. The Eurogroup, however, was up to the task, which resulted in the following:

- April 9, 2020 - The Eurogroup has unveiled a 500 billion-euro support package. The report proposes three immediate safety nets for workers, businesses, and member states (Eurogroup, 2020);
- April 14, 2020 - The Council adopted two amendments to the EU budget for 2020 to provide an additional € 3.1 billion in response to the crisis (Council of the EU, 2020).

2. The first major pandemic-provoked crisis within the EU

Throughout the year 2020, we all heard about governments worldwide attempting to enact many new preventive measures in the hope of averting the “Italian and Spanish scenario”. What exactly did this mean? How and why did these particular countries get hit so hard, and who is to blame?

² Sassoli, D. (twitter status) (2020), (retrieved from https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1243930262720962562?s=20&t=fYUU7JcyXRijMYWwZ0MZcw).

Spain and Italy were Europe's two worst-hit countries at the beginning of the pandemic and, at a particular time, the world's second outbreak point after China. Unfortunately for them, the government officials' nonchalance and self-confidence, way beyond reasonable, was another specificity shared by these two, especially in the first critical period of the virus spread. The term "unexpected" was used as an excuse by China and other surrounding nations (South Korea, Singapore) that experienced the first virus epidemic. Italy and Spain should have handled it better and deployed previously proven efficient approaches.

The first of many errors in Italy's reaction to the epidemic was underestimating the virus's spread and failing to take proper action as the situation escalated. At the end of February, as the first cases of local transmission were appearing in Northern Italy, some politicians decided to make bold public appearances. Nicola Zingaretti, the leader of the center-left Democratic Party, who was later diagnosed with coronavirus, appeared in a Milan bar having a late afternoon *aperitivo*, supporting the concept that Italy should avoid "destroying life or spreading panic" (Besser, 2020).

To further worsen what was rising as a hardly controllable crisis, Italy failed to act in coordination with the level of emergency. When the government issued the first decree of closing northern Italy on March 8 (Lowen, 2020), the first reaction of the citizens of this region was to rush into a massive escape to southern Italy, unstopably spreading the virus to other regions. The government also had disputes with regional governors, calling for a more extensive response. The lack of coordination in fighting the virus at a national level was very strongly replicated at the local level, which was particularly emphasized in the crisis management of Lombardy and Veneto. These two neighbouring regions were Italy's initial outbreak point. Lombardy, considered Italy's wealthiest region, had a very high rate of registered cases and deaths for almost two months. Veneto scaled significantly better, lowering the cases in a brief period. This result was achieved because of a comprehensive approach based on rigorous testing and a strong focus on home care, which minimized hospital pressure. According to experts, the so-called "Veneto model" could have been adopted early to define regional and national policies. That happened, however, less than a month after the outbreak began.

The same day, a quarantine zone was declared across Northern Italy. The Spanish government encouraged people to participate in International Women's Day protests. Consequently, thus disastrous from this perspective," thousands of women across Spain marched (...) against gender inequality to mark International Women's Day, despite concerns the gatherings could help the spread of coronavirus" (Rodriguez, 2020). Three ministers and the first lady (part of the Women's day march) tested positive for coronavirus (CUE, 2020). Spain's *Equality Minister Irene Montero* tested positive only four days after the march (CUE, 2020). The country was under total lockdown on March 14, six days after International Women's Day (Rolfe and Morris, 2020). Spain had fallen behind in testing by the time the emergency was announced and could only diagnose the most dangerous diseases or

those impacting essential employees. Later, the country followed Veneto's lead and developed a strategy to test the entire population.

The EU, on the other hand, failed to act collectively at a time when these two countries desperately needed a show of unity, leaving them no choice but to implement their limitations, border controls, and bans on the export of medical equipment. At the beginning of the crisis, Italy seemed to receive more help from China than from its EU partners, and that diminished the EU's reputation among Italian citizens. As if this was not bad enough, Italy suggested that the EU issue "coronabonds", backed by France, Spain, and seven other eurozone.³ The Germans and the Dutch were vocal in opposing the proposal. This sparked doubts about the EU's founding values and a rise in Euroskepticism, particularly in Italy.

On this occasion, Emmanuel Macron told the Financial Times that "the EU had no choice but to issue common debt with a common guarantee. The alternative was the collapse of the EU as a political project" (Mallet and Khalaf, 2020). Meanwhile, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission sent a heartfelt apology to Italy, on behalf of the EU, for letting the country down (Gill, 2020).

3. From medical equipment to vaccines – all the faces of the wolf warrior

As the coronavirus threat intensified throughout Europe, the rate of cases declined in China, so the Chinese government and major companies, such as Huawei and Alibaba, came out with help for Italy and other European countries. China used the moment to discursively promote its narrative of the greatest and only reliable power, an ideology whose acceptance can only benefit the world's nations by applying soft power and playing the card of emotional concern for others in difficult times. And that was when "mask diplomacy" became popularized. Thousands of masks, medical equipment, and personnel were delivered first to the European Union's worst-affected countries, then to other member states and adjacent countries. These were followed by a mass media campaign, which daily showed footage of Chinese politicians and diplomats worldwide delivering much-needed aid to the most affected countries.

Several vital moments of this process confirm that this was not just a helping hand to overcome the crisis by the responsible world power but a strategy for the long-term and sustainable promotion of the Chinese discourse in Europe and beyond. The aid came first and foremost to countries already partnered with China. Italy was not only the country hit the hardest by the coronavirus in Europe. It was the first major European economy and G-7 country to join the Belt and Road initiative in 2019. Serbia, which has strong economic and political relations with China, but more

³ A debt instrument would allow all countries that use a common currency to borrow together. This instrument would allow risk to be pulled between countries with high credit ratings, such as Germany and the Netherlands, and those with low credit ratings, such as Italy.

importantly, which has pompously marked every act of solidarity to and from China since the pandemic, received the first and most significant assistance from the Western Balkans. Furthermore, such assistance has consistently been accompanied by emphasizing China as a responsible power, reinforcing the concept of unity and a shared future, alluding to US and EU failures to do so on time. In an attempt to deflect attention away from the accusations levelled at China for failing to respond quickly enough to save millions of lives, there was not a single statement concerning the virus's origins in all of this.

The Chinese influence during the pandemic was mainly present in Central and Eastern Europe, which is no coincidence. As an instrument for realizing the Belt and Road Initiative, China established the 17+1 mechanism⁴ launched in 2012 to increase cooperation with the CEE countries. During the summit in February 2021, among other things, President Xi Jinping "...offered its vaccines to CEE countries...But rather than setting the vaccine quota for the region, (he) said heads of state or government would have to make individual requests" (Karásková, 2021). It resulted in China increasingly distributing its vaccines in the CEE countries, aside from the fact they were not approved by the European Medical Agency (EMA). This was parallel to the EU delays in vaccine distribution, which left many countries from the CEE region with vaccine shortages. While the EU struggled to negotiate and implement contracts with vaccine manufacturers, China was already distributing thousands of doses of its vaccines amidst the increasing third wave. One more time, great media coverage, pushing thousands of CEE residents to consider China as the great saviour amidst the fragile and insecure EU, followed. The Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, posted a photo of himself being inoculated with a Chinese manufactured vaccine, Sinopharm (Leigh, 2021).

4. Case study – are vaccines only the long-awaited rescue from the pandemic, or is CEE changing sides?

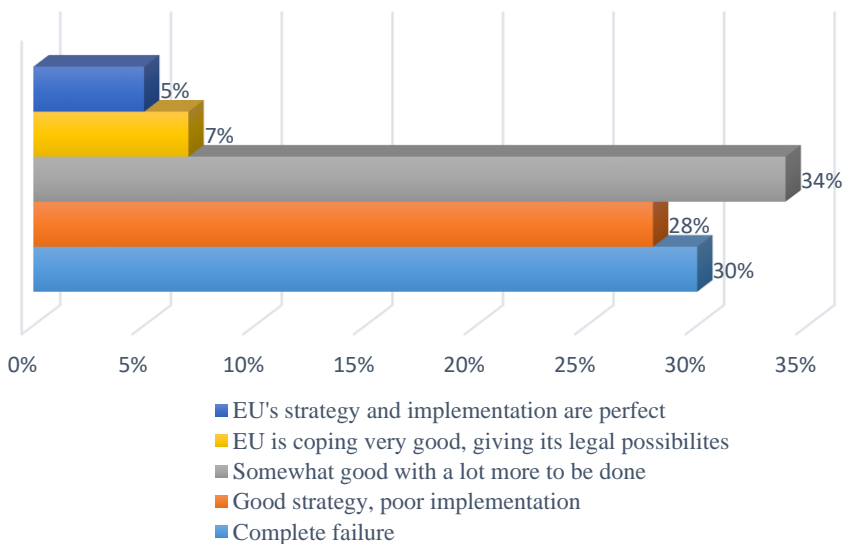
An online survey method was utilized to better evaluate the impact on public perception of the EU's handling of vaccine distribution in the CEE region in the context of China's vaccine diplomacy. Exploratory studies are typically done for three purposes; "to satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for better understanding, to test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study, and to develop the methods to be employed in any subsequent studies" (Crossman, 2019). The results obtained from this research are *indicative* and can be used to implement more complex and more comprehensive research in the future.

⁴17+1 mechanism consists of China, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

The online survey was conducted for 5 weeks (between May 25, 2021 – July 1, 2021) with 83 respondents. More than half of the respondents were aged 30–44 (61%), 34% were younger - 18–29, and 5% were aged 45+. 51% of the respondents came from CEE region countries, 42% from Europe – non-CEE countries, and 8% from other countries worldwide.

The respondents gave divided opinions regarding the EU’s coping with its vaccine strategy, which bends stronger toward the negative impression. Most of them (34%) chose the neutral “It is somewhat good, with a lot more to be done” answer, 30% rating it as a “Complete failure”, 30% rating it as a “Complete failure”, 28% chose the “The strategy is good, but the implementation is poor” option, 7% having a more favourable impression and choosing “EU is coping very well, giving it legal possibilities” and only 5% choosing the affirmative option that “*The strategy and the EU’s coping with its implementation are perfect*”.

Figure 1. How do you consider the EU’s coping with its vaccine strategy?

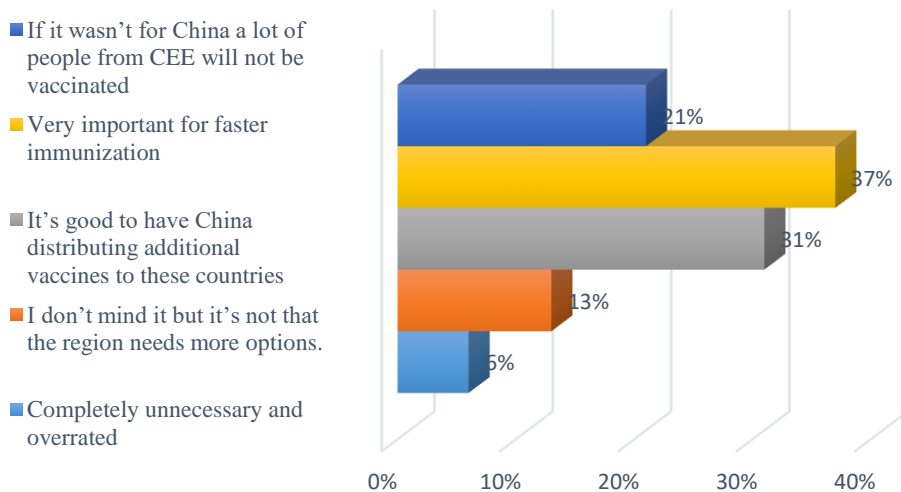


Source: Online survey “EU against China’s vaccine diplomacy in CEE”

Regarding China’s vaccine presence in the CEE region, 37% of the respondents consider it “Very important for faster immunization”, 31% chose the neutral option “It is good to have China distributing additional vaccines to these countries”, and 21% chose the most pro-China option that “If it were not for China, many people from the CEE would not be vaccinated”. Again, pro-EU answers were much fewer, with 13% of the respondents stating, “I do not mind it, but it is not that

the region needs more options” and only 6% choosing the “Completely unnecessary and overrated” option.

Figure 2. How do you consider China’s vaccine presence in the CEE countries?

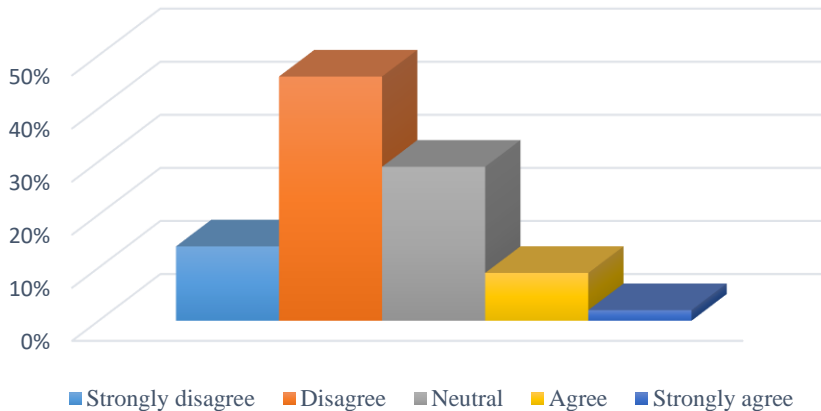


Source: Online survey “EU against China’s vaccine diplomacy in CEE”

Even the fact that Chinese vaccines are not approved by the European Medical Agency (EMA) is not enough of an argument for our respondents to doubt their quality. Namely, 46% of the respondents disagree with this statement, 29% are neutral, 14% strongly disagree, 9% agree with it, and only 2% strongly agree that EMA not approving Chinese vaccines is a sign of their poor quality.

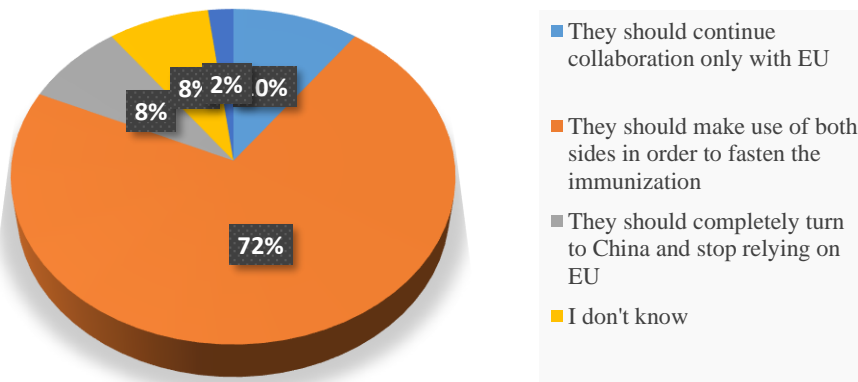
Regarding the question of whether CEE countries should continue relying on the EU regarding the vaccine distribution or should turn to China, a significant majority (71%) consider “They should make use of both sides to fasten the immunization”, 10% think that “They should continue collaboration only with the EU”. A percentage of 8% went to the option “They should completely turn to China and stop relying on the EU”. And, finally, “I don’t know” (2% of respondents).

Figure 3. Do you think that the fact that Chinese vaccines are not approved by EMA (European Medical Agency) means they are not of good quality?



Source: Online survey “EU against China’s vaccine diplomacy in CEE”

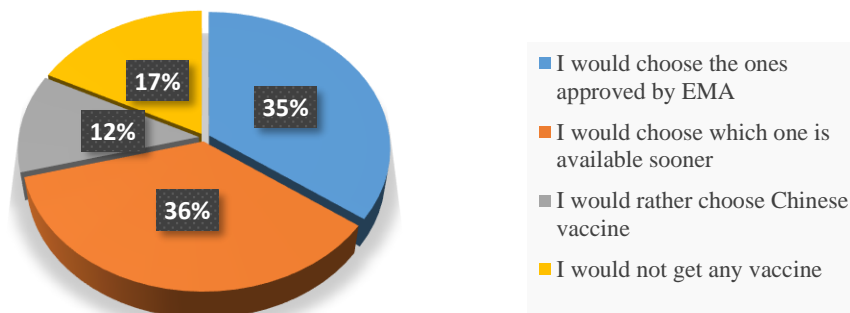
Figure 4. Do you think CEE countries should continue relying on the EU regarding vaccine distribution, or should they turn to China?



Source: Online survey “EU against China’s vaccine diplomacy in CEE”

If they could choose, 37% of the respondents would choose the one available sooner, 36% would choose the ones approved by EMA (Pfizer-BioNTech, Astra-Zeneca, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson), 18% of the respondents would not get any vaccine, and 12% would instead choose the Chinese vaccine.

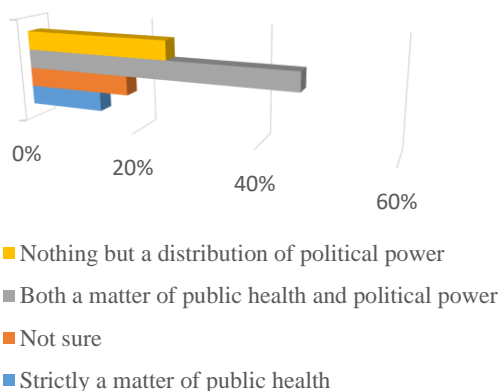
Figure 5. If you could choose, which vaccine would you choose?



Source: Online survey “EU against China’s vaccine diplomacy in CEE”

A significant 46% of the respondents consider the question of vaccine distribution in the CEE region to be both a matter of public health and political power, 25% consider it to be nothing but a distribution of political power, 18% are not sure, and only 13% consider it to be strictly a matter of public health.

Figure 6. How do you consider the question of vaccine distribution in the CEE region?



Source: Online survey “EU against China’s vaccine diplomacy in CEE”

To the last question regarding their general opinion on vaccine diplomacy, especially in the context of China’s presence in the CEE and the role of the EU, respondents gave a wide variety of answers that can be separated into four different groups.

The first one is the group of answers that refer to China as the rescuer of the CEE region and other countries regarding vaccine distribution and criticizing the EU. This group consists of the majority of respondents' answers:

- Respondent no. 1: "China is saving lives by filling the immunization gap for developing countries created by the EU's act of selfishness";
- Respondent no. 2: "The rich countries of the EU showed they did not care about the others; they took all the vaccines for themselves first";
- Respondent no. 3: "During the COVID-19 crisis, the EU failed, and over the previous two years, all of the EU's faults, including its hypocrisy toward the Western Balkans, have surfaced. So far, China's presence in the region has not been a problem for me, but rather a solution";
- Respondent no. 4: "They are only filling the gap in our health system. Lack of efficiency of EU administration created this gap";
- Respondent no. 5: "China's strategy is excellent. It is a long-term one, and they seem to know what they are doing";
- Respondent no. 6: "The EU manages the crisis insufficiently effectively due to, among others, its tendency to limit Eastern political and economic influences, including prioritization of certain vaccine manufacturers. If the EU's primary concern is public health, greater effort should be made towards immunization, regardless of the vaccine source country. The Chinese role in the CEE is increasing due to the recent vaccine supplies. Some Chinese vaccines were subsidized, some even as aid, and some were directed towards certain categories, such as the military members of certain CEE countries, which sends a strong message. These diplomatic and quasi-diplomatic gestures of China create a type of feeling among the local population, not negligibly a feeling of gratitude towards China, which the EU could have managed better if it had played a different role throughout the crisis - a role of catalyser and not an inhibitor of all sorts of immunization help";
- Respondent no. 7: "Thanks to China, we are closer to a better and faster vaccination process. This is very important to save public health. Also, I think the EU has to take care of its citizens and their health and ensure equal distribution of vaccines in all European countries";
- Respondent no. 8: "Notably, developing countries have problems getting vaccines that EMA approves. Vaccines from China are needed, and considering the health, I find it useful to have the Chinese vaccine as an opportunity to vaccinate as many people as possible".

The second group of answers refers to the Chinese vaccine presence in the CEE region as a purely diplomatic move. China's interests are not concerned with public health but with spreading power and influence:

- Respondent no. 9: "China is using this opportunity to impose its political presence in the CEE region";

- Respondent no. 10: “China is exploiting a gap that the EU created in CEE, and that is to be expected. It remains to be seen how (adversely) it may be for democracy and reforms”;
- Respondent no. 11: “The production and distribution of vaccines follow the logic of strength and power. The more powerful a country is, the faster it is vaccinated, based on the specific ability to have factories, knowledge, and technology to produce vaccines. Thus, there is a difference in the use of power arising from the existence of vaccines from China, and even Russia, which decided to use the vaccines as a diplomatic tool or to pursue its foreign policy”;
- Respondent no. 12: “Vaccination is rapidly becoming a political question that negatively affects the global public health situation. It looks more like a sanctions war against China as the EU’s competitor”;
- Respondent no. 13: “China exploits the lack of available vaccines in CEE and strengthens its diplomatic presence”;
- Respondent no. 14: “In the end, this is a political and a scarcity game. I do not see a lack of quality in some Chinese vaccines”;
- Respondent no. 15: “China is using all the available means to spread its ideology, and vaccines are currently the most influential weapon”.

The third group is the neutral one, with statements referring mainly to the need for vaccines to be considered only as a matter of public health and that the health issues should not be treated as political:

- Respondent no. 16: “In such times, countries should help each other without applying politics”;
- Respondent no. 17: “Vaccines should not be used for political purposes”;
- Respondent no. 18: “Politicizing vaccines should not be allowed. Political perception of health issues is unacceptable”;
- Respondent no. 19: “Health is more important than diplomacy”;
- Respondent no. 20: “As long as people get the vaccines, it does not matter from whom they are coming”;
- Respondent no. 21: “As long as Chinese vaccines are shown effective, there should not be a problem. China is getting more and more active around the globe due to its unprecedented growth. Vaccine issues can be indicators of power play. However, we are still pandemic, and public health is far more important than a political power play. Of course, there cannot be compromise”.

Few of the responses refer to the EU to withstand the pressure coming from China:

- Respondent no. 22: “The European Union must not yield to any pressure from China”;

- Respondent no. 24: “China is trying to leverage the resources it has in building a strong monopoly in the vaccine distribution as well, which should be avoided and should only be addressed on a merit basis”.

Conclusion

Considering the first research question (RQ1: How did the EU fail to handle the pandemic-provoked crisis in the period 2020-2021?), it can be concluded that the EU had faced significant difficulties in initial coping with the pandemic and the process of vaccine distribution. The institutional structure of the EU itself is the biggest obstacle to effective and efficient emergency response when needed most. The European Commission (2021) does not have the power to take urgent and immediate actions in unexpected situations. This is why such crises as the COVID-19 pandemic are opening the question of the effectiveness of the Union and the necessity to introduce reforms in the decision-making processes. The EU’s failure to act collectively as a response to the major outbreak in Spain and Italy during the first half of 2020 and the lack of support for issuing common “coronabonds” left space for an increased skepticism and foreign influence infiltrating within its borders.

When it comes to the second research question (RQ2: How did China use initial EU weakness to increase its presence and influence in the CEE region as a particularly critical point?), it can be noted that during the pandemic, the geopolitical interests of China continued reinforcing and promoting its soft power and intentions toward EU countries and, particularly, the CEE region. Once it managed to contain the spread of the virus within its territory, China entirely dedicated its resources to improving its international position and image. During the initial stage of the global COVID-19 pandemic, China’s aid, mainly consisting of medical supplies and staff, was urgently aimed mainly at the countries and regions that were hit the hardest, but also the ones that had a history of stronger relations with China in recent years, such as Italy and Serbia. All of these, reinforced by strong media coverage, made the impression that China could be a more reliable partner in crisis than the EU. In parallel, China seriously invested in developing vaccines, so at the beginning of 2021, the efforts continued in vaccine supplies. Once again, the help was not disseminated by accident, neither globally nor in the CEE, specifically. Because of the delays in vaccine supplies that the EU faced in the first months of 2021, China rushed to distribute its vaccines among CEE countries that although not EMA-approved, were eagerly accepted by most of the countries.

These circumstances significantly impacted the public perception of the EU’s handling of vaccine distribution in the CEE region in the context of China’s vaccine diplomacy. As the case study results show, the respondents, mainly residents of the CEE countries and EU (non-CEE countries) are, to a large extent, interested in providing protection against COVID-19, paying less attention to the fact where that protection comes from. Although they are not considering China as their leading

partner in vaccine supply, most respondents find the EU strategy and implementation in vaccine distribution to be either an issue of poor implementation or a complete failure. Furthermore, while most respondents are aware that vaccine distribution is a political issue as much as it is a health issue, they consider it a significant majority that citizens should use whichever vaccine is available to protect themselves.

These research limitations can be summarized into two main groups: research design and data/statistical limitations. Research design limitations refer to the research question being identified more broadly, given that the researched matter is an ongoing issue, with very few previously scientifically researched and discussed backgrounds subject to constant changes and new developments. The data/statistical limitations mainly refer to the results of the case study on the impact on public perception of the EU's handling of vaccine distribution in the CEE region in the context of China's vaccine diplomacy. The study sample is not representative, leaving room for a sampling error and results that do not necessarily replicate the public perception of the entire population. However, the study results are indicative and can be used to implement more complex and comprehensive research.

It can be concluded that the EU has taken significant but still limited measures in fighting the pandemic and its consequences. It has supported budget allocations, medical equipment and vaccine distribution, information and civil protection for the CEE region, but most of it is followed by delays and complex bureaucracy. The penetration of China through its vaccine diplomacy, especially in the CEE region, is primarily due to the EU's inability to take and maintain a single coherent position. This led China to take advantage of the crisis and reaffirm its more assertive position in the region. What might come out of this is strengthening the positions of autocratic elites in the region, who will, instead of the EU, turn to the Asian great power that puts no democratization and the rule of law conditions on them. They will sell this to the public as a sign of respect for the country's national interests. However, the truth is that behind the curtain lies a plan for the development of illiberal practices that will slow down or completely stop the region's progress.

Finally, the research confirmed the hypothesis that the fragility of the EU's unity pushed EU/European countries toward other foreign influences, in this case, China. Consequently, the recommendation represents a reversal of the hypothesis, namely that strengthening the EU's unity will decrease the foreign influences among the European countries. The EU must learn from this situation and take measures to consolidate and strengthen its ability to create coherent attitudes and policies in peacetime and crises.

References

- Ababakr, A. (2022), The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Transformation of International Order: A Short Overview, *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 8(2), pp. 266-280. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2282266a>

- Besser, L. (2020), Italy's coronavirus disaster: At first, officials urged people to go out for an aperitif. Now, doctors must choose who dies, *ABC News* (retrieved from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-18/what-went-wrong-with-how-italyhandled-coronavirus/12062242>).
- Borrel, J. (2020), *The post-coronavirus world is already here* (policy brief), European Council on Foreign Relations (retrieved from https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/the_post_coronavirus_world_is_already_here.pdf).
- Crossman, A. (2019), What Is a Snowball Sample in Sociology, *ThoughtCo* (retrieved from <http://sociology.about.com/od/Types-of-Samples/a/Snowball-Sample.htm>).
- CUE C.E. (2020), More Spanish politicians confirm they have been infected with the coronavirus, *El Pais* (retrieved from <https://english.elpais.com/society/2020-03-13/more-spanish-politicians-confirm-they-have-been-infected-with-the-coronavirus.html>).
- European Commission (2018), *Solidarity in Europe – Alive and active (policy review)* (retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/solidarity_in_europe.pdf).
- European Commission (2020), *Statement by Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič on EU support to China for the Coronavirus outbreak (February 1, 2020)* (retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_178).
- European Commission (2021), *EU vaccines strategy*, (retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/public-health/eu-vaccines-strategy_en).
- Gill, J. (2020), EU Commission President offers a 'heartfelt apology to Italy, as MEPs debate coronavirus response, *Euronews* (retrieved from <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/16/eu-commission-president-offers-heartfelt-apology-to-italy>).
- Hill, C. and Smith, M. (2011), *International relations and the European Union*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1093/hepl/9780198737322.001.0001>
- Ilik, G. and Shapkoski, V. (2020), Coherence on Trial: The Coronavirus outbreak as a critical test for the European Union, *Studia Europejskie - Studies in European affairs*, 4, pp. 25-42. <https://doi.org/10.33067/SE.4.2020.2>
- Karásková, I. (2021), *Injecting influence: China's vaccine diplomacy in Central and Eastern Europe* (opinion), MERICS (retrieved from <https://merics.org/en/opinion/injecting-influence-chinas-vaccine-diplomacy-central-and-eastern-europe>).
- Leigh, M. (2021), *Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?* (blog post), Bruegel (retrieved from <https://www.bruegel.org/2021/04/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-from-china-and-russia/>).
- Lowen, M. (2020), Coronavirus: Northern Italy quarantines 16 million people, *BBC Network* (retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51787238>).

- Malle, V. and Khalaf, R. (2020), Macron warns of EU unraveling unless it embraces financial solidarity, *Financial Times* (retrieved from <https://www.ft.com/content/d19dc7a6-c33b-4931-9a7e-4a74674da29a>).
- Piffer, C. and Cruz, P.M. (2020), The World Health Organization: the Covid-19 pandemic and transnational law, *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 6, pp. 55-66. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2060055p>
- Rios, B., Schulz, F., Fortuna, G. and Valero J. (2020), Leaders clash over stimulus against the pandemic, pass hot potato to Eurogroup, *Euractiv* (retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/leaders-clash-over-stimulus-against-pandemic-pass-the-hot-potato-to-the-eurogroup/>).
- Rodriguez, E. (2020), Thousands March in Spain on Women's Day Despite Coronavirus Fears, *US News* (retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-03-08/thousands-march-in-spain-on-womens-day-despite-coronavirus-fears>).
- Rolfe, P. and Morris, L. (2020), Spain goes on nationwide lockdown as coronavirus cases surge, *Washington Post* (retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/eu43rope/coronavirus-spain-nationwide-lockdown/2020/03/14/3bec86906619-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html).
- Vestager, M. (2000), The European Response to the Covid-19 Virus, *ICDS, International Center for Defense and Security* (retrieved from <https://icds.ee/the-europeanresponse-to-the-covid-19-virus/>).