

## DIPLOMACY AS AN INSTRUMENT OF GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY BETWEEN THE USA AND THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION FOR INFLUENCE IN POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## ДИПЛОМАТІЯ ЯК ІНСТРУМЕНТ ГЕОПОЛІТИЧНОГО СУПЕРНИЦТВА США І РФ ЗА ВПЛИВ У ПОСТРАДЯНСЬКИХ КРАЇНАХ ПІД ЧАС ПАНДЕМІЇ COVID-19

### Mykola Doroshko

Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor of the Department of International Regional Studies, Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Email: [doroshko7@ukr.net](mailto:doroshko7@ukr.net).

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0173-9416>

### Artur Raikov

PhD student of the Department of International Regional Studies, Educational and Scientific Institute of International Relations of Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Email: [artur.raykov@gmail.com](mailto:artur.raykov@gmail.com).

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8353-8450>

### Микола Дорошко

Доктор історичних наук, професор кафедри Міжнародного регіонаознавства Навчально-наукового інституту міжнародних відносин Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка. Email: [doroshko7@ukr.net](mailto:doroshko7@ukr.net).

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0173-9416>

### Артур Райков

Аспірант, кафедра Міжнародного регіонаознавства Навчально-наукового інституту міжнародних відносин Київського національного університету імені Тараса Шевченка. Email: [artur.raykov@gmail.com](mailto:artur.raykov@gmail.com).

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8353-8450>

**Abstract.** *The article considers how the COVID-19 pandemic has become the basis for geopolitical rivalry between the Russian Federation and the United States for influence among the post-Soviet countries. The article examines how the United States and Russia are using coronavirus diplomacy as a soft power, in particular through the supply of medical equipment, protective equipment, vaccines and financial assistance, to shape their positioning and improve their image among the countries of the region. In addition, the article analyses the strategic interests of the United States and Russia in the post-Soviet space, describes the diplomatic steps taken by both countries to assist other countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, compares the effectiveness of their coronavirus and vaccine diplomacy, and assesses the attitude of post-Soviet countries to the diplomatic initiatives of the United States and Russia.*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19 pandemic, coronavirus diplomacy, vaccines, geopolitical influence, soft power, USA, Russian Federation, post-Soviet countries.*

**Анотація.** *У статті розглядається, як пандемія COVID-19 стала підґрунтям для геополітичного суперництва між Російською Федерацією та Сполученими Штатами за вплив серед країн пострадянського простору. Піднімається питання використання США і Росією коронавірусної дипломатії як м'якої сили, зокрема через поставки медичного обладнання, засобів захисту, вакцин та фінансової допомоги, для формування свого позиціонування та поліпшення іміджу серед країн регіону. У статті аналізуються стратегічні інтереси США і РФ на пострадянському просторі, розглядаються дипломатичні кроки обох держав щодо надання допомоги іншим країнам під час пандемії COVID-19, порівнюється ефективність їхньої коронавірусної та вакцинної дипломатії, а також оцінюється ставлення країн пострадянського простору до дипломатичних ініціатив США і РФ.*

**Ключові слова:** *пандемія COVID-19, коронавірусна дипломатія, вакцини, геополітичний вплив, м'яка сила, США, Російська Федерація, пострадянські країни.*

**Introduction.** The outbreak of a new type of coronavirus disease, later called COVID-19, its rapid spread around the world and the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation have had a significant impact on various aspects of life in entire countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced almost the entire world to reconsider its policies on border openness and cooperation between countries, in particular, in overcoming the consequences of the disease. Many countries have suffered from high mortality rates due to inaccessibility of medical services, poor healthcare systems, lack of protocols for preventing the spread of the disease and responding to outbreaks, insufficient personal protective equipment, medical equipment, vaccines, etc.

However, any crisis opens up new opportunities, especially such a global crisis. Global actors in international relations have been able to project their influence on different countries and regions, as well as strengthen their trade, economic and political ties with a number of countries, thanks to diplomacy, which has subsequently received different names in the public environment: coronavirus diplomacy, vaccine diplomacy, pandemic diplomacy, etc. In the times of the global crisis, diplomacy played a key role, becoming not only a tool for assistance, but also a tool for strengthening relations between countries and increasing the influence of some actors in international relations on others. The states that had the opportunity to use this tool were, in particular, the United States of America and the Russian Federation. They both competed for leadership in the development of vaccines against coronavirus disease, competed for the number of vaccines delivered and the number of countries that were ready to receive these vaccines. In addition, it is important to mention other means of increasing American and Russian influence, such as covering humanitarian needs and providing financial aid and loans.

Post-Soviet countries have long been in a situation where the interests of the United States and the Russian Federation collide in the same region and where they compete for influence over the countries and the region as a whole. And the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception.

**Purpose of the article** is to analyse how the COVID-19 pandemic has become the basis for competition between the United States and Russia for influence in the post-Soviet region. The article explores how both countries use coronavirus diplomacy, namely the supply of medical equipment, protective equipment, vaccines, and other resources to influence countries in the region, with the aim of shaping their own positioning and improving their image among regional powers.

**Literature review.** As the problem of the coronavirus pandemic is a relatively new topic, and the World Health Organization only cancelled the International Health Emergency in 2023, there is not much research on the use of humanitarian aid during the COVID-19 pandemic as a tool for increasing geopolitical influence. The available literature mainly describes such phenomena as "coronavirus diplomacy", "vaccine diplomacy" (Bocchi, 2020) (Giusti & Ambrosetti, 2023) (Banco & Herszenhorn, 2021) (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021), or focuses on the use of diplomacy in times of pandemic as a "soft power" (Filipović, 2024). In addition, some of the published materials are devoted to the study of the diplomatic strategies of individual countries (the United States, China, Russia, India) to provide humanitarian assistance during the pandemic (Filipović, 2024), and to the comparison of coronavirus diplomacy between the United States and China as two global leaders (Bocchi, 2020). At the same time, the issue of competition between the United States and the Russian Federation in organising humanitarian aid during the pandemic and the use of coronavirus/vaccine diplomacy by these two states to strengthen their geopolitical influence, particularly in the post-Soviet space, has received very little attention in the existing literature. It is important to note that in addition to scientific works, the author used material from media such as the BBC, AP News, Reuters, The Independent, Ukrainska Pravda, Suspilne, as well as press releases and other materials from government agencies and international organisations to write this article.

**Main results of the research.** The COVID-19 pandemic has become a factor that has triggered changes in international relations. Countries have imposed various restrictions on both their own citizens and foreigners, thereby trying to limit the movement of people and reduce the spread of the coronavirus disease. This created certain problems in communication between states, as mistrust of each other grew. Another crisis in relations between states was the need to evacuate their citizens from other states who found themselves in a difficult situation: they could not return home due to the suspension of transport links between countries. In addition, states had to look for joint solutions to

combat the pandemic, including sharing medical knowledge and resources, coordinating measures to restrict travel and other human contacts, and working together to develop vaccines. While economically and politically strong countries were able to cover these needs on their own, less capable ones faced certain difficulties.

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a catalyst that has led to a qualitative change in the international political situation in the world. In addition to the problems of economic recession and the disruption of logistics routes due to numerous restrictions, the pandemic has exacerbated the competition between individual actors in international relations for influence and status in the international arena. How the state dealt with the consequences of the pandemic, how it was involved in global aid initiatives, and how ready it was to support others affected its positioning in the world. The pandemic has significantly intensified the competition between the US, Russia, China, India and other countries for influence on other countries. If we are talking about the post-Soviet space, the United States and the Russian Federation were actively competing with each other in this region.

For them, this crisis has become both an opportunity to increase their influence in countries where they already had a strong position and an opportunity to expand to other regions, thereby gaining an advantage over competitors. Both the United States and Russia have been actively involved in helping other countries overcome the pandemic. These two countries began to engage actively in their coronavirus and later vaccine diplomacy both globally and in post-Soviet countries in particular.

The active involvement of states in helping other countries to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has received a number of definitions in the media and public space: from coronavirus diplomacy itself (Bocchi, 2020) (Giusti & Ambrosetti, 2023, p. 212), when countries supplied protective equipment and provided financial assistance, to more specific ones, such as vaccine diplomacy (Banco & Herszenhorn, 2021) (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021, p. 132), which primarily described agreements between states to supply coronavirus vaccines. All of these definitions describe the same phenomenon: the use of humanitarian aid by states to overcome the consequences of the rapid spread of the coronavirus as a tool to increase their own influence. Countries have regarded the use of supplies of vaccines, tests, medical equipment, and personal protective equipment (PPE) as a way to strengthen political and economic relations with each other. In addition, it is possible to look at how COVID-19 vaccines were supplied: the priority of vaccine provision, quantities and terms of supply were directly related to the nature of bilateral relations between countries.

If we ignore the purely humanitarian aspect of such diplomacy, which is related to saving lives, and consider coronavirus and vaccine diplomacy as a tool for promoting geopolitical interests, the goal of such diplomatic work is to strengthen its own image among other countries, increase its influence on particular countries and regions, and strengthen international initiatives and coalitions of states. Every component of coronavirus diplomacy (including the supply of vaccines) was part of achieving political and economic goals.

Great powers, such as China, the United States, and the Russian Federation, have begun to offer their humanitarian aid to other countries. For example, China has begun to help less developed countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that were unable to purchase expensive American or European analogues of PPE, vaccines, and equipment. Since Chinese vaccines (e.g. CoronaVac) were produced using standard methods (containing a dead virus inside) (The different types ..., 2021), they were cheaper and could be produced in large volumes. Through active diplomacy, China has tried to whitewash its reputation, especially among countries in the Global South, after the story of the emergence of the virus in China itself.

The Russian Federation followed a somewhat similar approach. They developed a vector vaccine (containing special modified virus particles), which shortened the speed of the emergence of these vaccines (The different types ..., 2021). However, the directions of vaccine supply were closely linked to the countries with which Russia has friendly and close relations. Russian vaccines were exported to post-Soviet countries, as well as to Latin America, Asia and even Hungary. The Russian Federation also supplied its vaccines to the occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia (Giusti & Ambrosetti, 2023, p. 220). On the other hand, the United States developed innovative mRNA vaccines that were more expensive and took time to create (The different types ..., 2021), thus automatically

cutting off poor countries that did not have the means to buy such vaccines. It is also worth noting that the United States supplied a significant amount of vaccines to the domestic market, wanting to immunise its own citizens first. This created a negative image among other countries about the US strategy to overcome the pandemic in the world (Massie, 2021). Nevertheless, the United States has been actively assisting with the supply of PPE, equipment, and vaccines, as well as providing financial assistance to its allies and partners in the world, trying to counteract the active efforts of China and Russia in this area.

The post-Soviet countries have long remained a kind of "backyard" of the Russian Federation, where official Moscow has had undeniable influence on the political life of the region. However, other global actors have been methodically trying for years to gain a foothold in the region and compete with Russia for influence.

The United States is one of the countries with its own strategic interests in the post-Soviet space. The United States has sought to be present in the region through economic cooperation, trade cooperation, political arrangements, and military and security partnerships. The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the subsequent diplomatic work, was an opportunity for the United States to intensify the use of so-called soft power to increase its influence on the region and processes in it (Filipović, 2024, p. 60).

The United States has always tried to integrate post-Soviet countries into the international system by transforming them into democratic countries with stable political and economic systems (Courtney & Shatz, 2021), which should reduce their dependence on the Russian Federation.

Countering Russian influence is one of the key issues for the United States. Since the US rejects the possibility of a direct confrontation with Russia in order to reduce its potential, Washington acts by supporting political, security and economic initiatives with individual countries in the region to increase their capacity and turn them towards the US instead of the Russian vector. Thus, the United States actively supports the movement of the countries of the region (primarily Ukraine and Georgia) towards integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures (although in practice it postpones the moment of their integration into the North Atlantic Alliance).

Moreover, the United States invests in financing infrastructure facilities and helps to diversify hydrocarbon supplies to and from the countries of the region in order to reduce their dependence on Moscow's services, which uses economic leverage to influence the political situation in the region. And it should not be forgotten that the United States has contributed to the development of civil society in these countries, built on democratic and liberal foundations (Courtney & Shatz, 2021), which in turn challenges Russia's development vector and creates tensions in the region.

On the other hand, the Russian Federation has always regarded the post-Soviet countries as a traditional sphere of influence. Moscow has always sought to control all regional processes and to maintain its dominance in the region through economic, political and security mechanisms. Russia actively opposes the attempts of Western countries, especially the United States, to integrate the countries of the region into their political and economic projects, seeing this as a threat to its own dominance and security.

The Russian Federation uses security and economic factors to keep the countries of the region in its orbit. For example, Russia has included a number of countries in the Eurasian Economic Union in order to strengthen economic ties with Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and Moscow keeps a number of countries in the region in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, thus ensuring its military presence in CSTO member states and opening up the possibility of influencing their defence policies.

It is worth mentioning the instruments used by the US and Russia to promote their interests in post-Soviet countries. While Washington acts through financial assistance and investments in capacity building in regional countries, through political and diplomatic support of their governments and work with civil society, Moscow primarily uses the opportunities of its military presence in some countries, supports pro-Russian forces and governments to maintain its influence in these countries, and integrates them into its economic projects in order to guarantee markets for goods and services and access to the resources of these countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the necessity to overcome its consequences have opened up an additional instrument for the United States and the Russian Federation to influence the foreign policy

of some post-Soviet countries and their own positioning, thus opening up a new opportunity for competition for influence in the region.

The United States used assistance to other countries to overcome the consequences of the pandemic to strengthen its own influence. If looking at the transformation of the United States' attitude to the issue of aid, it is possible to observe a change in public policy from the isolationist position (America First) to the policy of global cooperation (Filipović, 2024, p. 63). In general, the first months of the pandemic had an extremely negative impact on the US position. This was due to the unresponsive policy of the then US President Donald Trump's administration, which didn't actively support the coronavirus restrictions imposed in the states and was sceptical about vaccination against COVID-19. In addition, there was no coordination between the White House, the US Department of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and other relevant agencies on how to respond to the spread of coronavirus disease in the country and what containment and prevention measures should be implemented (Filipović, 2024, p. 64). Trump's policy echoed among his core electorate, which also began to disregard the CDC's recommendations, leading to an increase in the number of infected people and hospitals being unable to provide quality care to all patients. Accordingly, this created an image of a country that could not cope with a pandemic disease, unlike the authoritarian Russian Federation and China, which showed pictures of successful countering the threat.

Nevertheless, after the 2020 presidential election, the US vaccine trials, and the start of the vaccination campaign, the United States started to engage more actively with other countries through its coronavirus and vaccine diplomacy, thereby improving its image and achieving greater influence. The United States has improved relations with the WHO, which had cooled during the Trump administration (Filipović, 2024, p. 64). This allowed Washington to rehabilitate itself and take the lead in vaccine donations through international initiatives.

The United States, being one of the leaders in the invention and production of vaccines against coronavirus disease (several American companies such as Moderna, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson worked on the development of vaccines), used this resource as a tool to strengthen its positions in post-Soviet countries.

When it comes to vaccine supply, this story can be divided into two episodes. The first is the US participation in the global COVAX initiative launched by the WHO to ensure equal access to vaccines for people around the world (COVAX explained, 2020). Post-Soviet countries also actively participated in this programme as recipients of such assistance and received the US vaccines for use. The US participation in COVAX (The White House, 2021) created the impression of Washington's readiness to stand in solidarity with other countries and improved the country's overall image in the world and among post-Soviet countries in particular. In return, countries of the post-Soviet region were able to immunise themselves using innovative American vaccines. Ukraine, Moldova, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan took advantage of the opportunity to receive the US vaccines through the COVAX programme. For example, the United States provided Ukraine with almost 6.7 million doses of Comirnaty (the name of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine) and Moderna vaccines. Moldova received 458,000 doses of vaccines from the United States, Tajikistan – more than 4.1 million doses, Uzbekistan – more than 9.6 million doses, Kyrgyzstan – more than 458,000 doses. These countries received 100% of the vaccines from the United States through the COVAX initiative (COVID-19 Vaccine Donations).

In addition to supplying vaccines under COVAX, the United States has also provided direct vaccine supplies to post-Soviet countries through bilateral agreements (The White House, 2021). For example, Georgia and Armenia received significant batches of the US Moderna and Comirnaty vaccines, which significantly eased the epidemiological situation in the countries and strengthened bilateral relations with the US and attitudes towards Washington. The United States donated more than 503,000 doses of vaccines to Georgia, and Armenia received 306,000 doses (COVID-19 Vaccine Donations).

Between May 2021 and February 2024, the United States donated more than 639 million doses of vaccines to 117 countries and economies around the world, both in partnership with other countries through global initiatives such as COVAX and bilateral agreements (COVID-19 Vaccine Donations).

However, the US coronavirus diplomacy was not limited to vaccine diplomacy. The United States has also provided humanitarian aid to post-Soviet countries to help them overcome the pandemic in the form of medical equipment, COVID-19 tests, PPE, and mechanical ventilation devices that post-Soviet countries lacked and that helped local health systems to withstand the impact (U.S. Provides new Vaccine Freezers..., 2021).

The United States has also provided financial support to countries in the region in the form of grants, loans, and technical assistance. The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the economies of post-Soviet countries hard, leading to the so-called coronavirus crisis. These funds were used to support the economy, finance business needs, and to maintain medical infrastructure and pay healthcare workers (U.S. Provides new Vaccine Freezers ..., 2021).

Such comprehensive assistance was meant to show the US's willingness to support its partners. The supply of vaccines and humanitarian aid helped the United States to strengthen its configuration of influence on regional partners, and the countries that received support from Washington began to interact more with the United States, thereby increasing their dependence on it. In addition, assistance in the fight against the pandemic has led to some improvement in the perception of the United States in these countries, which has helped to increase trust in the United States and strengthen its position in the region. Through the provision of financial and humanitarian support, the United States was able to influence the political life of the countries and to promote democratic values and principles, which is in line with official Washington's strategic interests.

The Russian Federation also kept up with other global players and actively used the COVID-19 pandemic to increase potentially its influence in other countries, including post-Soviet states, although it did not succeed as well as Russian officials might have intended.

An important instrument of the Russian diplomacy during the coronavirus pandemic was the Sputnik V vaccine (Kier & Stronski, 2021). It is worth noting that the process of creating the Russian vaccine had a number of international scandals. For example, in mid-2020, information emerged about Russia's industrial espionage in Western countries to obtain data on the development of local vaccines (Fox & Kelion, 2020). Nevertheless, despite these leaks, the Russian Federation was one of the first countries in the world to introduce its own version of the coronavirus vaccine (Saari, 2021). By doing so, Moscow created the appropriate image of a powerful country with advanced medicine, which was supposed to influence the decision of countries around the world to purchase the Russian vaccine. In addition, it was supposed to show that the Russian model of organising society, including the influence of the power vertical on all processes, is more appropriate for solving global problems such as the pandemic and vaccine development, unlike the Western liberal democratic system (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021, p. 134) (Saari, 2021).

The Sputnik V vaccine is a vector vaccine that contains a modified virus protein (The different types ..., 2021). This made it easier to produce and lower the cost, unlike the American vaccines, which played into Russia's hands, as more countries could afford to buy Sputnik V (Saari, 2021). It was also noted that this vaccine does not have special conditions for transportation and storage, unlike Western samples. In other words, post-Soviet countries could choose the Russian vaccine and not spend extra money on special temperature containers, which significantly reduced the cost of mass vaccination for them, but also made them dependent on Russia.

It should be clarified that Russia produced and exported not only Sputnik V, but also its lighter version Sputnik Light, as well as the EpiVacCorona and Kovivak vaccines (Filipović, 2024, p. 77). However, these vaccines were introduced to the market after short-term trials (for example, none of the vaccines had completed 3 stages of trials before registration), which made it difficult to be sure of their safety. It is also important to note that neither the WHO nor the EU approved Russian vaccines, which raised suspicions about the effectiveness of these vaccines, which negatively affected the image of the Russian Federation during the pandemic (Filipović, 2024, p. 77).

Nevertheless, the Russian Federation provided its own vaccines to post-Soviet countries in order to strengthen bilateral relations and expand its influence ("Vaccine diplomacy" ..., 2021). The recipients of Russian vaccines were Belarus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (How the vaccination is going..., 2021) (Saari, 2021). These supplies shaped the image of the Russian Federation as a country that is ready to meet the needs for urgent medical resources. In addition, Russia also supplied its own PPE and coronavirus tests to Belarus,

Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and other countries, which helped them survive several waves of the pandemic (Saari, 2021). For example, public opinion polls were conducted in Central Asian countries on Russia's role in the fight against the pandemic. Thus, the majority of respondents said that for them, Russia was the country that helped them the most in overcoming the consequences of COVID-19 (Filipović, 2024, p. 77).

It is also worth mentioning that the Russian Federation also supplied its own vaccines to the occupied territories of Ukraine and Georgia - parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Giusti & Ambrosetti, 2023, p. 220), although Ukraine, for example, did not allow the registration of such vaccines.

In addition, the Russian Federation has facilitated the launch of local production of the Sputnik V vaccine in Kazakhstan at the Karaganda Pharmaceutical Complex, as well as in Uzbekistan and Belarus (Belarus is going to produce..., 2021) ("How the vaccination is going...", 2021), thus creating the image of a country that is not only ready to share its vaccines with other countries, but even help others produce these vaccines themselves (Filipović, 2024, p. 77).

To summarise, the Russian Federation actively worked with the countries of the post-Soviet region, urging them to give preference to medical supplies and vaccines from the Russian Federation. An important aspect of the choice of Russian analogues was the relatively low cost and readiness of the Russian Federation to quickly meet the needs (although there were problems with this, too). At the same time, questions were raised about the effectiveness and safety of Russian vaccines, as they had not passed all stages of research and had not received WHO approval for emergency use (Kier & Stronski, 2021). Nevertheless, Russia's active coronavirus diplomacy fulfilled its main goal of maintaining and strengthening its influence on post-Soviet countries, including increasing their economic dependence on Moscow.

Both the United States and Russia have tried to make the most of coronavirus diplomacy to their advantage. Both states have supplied personal protective equipment, tests, medical equipment and vaccines to post-Soviet countries in the hope of improving their own image and increasing their credibility among the countries of the region.

Both countries have faced difficulties in this process and have gained some benefits. Unlike China, for example, the United States did not immediately embark on the path of organising assistance to other countries, primarily because of the then-presidential administration of Donald Trump, who is known for his isolationist views. As a result, the US did not immediately join the global COVAX initiative, which provided vaccines to less affluent countries. Only the election of Joe Biden changed the situation, but the reputation of the United States was undermined. Nevertheless, Washington managed to change the situation for itself, becoming the largest donor of funds for COVAX – \$4 billion was allocated (Madhani, 2021).

In turn, the Russian Federation tried to become one of the first to invent a vaccine and supply it to other countries, thereby demonstrating the success of its development model and improving its reputation in the international arena after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. And such a rapid release of the Sputnik V vaccine was supposed to contribute to this. However, the lack of research on the vaccine, questions about its safety and effectiveness have affected Russia's positioning as a country that can effectively counter such global crises and generated distrust. In response, Russia has tried to influence the perception of US vaccines and change attitudes towards Russian counterparts through various disinformation attacks and information operations, but it is difficult to assess the impact of such campaigns on other societies (Kazharski & Makarychev, 2021). It was more likely to work for a domestic audience.

There have been no dramatic changes in spheres of influence as a result of coronavirus diplomacy. The United States actively helped its partners in the region - Ukraine and Georgia - who refused to accept Russian vaccines, given their difficult relations with Russia. Instead, the Russian Federation actively cooperated with the Central Asian countries, Armenia and Belarus, which are traditionally part of its sphere of influence. Each of the countries received significant supplies of Russian vaccines (Kazakhstan asks Russia..., 2021) ("Sputnik V" and AstraZeneca..., 2021), and some countries even started producing these vaccines in their own countries (How the vaccination is going..., 2021). In addition, when it comes to Central Asian countries, Moscow was also interested in providing humanitarian aid because residents of these countries are cheap labour for Russia. Russia

cooperated with the governments of these countries to, firstly, prevent them from leaving their sphere of influence; secondly, to prevent other global players from entering; and thirdly, to reduce tensions between Russia and these countries by restricting the movement of residents of these countries to Russia due to coronavirus requirements. Moreover, the launch of local production of vaccines in these countries would demonstrate Russia's readiness to address comprehensively global issues, showing good intentions.

**Conclusions.** As global actors in the international arena, the United States and the Russian Federation could not afford not to engage in coronavirus diplomacy during the pandemic. Official Washington and Moscow used humanitarian aid, including the supply of vaccines, medical equipment, and PPE, as a tool to increase their influence in the region. This form of diplomacy allowed the Russian Federation and the United States to consolidate their presence and improve their positioning.

The United States focused on using the global COVAX initiative to help other countries, which highlighted its positioning as a global leader in responding to the pandemic. The Russian Federation, in turn, used the Sputnik V vaccine as a symbol of its achievements and an instrument to strengthen bilateral relations. Moscow supplied vaccines to friendly countries on preferential terms, reflecting Russia's intention to strengthen its geopolitical position.

However, the competition between the US and Russia did not affect the geopolitical dynamics of the region: pro-Western Ukraine and Georgia, which have difficult relations with Russia, tended to receive aid from the US, while countries such as Belarus, Armenia, and Central Asian countries, which have close (and sometimes dependent) relations with Russia, were more focused on aid from Russia. In other words, the choice of a donor country depended on the nature of bilateral relations between the donor and the recipient.

Nevertheless, the pandemic has become an opportunity for the US and Russia to compete with each other for influence, using soft power. Washington and Moscow's use of coronavirus diplomacy, particularly in the post-Soviet space, reflects a new level of global competition for influence and power. Considering the examples of diplomatic work of the United States and Russia in the region during the pandemic, it can be said that humanitarian diplomacy is becoming an important aspect of geopolitical strategy that can influence international relations and the balance of power.

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