

Lula's Return and the Arrival of Sputnik V Change the Brazilian Political Scenario

By [Lucas Leiroz de Almeida](#)

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Changes are taking place on the Brazilian political scene. Former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva recently returned with great political strength, reversing years of popular antipathy. After a controversial judicial decision that extinguished all the prosecutions against him, Lula demonstrated his capacity for political articulation and is making public some maneuvers he had been secretly carrying out until now, the results of which tend to have a great impact in Brazil about a year before of the upcoming presidential elections.

The most notable result of Lula's articulations is the arrival of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine in Brazil. In the coming weeks, tens of millions of doses of the vaccine will be sent to Brazil, reversing the result of months of the federal government's campaign against the Russian product. Lula's role in the arrival of vaccines was fundamental. The ex-president held talks with some of his contacts abroad to try to get around the diplomatic crisis brought about by the Bolsonaro government with his pandemic denialism. Together with the former Health Minister and current deputy Alexandre Padilha, Lula was in contact with the Russian authorities in a parallel diplomacy work.

The work started last year, when Lula, still removed from public life, signed an international manifesto in favor of the classification of vaccines as “common good for humanity” in a campaign for a wide distribution of vaccines for poor countries. The former president was then contacted by the director of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, Kirill Dmitriev, at the request of President Vladimir Putin himself. Putin and Dmitriev's intention was to show the Russian desire to cooperate with Brazil in medical diplomacy and expand the distribution of Sputnik V. Lula immediately accepted the proposals.

It is curious to note that when Lula started to negotiate with the Russians in November last year, according to information provided by Padilha himself, Brazil had only the Chinese vaccine, whose production center is the Butantan Institute, commanded by the Government of São Paulo. At the same time, the federal government had the ambition to bring the vaccine from Astrazeneca, but there was still no forecast for the arrival of the doses. Across the country, strong pressure was beginning to emerge for Brazil to purchase vaccines from other laboratories, as the death toll grew day by day. Although some local governments tried to negotiate the purchase of Sputnik V with Russian authorities, the federal government was strongly opposed to admitting such a vaccine in its national immunization

plan, just as it had done with Coronavac. Lula emerged as a figure parallel to the small-scale negotiations by state governments and Bolsonaro's anti-vaccine crusade and presented terms favorable to the acquisition of the product, which explains his success.

Lula's strategy was to create alternatives to non-viable negotiations with the federal government by establishing an alliance between the Russians and a consortium of Brazilian governors allied to him, mainly in the Northeast region, where the former president shows greater political strength. After the meeting between Lula and Dmitriev by videoconference, governors of Lula's party began to negotiate directly with RDIF. The governor of the State of Bahia, Rui Costa, who is a member of Lula's party, led the negotiations. As a result, 39 million vaccines were purchased by Brazilians.

This case shows us how the Bolsonaro government's incompetence in managing the health crisis is leading to the need for a stronger parallel diplomacy – and this will certainly harm the federal government itself. Bolsonaro has so far made two speeches in relation to the pandemic. At first, his posture tended to total denialism. Later, Bolsonaro gradually admitted the seriousness of the virus, but, in return, endorsed an anti-scientific discourse on vaccines and, for reasons of political alliance, started a crusade against Russian and Chinese vaccines – arguably the most efficient so far produced – in favor of the vaccines of Astrazeneca and Pfizer, which represented their international interests in political alliance with Americans and British. Bolsonaro did not consider popular interests and local governments, in addition to underestimating the strength of some of his greatest political opponents, such as Lula.

Lula's return to political life is very controversial. The Court's decision that annulled all legal prosecutions against him constitutes nothing more than a political maneuver against Bolsonaro. Lula is far from being a socialist or extreme left politician. He is a great conciliator and has always sought to simultaneously serve the interests of the economic elites and popular classes. Thus, it is likely that some sectors of Brazilian politics will see him as a more stable figure than Bolsonaro and will come to support him as an alternative for the 2022 elections. This is the position of the judiciary class, for example – which led it to cancel the processes. Lula can now run for election again or nominate a candidate and support him more emphatically. And certainly, the fact that he got millions of vaccines and immunized a large part of the population will be his main electoral speech.

However, for 2022, we cannot forget the figure of João Dória, governor of the State of São Paulo who commands the Brazilian production of Coronavac through the Butantan Institute. Dória started a great political polarization against Bolsonaro and, according to several sources, plans to run for president in 2022. Dória has the production of Coronavac – the most widespread vaccine in Brazil so far – as his main discourse and this creates a previous scenario of vaccine-based electoral dispute: Lula will support Sputnik V, Dória will support Coronavac and Bolsonaro will support Pfizer and Astrazeneca's products. In this scenario, Bolsonaro is visibly the weakest part. Not only was he unable to produce such vaccines on a large scale in Brazil, but he probably will also not be able to because of technical and financial infeasibility. In addition to being the most expensive, the Pfizer vaccine, for example, requires refrigeration to -70 degrees Celsius to keep it conserved. Such a technology does not exist in Brazil, which makes an immunization plan based on this vaccine impossible.

Either Bolsonaro radically changes his stance on vaccines and stops basing his immunization

plan on purely ideological issues, or his political future will be the electoral defeat in 2022.

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Lucas Leiroz is a research fellow in international law at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro.

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