

Are Vaccines the Real Driving Force Behind the Latest Donbass Destabilization?

By [Andrew Korybko](#)

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Observers are in a passionate debate over what’s really driving the latest Donbass destabilization, with the most prominent hypotheses being either domestic Ukrainian politics or the US’ regional geostrategic ambitions, but the argument can also compellingly be made that the concept of so-called “vaccine nationalism” is playing a largely under-discussed role in events.

The Two Main Hypotheses

Donbass is on the brink of major destabilization once again, yet observers are in disagreement over what’s really driving the latest events. Some believe that domestic Ukrainian politics are to blame and that Kiev’s ruling party aims to provoke a regional crisis in order to distract from its plummeting popularity. Evidence in support of this hypothesis includes the government’s recent [witch hunt](#) against opposition figures and its [draconian banning](#) of many Russian-language media outlets in the country.

President Zelensky also promulgated a decree late last month which [practically declares war on Russia](#) and explicitly threatens Crimea. The other theory about the US’ regional geostrategic ambitions is backed up by the its [ominous statement of support](#) for Ukraine as well as Washington’s preexisting motives for destabilizing Moscow’s western periphery, which prompted Russia to promise its own [ominously support](#) for its passport holders in the country. Both theories have a lot of truth to them, but they’re missing a crucial component which could complete the strategic picture.

“Vaccine Diplomacy”

That’s the concept of so-called “vaccine nationalism”, which refers to countries’ efforts to promote their COVID-19 vaccines abroad while also sometimes simultaneously thwarting their competitors’ selfsame attempts. In the current context, [Russia’s “vaccine diplomacy”](#) of exporting Sputnik V across the world to save lives, restore the economy, and also for the supplementary purpose of expanding its multipolar influence is on the brink of a globally game-changing success after Politico reported over the weekend that [“More EU Countries Eye Separate Deals With Russia For Sputnik Vaccine”](#).

This was preceded just a few days prior by a related report about how [“Macron And Merkel](#)

[Discuss Vaccine Cooperation With Russia](#)". The unmistakable trend is that Europe is quickly learning that it needs Russia more than the reverse despite American pressure to convince them to the contrary, which explains why CNN is freaking out so much that it recently published a scaremongering piece about how "[Europe Is Torn Over Whether To Take Putin's Help On Vaccines](#)".

The Donbass Dilemma

It's against this strategic context that the latest destabilization in Donbass is unfolding. Each side blames one another for provoking it, but an objective assessment of the situation very strongly suggests that neither Russia nor the Russian-friendly rebels of Eastern Ukraine are responsible. After all, they've been trying to peacefully implement the Minsk Accords for the past few years, but it's US-backed Kiev which has obstinately refused to make any tangible progress in this direction, both for domestic nationalist reasons and those related to American regional geostrategic ambitions as was earlier argued. Ukraine is also being crushed by the COVID-19 pandemic but isn't being provided any real help from its American "ally", which is why some in the country have looked eastward to Russia for much-needed relief. This inspired me to write about how "[Sputnik V Is The Antidote To, Not Russia's Weapon Of, Hybrid War In Ukraine](#)" at the beginning of the year even though it's extremely unlikely nowadays that Kiev will agree to cooperate with Moscow in this respect.

The US' Strategic Failures

Not only has the US failed in its grand strategic goal of "isolating" Russia over the past seven years as seen by Moscow's [successful "balancing" act](#) all across Eurasia that was [commenced in response](#), but it's also proven itself unable to convince Berlin to sabotage Nord Stream II by incorporating it into the ongoing [German Hybrid War on Russia](#). The Central European country, to its credit, continues to pragmatically engage with Russia on several issues of significance, including Nord Stream II and most recently exploring the [possibility of purchasing Sputnik V](#), though its silence in the face of the latest Donbass destabilization worryingly risks being [interpreted as a carthe blanche](#) by Kiev. Nevertheless, the silver lining is that Germany hasn't condemned Russia for the recent escalations there like others have, and this observation greatly concerns the US. Considering the speed with which Russia's "vaccine diplomacy" is attracting new partners Europe, it can't be ruled out that the US wants to provoke a crisis in Eastern Ukraine so as to make Russian-EU Sputnik V cooperation politically impossible.

Towards A Russian-EU Rapprochement?

This shouldn't sound all that surprising to the reader if they take the time to reflect on the insight that was just shared. "Vaccine diplomacy" is the quickest way to enter into strategic partnerships with other states or comprehensively reinforce those that already exist. Russia's European interests in this respect rest with its desire to gently influence those countries to reduce and then ultimately lift the US-led sanctions regime that was imposed after Crimea's reunification in 2014. Moscow would also like the European countries to show more consideration for its legitimate security interests by not rolling out the red carpet for NATO's US-led unprecedented expansion along Russia's western periphery. These two US-led developments in recent years - sanctions and military expansion - caused a crisis in Russian-EU relations, one for which Brussels bears partial responsibility because it willingly went along with it in response to Washington's pressure. It didn't have to do that, and its [obsequiousness to American strategic demands](#) made everything much worse.

Russia's Soft Power Plans

Perhaps the most immediate strategic importance of Russia's "vaccine diplomacy" is that it could win countless hearts and minds in Europe and therefore create a favorable grassroots social environment for facilitating those governments' eventual lifting of their anti-Russian sanctions and their gradual rolling back of NATO's US-led military expansion in the region. After all, it might soon be the case that Sputnik V is responsible for saving an untold number of lives in the continent in parallel with facilitating the bloc's economic reopening, both of which would greatly improve the lives of the EU's hundreds of millions of citizens. It might be very difficult for those governments to justify their decision to continue "punishing" Russia through economic and military means after Moscow saved them from the worst of [World War C](#)'s ravages, which scares the US to no end since it rightly assumes that this might lead to the irreversible decline of its hegemonic influence there. It thus logically follows that the US has an urgent interest in provoking a crisis to make this scenario politically impossible.

Concluding Thoughts

Putting everything together, it can compellingly be argued that while domestic Ukrainian politics and the US' regional geostrategic ambitions play very important roles in driving the recent destabilization in Donbass, any discussion of these developments is incomplete without incorporating the influence of "vaccine nationalism". The US will do whatever it can to prevent Russian-EU Sputnik V cooperation since it fears that this would greatly reduce its hegemonic influence over the continent. Provoking a crisis in Ukraine, which was already boiling for a long time already even before last year's COVID-19 outbreak, could help advance this agenda by making it politically impossible for the EU to purchase Russia's vaccines. It would be very challenging for any country to go forward with such plans in the face of unprecedented American pressure to "reconsider" following what they'd be told was so-called "Russian aggression in Ukraine" even though Moscow wouldn't be responsible for sparking any potential conflict. That could in turn prolong America's fading hegemony over the EU.

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Andrew Korybko is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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About the author:

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