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BY DANIEL WARNER

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Are We Ready For Vaccinating With Sputnik V?



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Millions of people have died from Covid-19. Many more are infected; many more are at risk. With new variants popping up as the virus mutates, scientists around the world are searching for better protection with different vaccines. As supplies of the approved vaccines become limited, any new vaccine should be universally welcomed. After all, the pandemic has become a global danger. Any new and successful vaccine should be globally welcomed.

The scientific journal *The Lancet* has confirmed that “Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine shows 91.6% efficacy in clinical trials.” Wow. What a relief. Since Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna vaccines are in short supply, this should be a most welcome development.

But it hasn’t been. Why not?

Maybe the answer is in a nostalgia for a binary world. We have lived in a binary world. Our computers are programmed with two numbers, 0 and 1. Since the end of the Cold War, there have been two dominant political/economic systems, liberal/capitalism and state/socialism.

Sexual orientation has been defined as male or female, he or she. In sum, our perceptions have been oriented towards either/or, black or white, good or bad. During the pandemic it's been health or wealth, science or politics.

That binary world is over. Quantum computers do not use 0 and 1. The choice between liberal capitalism or state socialism is passé. The Chinese economy, projected to become the world's largest in the very near future, has state capitalism, neither state dominated socialism nor market-oriented capitalism. Sexual orientation is no longer male or female. Third gender sexual theories distinguish between biological sex and social/psychological gender. The use of he or she can now be replaced by they, them or everyone. Either/or has become fluid; black or white has many shades, and good or bad depends on the situation and perspective. Absolutes no longer exist, except perhaps for pregnant or not, dead or alive.

And Sputnik V? From a nostalgic perspective, can you see Western countries such as the United States buying a Russian vaccine? Its very name is an obvious provocation. Referring to the world's first satellite launched by the U.S.S.R. in 1957 and the vaccine, Kirill Dmitriev, CEO of the Russian Direct Investment Fund, a major sponsor of Sputnik V, boasted on CNN in late July, "Americans were surprised when they heard Sputnik's beeping. It's the same with this vaccine. Russia will have got there first."

(I do remember the trauma of watching the satellite circling the globe in 1957 on a TV in an auditorium in my high school and fearing that the Soviets were going to invade us from outer space soon after Nikita Khrushchev threatened to bury us in 1956.)

Currently, with the jailing of Russian opposition leader Alexsey Navalny, any purchase of something Russian, even if it benefits people medically will be seen as an appeasement of President Putin, especially post-Trump. The recent unsuccessful visit of the European head of diplomacy, Josep Borell, to Moscow has further heightened tensions between the West and Russia.

But not all countries or leaders are mired in binary nostalgia or anti-Russian animosity. "Every vaccine is welcome in the European Union," German Chancellor Angela Merkel told German public broadcaster ARD, praising the "good data" related to Russia's Sputnik V product. Merkel, a former scientist in East Germany, had no nostalgia problem in recognizing the value of the Russian vaccine as European countries scramble to find new sources of vaccines.

It was reported that Merkel discussed the pandemic with President Putin. During that call, it was confirmed that she said she is "is open to the idea of bilateral cooperation for the purpose of tapping European production capacities (for the Russian vaccine)." Europe's regulators have approved the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine and Moderna's, but have yet to receive a formal request to approve Sputnik V.

Europeans have been sceptical of the Russian and Chinese vaccines and are waiting for more "transparency" before making decisions. However, *The Lancet* article has given further

incentives for the vaccines to be approved. European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen told EU lawmakers that “if the Russian producers, the Chinese producers open their books, show transparency, show all the data... then they could get... a conditional market authorisation like the other ones.”

Dmitriev recently stated; “Sputnik V is now approved in 18 countries and this number will keep increasing. High efficacy, safety, easy distribution and affordability allow regulatory authorities around the world to include Sputnik V in their national vaccine portfolio.”

But politics and medical science do not mix easily. Presidents Biden and Putin had their first phone conversation in late January. Among the items discussed, it was reported by the White House, were: election meddling by Russia in U.S. elections; Russian reaction to protests for Alexsey Navalny; the extension of the New Start nuclear agreement for five years; the SolarWinds cyberattack; the Kremlin placed bounties on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, and the U.S. firm support for Ukrainian sovereignty. Nothing about the pandemic? Nothing about Sputnik V? Could Biden have even pronounced that word to Putin?

Indeed, in his first major foreign policy speech at the U.S. State Department on February 4, President Biden took a much harsher stance towards Russia than Donald Trump: “I made it clear to President Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions, interfering with our elections, cyberattacks, poisoning its citizens, are over,” he said.

Can we imagine Dr. Fauci being injected with Sputnik V? Or President Biden? Or President Putin being injected with Pfizer/BioNTech or Moderna? Why not? Wouldn’t that be a real sign of détente and resetting the relationship? A triumph of medical science over politics?

If the pandemic is the major global issue today, why can’t we imagine global cooperation for vaccines? Granted that Sputnik V needs final approval by the World Health Organization, several non-Western countries are already using the Russian vaccine. They are desperate. Does our nostalgia for a binary world continue to be self-defeating? In outdated binary terms, politics seems to be winning over medical science. While the West may have political differences with Russia, getting people vaccinated could be a non-political benefit for millions. Amid the shrill calls for science to (T)rump politics, are we ready for vaccinating with Sputnik V?

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Daniel Warner is the author of [An Ethic of Responsibility in International Relations](#). (Lynne Rienner). He lives in Geneva.