



## What Is Vaccine Diplomacy?

Éva HARNOS JAKUSNÉ<sup>1</sup>

Eszter MURÁNYI<sup>2</sup>

University of Public Service, Hungary

<sup>1</sup>e-mail: jakusne.harnos.eva@uni-nke.hu

<sup>2</sup>e-mail: emuranyi96@gmail.com

**Abstract.** The phrase “vaccine diplomacy” spread in the media during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors examine where it comes from and locate it in health-related strategic communication. The article provides an overview of the history of vaccine diplomacy taken from the literature and then places the phenomenon among the branches of specialized diplomacy as well as among the components of public diplomacy. It highlights the difference between vaccine diplomacy and 20<sup>th</sup>-century public diplomacy. The article concludes that vaccine diplomacy as a tool of soft power and persuasion hardly differs from vaccine solidarity announced by the G7 member states. In fact, the only difference between vaccine friendship, vaccine diplomacy, and vaccine solidarity is in the perspective, that is, the evaluation by the speaker. These phrases are manifestations of the rivalling narratives that accompany the global power shift.

**Keywords:** vaccine diplomacy, public diplomacy, solidarity, soft power, influence

### 1. Introduction

In 2021, India, one of the world’s centres of vaccine manufacturing, launched a project named *Vaccine Maitri* (Vaccine Friendship), within the framework of which it distributed COVID-19 vaccines to 95 states until May 2021, as it was published on the home page of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (Sharun–Dhama, 2021). Besides business deals, it donated vaccines to 47 of them, including neighbouring countries of India, a number of African states, and Albania in Europe (Suzuki–Yang, 2022: 10–13). In addition, India donated 0.2 million vaccines for the immunization of United Nations peacekeepers and proposed the temporary suspension of intellectual property rights of the COVID-19 vaccines. Although the suggestion was endorsed by the Director-General of the WHO, it was rejected

by the United States, Norway, and the European Union (Sharun–Dhama, 2021). The explanation is probably not that the opponents of the proposal did not want to establish “vaccine friendship” but rather that they intended to use the means of “vaccine diplomacy” in a different way. In this article, we will examine the definitions of vaccine diplomacy and try to place it among the components of public diplomacy as well as in the system of Organized Persuasive Communication. Our aim is to clarify the meaning of the term.

## **2. Vaccine Diplomacy in the Historical Perspective**

Vaccine diplomacy re-appeared in political discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic and set the agenda of politics for about two years. A study proves that the phenomenon is not a novelty (Hotez, 2014), similarly to epidemics: health diplomacy can be traced back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and vaccine diplomacy can be linked to the development of the first modern vaccine in 1798, although the phrase itself was coined only in 2001. Hotez summarizes the milestones of health diplomacy and vaccine diplomacy, in the context of which two Cold War events should be highlighted: the visit of Dr Albert Sabin to the Soviet Union between 1956 and 1959 in order to test the oral polio vaccine on ten million children, in collaboration with his counterpart, Dr Mikhail Chumakov. The other example is the worldwide anti-smallpox campaign from 1962 to 1966, conducted with the vaccine developed by the Soviet Union and the financial support of the USA, which was a form of joint aid to developing countries (Hotez, 2014: 3). These historical events prove that even opponents or rivals may have the intention to collaborate in the interest of humanity, in fields like epidemiology, vaccine development, trial, or delivery.

On the basis of the above, vaccine diplomacy could be associated with international relations and talks connected with vaccine manufacture, sale, and purchase. Nevertheless, the sense of this term is broader in the literature, and especially in the media. Some aspects will be discussed in the following. In his mentioned article, Hotez uses the phrases “health diplomacy”, “vaccine diplomacy”, and “vaccine science diplomacy” (2014). In his view, vaccine diplomacy can be used for any area of global health diplomacy that is connected to the use and transport of vaccines, often comprising the works of the GAVI Alliance, the WHO, and the Gates Foundation. In 2021, Western media outlets and some Asian articles used “vaccine diplomacy” for the mass global vaccine rollout of states such as China, Russia, and India (Wigmore, 2021).

Whether health or vaccine diplomacy is related to the umbrella term of public diplomacy, and whether it has positive or negative connotations, needs further examination.

### 3. The Changing Concept of Public Diplomacy

The term “public diplomacy” is relatively new: it was created in 1965 and became widely used after the end of the Cold War (Cull, 2008). It was preferred by experts in the United States as a replacement of “propaganda”, which was disgraced due to historical experience (Gregory, 2008: 275). The umbrella term involved the international information activities and cultural relations as well as broadcasting designed and sponsored by the US government. Public diplomacy aims at shaping the perceptions of foreign audiences (and nowadays, because of the omnipresent Internet, of both foreign and home audiences) in the direction desired by the sponsor. Thus, it depends on specific geostrategic contexts, interests, values, and identities. This is the reason why public diplomacy and the underlying political discourse are changeable.

Some scholars identify three types of public diplomacy in the light of the context: classic Cold War public diplomacy, local public relations, and a non-state or transitory model (Simon-Nagy, 2012: 64–71). Nevertheless, these provide only frameworks for the stakeholders who shape them according to their resources. Each state has developed a model that relies on their long-term geopolitical objectives.

Experts claim that public diplomacy is the official political means to put soft power resources into practice (Gilboa, 2008: 61). In this sense, public diplomacy is an official non-coercive (soft power) tool to influence other people’s behaviour. It also builds on creating a positive impression about a country whose experts designed it. It is termed nation branding, although the literature doubts whether the two phrases have the same meaning; for instance, Szondi analysed the two terms in his study entitled *Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences* (2008b). In another study, Szondi (2008a) elaborates on the difference between so-called conventional public diplomacy and 21<sup>st</sup>-century public diplomacy. He says a country often conducts interactive communication with the public of a foreign country while trying to create a favourable reception and a positive image. In his view, the foundation of direct contact is cooperation and shared values. Nevertheless, we think this does not apply to vaccine diplomacy in all respects. On the contrary, in this new branch of public diplomacy, which is taking shape nowadays, the context of messages is different because it reflects competing ideologies and diverse values instead of cooperation and shared values. At the same time, the conductors of vaccine diplomacy rely on the amplifying effect of concerted media campaigns, which is essential for any organized persuasion.

## 4. Vaccine Diplomacy and Public Diplomacy

Vaccine diplomacy can be interpreted as a type of “propaganda of the deed” (Smith, n. d.). One of its forms may be providing economic aid, whose actual aim is to gain influence. On the other hand, it may be a tool of public diplomacy designed by governments in order to make the public of other states accept their aspirations or even make foreign audiences support their objectives. It is known that public diplomacy as a strategic campaign sponsored by a government involves the use of international media to describe the stakeholder’s policy in a favourable way (Public Diplomacy, n. d.).

Public diplomacy is regarded as one of the specialist branches of diplomacy (such as sports diplomacy, economic diplomacy, environmental democracy, defence diplomacy, media diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy) (Bába et al., 2018: 93–94). In this sense, it comprises all of the international relations’ persuasive attempts at influencing foreign public, and it can also be named “people’s diplomacy”, including interactions of non-state actors who facilitate the implementation of a given state’s foreign policy. For this reason, it is regarded as an element, or rather a manifestation of soft power.

As to the interrelationship between public diplomacy and soft power, Joseph Nye (2008) explains that soft power cannot be identified with influence since the latter can also be the result of hard power, that is, coercion. For Nye, soft power is more an ability to attract, which originates from the values expressed in the guiding principles and culture of a country or an organization acting in international politics, and the way it accordingly manages its external relations (Nye, 2008: 95). In the information age, competition takes place for attention and credibility, and public diplomacy relies on three pillars: culture, political values, and foreign policies (Nye, 2008: 96–101). The three need to be in harmony so as to achieve the desired impression of legitimacy, reliability, and authority – that is, attraction. Consequently, public diplomacy is not the same as public relations campaigns and is not another euphemism for propaganda. Though, similarly to these, the transfer of information and the construction of a positive image also constitute part of public diplomacy, its priority is the establishment of long-term relationships aimed at ensuring a favourable environment for the policy of the stakeholder state. Public diplomacy is often centred on deeds that may be more effective in exercising soft power than telecommunications (Nye, 2008: 104; Leonard et al., 2002: 53). On the basis of the above, vaccine diplomacy can be placed in the comprehensive toolbox of public diplomacy suggested by Gilboa (2008: 74) and complemented by the authors.

## **5. A New Way of Building Soft Power: Vaccine Diplomacy during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Middle East Institute of Washington defines vaccine diplomacy as the utilization of vaccine transports for projecting soft power (Woertz–Yellinek, 2021). Similarly, an analysis published by the Center on Public Diplomacy of the University of Southern California (Ellwood, 2021) concludes that vaccine diplomacy has been a demonstration of the force of soft power. Ellwood remarks that the historical predecessor of soft power has been prestige, which each state in the world would like to acquire, and offers an approach different from Nye's. Ellwood thinks that soft power is a mechanism that associates with traditional power (military, economic, geopolitical) where influence is combined with innovation, development, and modern society (Ellwood, 2021). The countries aiming at gaining soft power through vaccine diplomacy try to provide evidence that they are able to manufacture and transfer their products worldwide. This applies to the countries of the first vaccine developers using their corporations for getting real soft power advantages, and it also reflects the competition between the early and later developers. This phenomenon extends the concept of vaccine diplomacy: it is not only that states negotiate their affairs concerning specific vaccine purchase and transport via (health) diplomacy. In addition, states that have opportunities for vaccine manufacturing and sale or donation use their capabilities for gaining prestige and influence.

India, for instance, exploited its advantage in vaccine production when it offered vaccine transports and donations in tribute to its neighbours and other, less developed countries. It can be regarded as a move in public diplomacy, especially because it is likely to improve India's relationship with those countries. Vaccine diplomacy contributed to the solution of problems which were seemingly unrelated to the pandemic, for instance, when Israel bought a shipment of Sputnik V vaccines from Russia for the Syrian government within the framework of a deal on the exchange of prisoners (Jennings, 2021).

## **6. Vaccine Diplomacy and Related Concepts in the Model of Public Diplomacy**

Following the overview of definitions, vaccine diplomacy can be located in the model of public diplomacy developed under the theory of the means of soft power. Several components of Gilboa's model (2008: 74) can be connected with vaccine diplomacy, such as public opinion and the related terms of psychology and sociology, as well as rhetoric, media effect, and technology, because of the

mediatized modern politics. This also illustrates that public diplomacy is a flexible concept owing to its interdisciplinary character, that is, its efficiency depends on the collaboration of experts of various fields.

On the basis of Szondi's model (2008a), vaccine diplomacy can be placed in the context of international relations. Szondi's model compares conventional public diplomacy with 21<sup>st</sup>-century public diplomacy and takes into account factors such as circumstances, objectives, strategies, flow of communication, context, target audience, channels, and funding. Circumstances describe the general international political conditions, while context refers to the communicative factors that impact the content and formulation of a message.

Taking into consideration this model, 21<sup>st</sup>-century vaccine diplomacy is different regarding circumstances, objectives, context, and target audience. The circumstances are fundamentally peaceful but involve new tensions rising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the global power shift is probably moving from a unipolar world order to a multipolar one. The US, China, Russia, the European Union, and India (the last one aspiring at regional leadership at least) are competing in various fields of international relations on the world stage for proving their right to be a leading power. As a result, their objective is to advance their economic and political interests by extending the circle of partners and allies better or faster than their rivals. Thus, the context of the messages is provided by the struggle of ideologies, values, and interests. The target audience is the global public because of the channels of communication, which include conventional and social media, the latter even targeting individuals with the help of profiling. That is, the home public and the public of potential allies (also the public of rivals) are targeted simultaneously. In summary, the most prominent characteristic of 21<sup>st</sup>-century vaccine diplomacy is that it is a tool of power struggle and persuasion, targeted at the global public and aiming at attracting allies and discouraging rivals. These factors relate vaccine diplomacy and the connected communication to the "political warfare" of the Cold War era, which involved fierce ideological struggle, too (Jowett–O'Donnell, 2015: 233).

Ideological struggle involves values and principles (depending on culture, such values are, for instance, human life, performance, freedom, or profits), but, as it was said above, the clash of the interests of various actors was a decisive factor of the context and of their communication. As regards communication, we cannot talk about a dialogue between state or non-state actors only, as the role of international organizations and their messages cannot be ignored. Let us take the example of India mentioned at the beginning of this article: after the proposal on the suspension of vaccine-related intellectual property rights, both the WHO and the European Union stated their opinion (Sharun–Dhama, 2021). It can be assumed that the public of any country, whether it was targeted by public

diplomacy operations or not, consumed a mixture of all the messages thanks to the Internet and social media.

Background research on the effectiveness of the vaccines provided valuable information to the public, but its media leaks and the adverse media campaigns conducted by either rival states or rival pharmaceutical companies resulted both in an ideological struggle and a commercial war. The rumours about the possible side-effects of the Astra Zeneca vaccine, for instance, intimidated both patients and potential buyer states, not to mention the week-after-week publication by the manufacturer country of each vaccine on its outstanding efficiency and on the low efficiency of the vaccines of the competitors. It seemed as if each actor involved wanted to prove their technological superiority with ideological bias. With the climate of fear from the disease and the astonishment of citizens about extraordinary security measures taken by the governments, the media environment resembled more the “psychological warfare” of the Cold War era – the American term for British “political warfare” (Jowett–O’Donnell, 2015: 233) – than the civilized 21<sup>st</sup>-century circumstances described in Szondi’s public diplomacy model. Background research on the impact of such media content was easily available in the form of software.

## **7. The Vaccine Solidarity of the G7**

At the G7 summit held in Carbis Bay between 11 and 13 June 2021, the European Union was represented by Charles Michel, President of the European Council, and Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. The host of the summit, the United Kingdom, invited the leaders of Australia, India, South Korea, and South Africa to some of the sessions. The participants announced that they would provide two billion COVID-19 vaccines for countries suffering from vaccine shortage in order to help contain the pandemic (G7 Summit, n. d.). The participants also promised to accelerate the manufacturing of the vaccines and to take a constructive attitude towards the right to intellectual property at the talks with the World Trade Organization.

According to the information on the home page of global solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic (n. d.) and a related infographic (Infographic COVID-19, n. d.), the European Union offers 2 billion vaccines to poor countries within the framework of the COVAX global initiative, of which 1.3 billion will be available for 92 low- or medium-income countries by the end of 2021. Just like the home page of the Ministry of External Affairs of India, the 2021 G7 summit home page publishes statistics on countries that received aid until June 2021. Among others, Ghana, Cambodia, Moldova, Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Honduras are mentioned.

The title of the infographic home page is “Infographic – COVID-19: the EU’s contribution to global *vaccine solidarity*” (emphasis added by the authors).

All the vaccines listed on the home page have been developed and manufactured in Europe, except for COVOVAX and COVISHIELD, the Indian versions of the Astra Zeneca vaccine. Other international organizations such as the WHO, UNICEF, GAVI, The Vaccine Alliance and CEPI, or the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations also participate in the vaccine aid project. In addition, the G7 home page gives a detailed overview of the financial support provided to non-EU countries, part of which is low-interest credit. The news and data use the phrase “vaccine solidarity” consistently, and the terms “health diplomacy” or “vaccine diplomacy” do not appear.

## 8. Conclusions

In a study trying to introduce a comprehensive model of Organized Persuasive Communication, Bakir et al. (2018) discuss the various types of persuasion used in our modern world and emphasize that one reason for terminological confusion is the decisive role of point of view. Actors in modern democracies attribute “propaganda” campaigns to so-called autocratic states, whereas no state can function without forms of influence either impacting their own population and aiming at the public support of policies or establishing their position in the international arena. In our modern age, other actors can be added, such as corporations, international organizations, or NGOs. The difference lies in the degree of transparency and coercion or the lack of it. The continuum of organized persuasive communication ranges from strategic dialogical communication through strategic one-way persuasion – which are consensual, that is, the target audience are aware of the persuasive attempt and of the source – to manipulative, deceptive coercion. Public diplomacy and its specialized areas of health and vaccine diplomacy are located at the consensual, transparent end of the scale. Still, the meaning of a seemingly neutral phrase can be shifted towards the other end if it is put into an emotionally negative context.

In our article, we have proved that a term for an activity in international relations can express ideological stance and, in fact, can become a tool of ideological struggle and of rivalry. The language describing the activities of each agent reflects the current geopolitical competition. The donation and sale of COVID-19 vaccines by so-called “revisionist states” (Mead, 2014), which intend to change the current world order and reposition themselves, was labelled *vaccine diplomacy* by the “status quo states”, which had an interest in protecting their leading positions and alliances. The same “status quo states” named their similar activities *vaccine solidarity* so as to delineate them from the objectives of the “revisionist states”.

India, which is often described as a rising regional power, named the same vaccine donations and sales *vaccine friendship*. Consequently, these terms are not primarily about health diplomacy, the specialist branch of public diplomacy, but about the geopolitical situation and political ambitions.

Vaccine diplomacy, if considered a neutral term, however, can either be placed in the inventory of public diplomacy within health diplomacy or, due to the securitization of epidemics (Seeger–Sellnow, 2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Molnár et al., 2020), it can be considered an independent specialized branch. In its meaning free of evaluative and emotional connotation, it could be a component of health diplomacy. It has a long history, and in the Cold War era or in the early 2000s it even involved the collaboration and cooperation of great powers for the prevention and eradication of epidemics and pandemics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, it received negative connotations because of the geopolitical situation: Western powers were suspicious about the vaccine development, sales, and donations of China and Russia, seeing these as attempts to gain influence. The G7 member states launched the COVAX programme jointly with the European Union, attempting to counterbalance the political and economic effects of vaccine diplomacy, the elements of which were similar to the activities of the rival powers. In their strategic communication, they emphasized the ideological differences and competing interests by the consistent use of the terms “vaccine diplomacy” and “vaccine solidarity”.

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