

Black Sea security: Is Covid-19 a window of opportunity for Ukraine?

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About the author

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Black Sea security: Is Covid-19 a window of opportunity for Ukraine?

This paper examines the consequences of the COVID-19 health crisis for Ukraine and implications for U.S. policy in the Black Sea region. It argues that with COVID-19, there is now a window of opportunity for the U.S. to strengthen its presence and establish leadership in the Black Sea through closer cooperation with Ukraine.

The Black Sea region is an important gateway between Europe and Asia. Policymakers have long highlighted the geopolitical importance of a secure Black Sea region because it is closely connected to the stability of the Eurasian continent at large. In 1904, H J Mackinder remarked that a strong strategic position and influence in the Black Sea region would provide opportunities for establishing dominance over Eurasia, which is vital to controlling the world at large.¹

The link between geopolitics and health security is vital when studying the impact of COVID-19 on the Black Sea region and specifically, Ukraine. According to Alan Ingram, the potential for disease to disrupt sovereignty and state stability, causing implications for wider geopolitics and international security, is high.² Similarly, Stefan Elbe argues that the power of a disease lies in its ability to directly alter military balances and speed up ongoing conflicts.³ Long term, viruses have the potential to undermine the social, economic, and political layers of societies. This exacerbates existing problems while creating new weaknesses – a combination which creates fertile ground for instability.

The Black Sea region is currently managing military pressure from Russia, the economic influence of China, and soft power efforts of the West, making it a stage for power competition. With COVID-19 exacerbating Ukraine's political weaknesses and economic vulnerabilities, Russia and China are increasingly adopting a united front in the Black Sea. Such geopolitical changes in power distribution require more active presence and involvement of the U.S. in the Black Sea. This is not only to counterbalance the actions of Russia and China, but also to ensure a peaceful, stable, and democratic future for the region.

1 Mackinder, H. J. "The Geographical Pivot of History." *The Geographical Journal*. April 1904.

http://katedrawiss.uwm.edu.pl/sites/default/files/download/202005/h._mackinder_the_geographical_pivot_of_history_1904.pdf

2 Ingram, Alan. "The New Geopolitics of Disease: Between Global Health and Global Security." *Geopolitics*. January 24, 2007.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14650040591003516?journalCode=fgeo20>

3 Elbe, Stefan. "Strategic Implications of HIV/AIDS." 2005.

Ukraine

COVID-19 has highlighted the scale of global inequality. While the pandemic hit all countries of the Black Sea, and undermined security capabilities across the region, Ukraine's geopolitical positioning means it has suffered most in terms of global inequalities in the race for the vaccine.⁴ Ukraine has always had a unique role in the Black Sea having played an active part in tug-of-war competitions between the East and West on the Eurasian continent.

While in the short-term Ukraine benefited from Western attention because of this East-West rivalry, it now faces a deadlock in the geopolitics of coronavirus vaccines. Now, unable to secure the health of its population, Ukraine is looking Eastward for a solution. At the same time, Russia views the crisis as an opportunity to secure its position in Crimea and further 'Russify' the temporarily occupied territories in Eastern Ukraine.⁵⁶ COVID-19 has exposed the interdependency of health and geopolitics where a health crisis is used to manipulate and influence the geopolitics of the region. The coronavirus pandemic became a focal point of not only Ukraine's detriment but that of the whole Black Sea region.

Vaccinations

As one of Europe's poorest countries, Ukraine has significantly lagged behind in securing vaccines for its 41 million people, asking the West to help while banning the Russian vaccine. Despite differences in vaccine strategy amongst the Black Sea littoral states, Ukraine is a particular case in the region due to its geopolitical location. Situated between the East and West in the global race for the vaccine, Ukraine is struggling both with obtaining vaccines and ensuring fair and equitable public access to these vaccines.⁷⁸

4 Varenikova, Maria. "In Vaccine Geopolitics, a Great Game Played with Ukrainian's Health." New York Times. January 9, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/09/world/europe/covid-vaccines-ukraine.html>

5 Pishchikova, Kateryna. "Covid-19 in Crimea: A Unique Challenge for an Unusual Periphery." ISPI. May 20, 2020.

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/covid-19-crimea-unique-challenge-unusual-periphery-26226>

6 "Russia to ship COVID-19 vaccine to rebel-held eastern Ukraine, Kremlin says." Reuters. February 3, 2020.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-russia-ukraine-idUSKBN2A31WZ>

7 Herszenhorn, David M. "Ukrainian PM: Russia using Covid influence for vaccine." Politico EU. February 10, 2020.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-using-covid-vaccine-for-influence-ukrainian-prime-minister-denys-shmyhal/>

8 "New EU programme to support readiness for vaccination efforts in Eastern Partnership countries with WHO." February 11, 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/new-eu-programme-support-readiness-vaccination-efforts-eastern-partnership-countries>

Set to be among the last countries in the world to receive the vaccination, Ukraine has been forced to turn to Asia for its vaccine roll-out.⁹ This is for several reasons: Ukraine cannot afford Pfizer vaccines from the U.S. due to a lack of infrastructure needed to store and transport them; Kyiv has banned Russian vaccines for political reasons; and Ukraine cannot rely on the EU because the bloc is facing its own delays.¹⁰¹¹¹² Having become more vulnerable to Russian hybrid war attacks, Ukraine is forced to seek partnerships in Asia. In the absence of Western support, Ukraine is looking East and has agreed to import the Chinese Sinovac vaccine while also securing a deal of vaccine supply from India.¹³¹⁴

While managing the fallout of COVID-19, Black Sea countries have become more vulnerable to the hybrid attacks and economic influences of Russia and China. It is important to highlight that Ukraine has found itself isolated from other Black Sea countries since the beginning of the pandemic. Both Ukraine and Moldova are among the last to ensure vaccine supply. However, Romania is supporting its neighbor by donating vaccines.¹⁵ In contrast, Ukraine has been completely ignored as an isolated borderland between Russia and the West. During Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shymhal's visit to Brussels in early February, it was decided that Poland would provide around 1.2 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Ukraine.¹⁶ But delays in the EU's vaccine roll-out have put this arrangement on hold. Meanwhile, the Baltics are unable to aid neighboring countries because they are in need of assistance themselves. Having been heavily affected by the coronavirus during the second wave, three Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – wrote to the Commission asking for a new, more effective, and cohesive

9 "More than 85 poor countries will not have widespread access to coronavirus vaccines before 2023." Economist Intelligence Unit. January 27, 2021. <https://www.eiu.com/n/85-poor-countries-will-not-have-access-to-coronavirus-vaccines/>

10 "Three companies in Ukraine ready to store Pfizer." Ukrinform. February 16, 2021. <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3191522-three-companies-in-ukraine-ready-to-store-pfizer-vaccines-shmyhal.html>

11 "Ukraine formally bans registration of Russian COVID-19 vaccines." Reuters. February 10, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-ukraine-russia/ukraine-formally-bans-registration-of-russian-covid-19-vaccines-idINL1N2KG2EZ>

12 Deutsch, Jillian. "How Europe fell behind on vaccines." Politico EU. January 27, 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-coronavirus-vaccine-struggle-pfizer-biontech-astrazeneca/>

13 "Ukraine signs up for China's Sinovac vaccine, with doses expected soon." Reuters. December 30, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-ukraine-vaccine/ukraine-signs-upfor-chinas-sinovac-vaccine-with-doses-expected-soon-idUSKBN294150>

14 "Ukraine strikes deal for supply of 500,000 doses of Indian COVISHIELD vaccine." February 20, 2021. <https://covid.unian.info/covid-19-ukraine-strikes-deal-for-supply-of-500-000-doses-of-indian-covishield-vaccine-11328737.html>

15 Oroschakoff, Kalina. "Romania donates Covid-19 vaccines to Moldova." Politico EU. February 27, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/romania-donates-covid-19-vaccines-to-moldova/>

16 "Ukraine to receive 1.2 million doses of AstraZeneca vaccine from Poland." Ukrinform. February 17, 2021. <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-society/3192453-ukraine-to-receive-12m-doses-of-astrazeneca-vaccine-from-poland-pm.html>

‘needs-based’ system of vaccine distribution to halt the spread of the virus across Europe.¹⁷ Thus, the EU is unable to aid Ukraine’s vaccine roll-out because of persistent delays in vaccine deliveries to EU members, as well as findings that the AstraZeneca vaccine has been linked to a number of rare blood clots.¹⁸

A strong rhetoric of mutual cooperation and a “common fight against the coronavirus” persists within the EU, but the bloc is clearly unable to fully assist Ukraine’s health insecurity when its medical system is poor and largely reliant on post-Soviet equipment. While the EU provided Ukraine with the largest amount of macro-financial assistance to help fight the coronavirus, it is not capable of providing aid in terms of vaccines due to its own internal challenges of vaccine supply delays.^{19,20}

Russia

It has been unsurprising to see global rivalry in the race for a vaccine. However, a pursuit of “‘pandemic populism’, authoritarian opportunism and geopolitical skulduggery”²¹ is transforming the pandemic into an effective tool for anti-establishment ideologies that wish to ‘take back control.’ This could pose a greater threat for international affairs in the post-pandemic future. Russia uses this tool to demonstrate to the world that the political status quo is incorrect, and it is in fact Russia who is better adapted, better equipped, and better managed for a pandemic than Western states. It has benefited from COVID-19, having strengthened its influence in neighboring states by spreading disinformation that has enabled pro-Russian forces to gain more public support in Ukraine.^{22,23} Russia’s ‘vaccine diplomacy’ seems to be a win-win strategy in constructing a positive pandemic narrative in which Russia creates and projects an

17 Foote, Natasha, “New needs-based COVID vaccine distribution scheme needed, say Baltics.” Euractiv. March 12, 2021. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/coronavirus/news/new-needs-based-covid-vaccine-distribution-scheme-needed-say-baltics/>

18 “Commission extends transparency and authorization mechanism for exports of COVID-19 vaccines.” European Commission. March 11, 2021. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_1121

19 “EU disburses 600 million in macro-financial assistance to Ukraine.” European Commission. December 9, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/news_corner/news/eu-disburses-€600-million-macro-financial-assistance-ukraine_en

20 Adler, Katya. “Covid: Why is the EU’s vaccine rollout so slow?” BBC. January 29, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55844268>

21 Dodds, Klaus et al. “The COVID-19 pandemic: territorial, political, governance dimensions of the crisis.” Territory, Politics, Governance. June 22, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2020.1771022>

22 Leigh, Michael. “Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?” Bruegel. April 27, 2021. <https://www.bruegel.org/2021/04/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-from-china-and-russia/>

23 Scott, Mark. “In race for coronavirus vaccine, Russia turns to disinformation.” Politico. November 19, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/covid-vaccine-disinformation-russia/>

impression to the world that its medical science prevails over that in the West, while showing readiness to aid neighboring countries in the name of humanitarian values.²⁴ In doing so, Russia has diverted global attention from its actions in the occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea, thereby strengthening its presence and influence in the Black Sea region.

Donbas

On Mar. 22, 2020, the Ukrainian government announced the closure of its borders across the contact line in Eastern Ukraine, leaving non-government-controlled areas landlocked without support or sufficient infrastructure to respond to the health crisis. It was announced that the administrative borders between Ukraine and Donetsk/Luhansk regions would be closed indefinitely, opening a window for Russia to step in. The following day, Russia amended its lockdown decree No. 671-r and opened the crossing points for the people of Donetsk and Luhansk “in relation to the economic and transport blockade by Ukraine of certain districts of Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine, guided by the principles of humanity.”²⁵ The border closures have had a detrimental impact on the population living in the non-government-controlled areas of Donbas, who have been unable to withdraw their pensions and money, visit relatives, or deal with official business like document legislation. The pandemic has isolated the breakaway regions of Ukraine, dramatically worsening the humanitarian situation there.

Six years since it began providing military, political, economic, and diplomatic support to separatist forces in Ukraine, Russia has added an ‘humanitarian’ instrument to assert its control over secessionist territories and fill the gap of a worsening humanitarian situation, including in terms of water supply, electricity and gas installations, disrupted food supplies, and destroyed medical facilities. There is no available data on COVID-19 cases in Donbas, simply due to no “official” information and lack of communication with the government in temporarily occupied territories.²⁶ Since the beginning of pandemic, the Donbas region has been forced to deal with restricted traffic through the crossing points at the contact line as well as limited medical facilities to accept and treat the sick. Without access to Ukrainian territory or medical assistance, the Donbas region and its people have been driven further

24 Leigh, Michael. “Vaccine diplomacy: soft power lessons from China and Russia?” bruegel. April 27, 2021.

<https://www.bruegel.org/2021/04/vaccine-diplomacy-soft-power-lessons-from-china-and-russia/>

25 <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202003230042>

26 “COVID-19 pandemic: what is going on in the occupied part of Donbas and in Crimea?” Ukraine Crisis. March 27, 2020.

<https://uacrisis.org/en/75276-covid-19-pandemic-going-occupied-part-donbas-crimea>

away from Ukrainian authorities and forced to seek help in Russia.²⁷²⁸ Health insecurity of the region, exacerbated by the current crisis, has led to thousands of people taking advantage of Russia's 'passportization' policy.²⁹ Since 2019, this policy has allowed residents of the separatist controlled the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic, DPR and LPR, to become Russian citizens through a simplified procedure. So far, it is estimated that the policy has affected about 2.9 million Ukrainians in Donbas and Crimea with 400,000 people in Donbas undergoing the compulsory conversion to Russian citizenship since the beginning of the conflict.³⁰

Although banned by Ukrainian authorities, Russian vaccines are still circulating in the breakaway territories of DPR and LPR as a part of 'humanitarian convoy' dispatched by Russia.³¹³² Russia is attempting to portray itself as an humanitarian actor in the region while at the same time condemning and pressuring Kyiv to address Ukraine's struggles in securing alternative vaccine options for its population.

Crimea

The situation in Crimea is similar. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the peninsula has followed Russia's example in underreporting COVID-19 cases. A lockdown for Crimea was announced in March, despite being among the least affected regions, especially when compared to the rest of Russia.³³ This resulted in Crimea's air traffic decreasing by more than 70 percent and rail traffic declining by five

27 Durnev, Dmitry. "In Ukraine's Donbas, coronavirus is pushing people on both sides even further apart." Open Democracy. June 30, 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/coronavirus-donbas-crossing-points/>

28 Parfenchuk, Maryna. "Zelensky's strategy in Donbas is destined to fail: Human security as a major constraint." New Eastern Europe. August 12, 2020. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/08/12/zelenskyys-strategy-in-donbas-is-destined-to-fail-human-security-as-a-major-constraint/>

29 "Russia's "Passportisation" of the Donbas." German Institute for International and Security Affairs. August 2020. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2020C41/>

30 "Forced Russian 'passportization affects 2.9 million Ukrainians in Donbas, Crimea." Kyiv Post. February 20, 2020. <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/forced-russian-passportization-affects-2-9-million-ukrainians-in-donbas-crimea.html>

31 "Ukraine officially bans registration of Russian COVID-19 vaccines." Reuters. February 10, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-ukraine-russia/ukraine-formally-bans-registration-of-russian-covid-19-vaccines-idINL1N2KG2EZ>

32 "Ukraine's separatists roll out Russia's Sputnik V vaccine." Moscow Times. February 1, 2020. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/02/01/ukraine-separatists-roll-out-russias-sputnik-v-vaccine-a72800>

33 Tafuro Ambrosetti, Eleonara. "Covid-19 in Crimea: A Unique Challenge for an Unusual "Periphery"." ISPI. May 20, 2020. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/covid-19-crimea-unique-challenge-unusual-periphery-26226>

times.³⁴³⁵ However, a 46 percent increase was observed in cargo transportation and car arrivals through the Kerch Bridge, compared to last year when the bridge was first introduced.³⁶ These statistics demonstrate that COVID-19 is helping to isolate the peninsula while pushing for the region's full integration into Russian territory.

The pandemic has presented an opportunity for Russia to increase control over the region and allow exceptional actions to be taken, such as deploying paramilitary units to patrol streets and establishing tighter control on the peninsula. According to the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, once an issue has been successfully labelled as a 'security' issue, it is taken beyond the realm of normal political discourse and allows exceptional actions to be undertaken.³⁷ With COVID-19 clearly recognized as a global 'threat' to livelihoods, Russia has been able to use this discourse to justify further militarization of the Crimean Peninsula. Thus, in identifying the pandemic as a "threat to survival", militarization becomes a justified and necessary process.³⁸

Using the global health crisis as justification, Kremlin authorities have introduced 'Cossack' paramilitaries to patrol the streets alongside local police.³⁹ Deployed 'Cossacks' do not have any legal status but are controlled by the Russian security service. They patrol the streets and enforce lockdown provisions which state that as of May 1, anyone arriving to the Crimean Peninsula should be placed "under observation" in "dedicated facilities" for 14 days, unless he/ she is a homeowner in Crimea. The Crimean Human Rights Group has recorded numerous cases where Cossacks have been involved in enforced disappearances, abductions, and torture by helping the police exert pressure on citizens and then by falsifying prosecutions against Crimean activists.⁴⁰ The 'Cossack' constituencies in Crimea have declared the creation of a 'Black Sea Cossack host' – a sort of Black Sea Cossack army under the orders of Russian security services. The Council of Ministers of the Republic of Crimea have issued a Decree "On the creation of the State Treasury Institution of the Republic of Crimea 'The Cossacks of Crimea'", which

34 <https://iz.ru/995406/2020-04-03/passazhiropotok-v-krym-aviatcionnym-transportom-upal-za-sutki-na-76>

35 <https://news.allcrimea.net/news/2020/4/18/passazhiropotok-poezda-moskvasimferopol-sokratilsya-v-pyat-raz-130442/>

36 <https://www.rzd-partner.ru/zhd-transport/news/po-krymskomu-mostu-zheleznoy-dorogoy-perevezeno-bolee-850-tys-tonn-gruzov/>

37 Nyman, Jonna. "Securitization theory." In *Critical Approach to Security*. Abingdon, Routledge. 2013. <https://bit.ly/3pj4vqK>

38 McDonald, Matt. "Securitization and the Construction of Security." *European Journal of International Relations*. 2008. <https://ir101.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/mcdonald-securitization-and-the-construction-of-security.pdf>

39 Goble, Paul. "Moscow Sets Up New 'Cossack' Paramilitary Units for Possible Use Against Ukraine." The Jamestown Foundation. April 9, 2020. <https://jamestown.org/program/moscow-sets-up-new-cossack-paramilitary-units-for-possible-use-against-ukraine/>

40 Coynash, Hayla. "Russia to use paramilitaries to enforce Covid-19 isolation in occupied Crimean." Kharkiv Human Rights Group April 13, 2020. <http://khpg.org/en/1586718841>

legitimizes and secures Cossacks' presence and influence over illegally annexed territory.⁴¹ Over this short period of time, however, Cossacks have managed to organize themselves efficiently and begin recruiting youth into military schools, such as the Crimean Cossacks' Corps of Cadets.⁴² Thus, the militarization tactics of Russia are also embedded in public life by using "patriotic education" as a tool to indoctrinate local populations and subject young children to military training or other military-related activities.⁴³

The deployment of 'Cossacks' to Crimea will have long term effects on the entire Black Sea region, which could undermine the security of the region for years to come. Not only do Cossacks possess weapons and military training, but they are also strengthening their network by establishing military camps and centers for training the youth. In the years to come, Crimea will be full of young people, militarily trained and well-acquainted with weaponry, who are seeking employment. Cossacks, a pro-Russian group based on Russian values, language, and mentality, will transmit those characteristics to youths. This will, consequently, assist efforts to bring Crimea closer to Russia. Intensified control over Crimea is isolating the region even further and pushing for a definitive break-up from Ukraine and the region.

Establishing tighter control over Crimea by deploying security service forces has gone hand-in-hand with seizing land and demanding all non-Russian citizens to sell and leave their properties in the peninsula. During his lockdown announcement in March, President Vladimir Putin issued a decree "On introducing amendments to the list of border territories, where foreign citizens, stateless persons and foreign legal entities may not own land plots."⁴⁴ This decree states that 'foreigners' do not have the right to own land in 'coastal territories' of Crimea, except for three regions which have no access to the Black Sea. The category of 'foreigners' includes both Ukrainians and Crimean Tatars who have not acquired Russian citizenship. The decree also states that if land is not sold before Mar. 20, 2021, it will be done so forcibly. In demanding the destruction or expropriation of property, Russia is not only breaching international law.⁴⁵ It is also securing its influence in Crimea and ensuring it will become the control point of the entire Black Sea region. Given the heavy militarization of Crimea over the past six years, it is not hard to assume that the lands bordering Ukraine and the littoral areas of the Black Sea will become only more militarized and patrolled in the near future.

41 <https://rk.gov.ru/ru/document/show/25259>

42 <https://ru.krymr.com/a/video/29204818.html>

43 Matviyishyn, Iryna. "Children as a tool: how Russia militarizes kids in the Donbas and Crimea." Atlantic Council. May 3, 2019.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/children-as-a-tool-how-russia-militarizes-kids-in-the-donbas-and-crimea/>

44 <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202003200021?index=0&rangeSize=1>

45 Coynash, Hayla. "Russia calls Ukrainians in Crimea 'foreigners' and forces them to sell or lose their land." Kharkiv Human Rights Group. May 7, 2020. <http://khpg.org/en/1588801601>

China

Russia is clearly using COVID-19 in Ukraine to gain more control over the Black Sea. On the other hand, China sees an opportunity to build a long-lasting and beneficial alliance. COVID-19 has opened a window of opportunity for China to engage with the Black Sea region and build closer ties with the countries that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative. In 2017, China and the World Health Organization signed a memorandum of understanding for a 'Health Silk Road,' a project under the Belt and Road Initiative aimed at improving the health of populations along the route.⁴⁶ Introducing a health component to the Belt and Road Initiative was met with positive feedback from global powers. But in the context of COVID-19, a 'Health Silk Road' plan could have very different implications today.⁴⁷

China intends to play a leadership role in building global infrastructure that strengthens medical systems across different states, so that they can compete for a share of the global vaccine market. However, in the case of Ukraine, the provision of COVID vaccines could also be the foundation for the long-term presence of China.⁴⁸

Ukraine's location makes it a potential transit hub for the Belt and Road Initiative. Ukraine lies along the land route connecting the EU with its second most important trading partner, China. While Ukrainian infrastructure is underdeveloped, it presents a medium-term opportunity for China.⁴⁹ There have been previous attempts to transform Ukraine into a 'sea terminal' with Chinese support. In 2013, Ukraine's then President Viktor Yanukovich signed a range of agreements with China spanning the construction of a new deep-sea terminal in Crimea and the reconstruction of the Sevastopol Sea Port.⁵⁰ Crimea was intended to become a large transit hub, but following the illegal annexation of the peninsula, investments were withdrawn.

However, China has remained somewhat focused on Ukraine with smaller infrastructure modernization investment projects reemerging in the south of Ukraine, such as a new highway linking Odessa and

46 Baijie, An. "WHO, China sign pact establishing 'health Silk Road.'" China Daily. January 19, 2017.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2017wef/2017-01/19/content_27993857.htm

47 <https://gh.bmj.com/content/5/2/e002261.full>

48 "Ukraine expects first batch of Sinovac vaccines in three or four weeks." Ukrinform. January 26, 2021.

<https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-politics/3178158-ukraine-expects-first-batch-of-sinovac-vaccines-in-three-or-four-weeks-shmyhal.html>

49 Mykal, Olena. "Why China is interested in Ukraine." The Diplomat. 2016. <https://bit.ly/3fO2O1f>

50 <http://inpress.ua/ru/economics/21566-perelomnyy-vizit-yanukovicha-v-kitay-30-mlrd-investitsiy-i-garantirovannaya-kvota-dlya-ukrainskoy-produktsii>

Mykolaiv in Southern Ukraine.⁵¹ The Euromaidan Revolution and conflict with Russia was a pivotal moment for Sino-Ukrainian cooperation because Ukraine's political trajectory shifted toward the West and the Transatlantic community. This heavily impacted Ukraine's relations with China, hindered economic cooperation, and made it difficult for Ukraine to take part in the development of the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵² The health crisis, however, could signal a Sino-Ukrainian rapprochement. In 2019, China overtook Russia as Ukraine's largest trading partner.⁵³ Also in 2019, China's share in Ukraine's overall foreign trade rose to 10.6 percent, outpacing Russia's share of 9.7 percent. Germany ranked third with 6.9 percent, followed by Poland with 6.1 percent.⁵⁴

China will likely become Ukraine's largest vaccine provider given its geopolitical position.⁵⁵ Ukraine has signed a contract to purchase 1.8 million doses of China's Sinovac vaccine. By aligning on common interests in this time of crisis, Ukraine is contributing to China's 'Health Silk Road' plan, potentially starting strong economic cooperation in other areas. Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, the economic partnership between Ukraine and China continues to grow and both sides are ready to deepen mutually beneficial cooperation.⁵⁶⁵⁷ Thus, the pandemic has accelerated an existing tendency for cooperation between the two states.

Opportunities for the United States: Policy Recommendations

The COVID-19 crisis has had a detrimental impact on international politics. Some countries have used the virus to secure its geopolitical position and assert control. Others saw the health crisis as a way to revitalize once close ties. Ukraine is at a crossroads with domestic vulnerabilities forcing Kyiv to seek collaboration with the East as it loses ground in Crimea and Donbas.

51 "China Road and Bridge Awarded Odessa-Mykolaiv Highway Project; China continues to invest in Ukraine, but outside of Crimea." RWR Advisory Group. July 10, 2017. <https://www.rwradvisory.com/china-road-and-bridge-awarded-odessa-mykolaiv-highway-project-china-continues-to-invest-in-ukraine-but-outside-of-crimea/>

52 Kaczmarek, Marcin. "The effects of China's economic expansion on Eastern Partnership countries." EU-STRAT. March 2019. <http://eu-strat.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EU-STRAT-Working-Paper-No.-17.pdf>

53 "Trade geography of Ukraine in 2019: declining Russia, rising China, slowing EU." Ukrainian Liaison Office in Brussels. February 17, 2020. <https://ukraineoffice.blogactiv.eu/2020/02/17/trade-geography-of-ukraine-in-2019-declining-russia-rising-china-slowing-eu/>

54 Datskevych, Natalia. "it's official: China is Ukraine's largest trading partner." Kyiv Post. September 27, 2019. <https://www.kyivpost.com/business/its-official-china-is-ukraines-largest-trading-partner.html>

55 Kovtoniuk, Pavlo. "Geopolitics complicates Ukraine's vaccine quest." Atlantic Council. January 27, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/geopolitics-complicates-ukraines-vaccine-quest/>

56 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/europe/2020-12/03/c_139561449.htm

57 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-01/22/c_139688941.htm

The U.S. must see COVID-19 as an opportunity to engage with Ukraine and the region more deeply. Since 2014, Ukraine has consistently showed interest and willingness to build closer ties with the U.S. as its main strategic ally in the context of transatlantic relations.

Health Security

The U.S. should increase its vaccination assistance to Ukraine. While the storage of Pfizer vaccines remains a challenge for Ukraine, the U.S. can lead in helping Ukraine build the infrastructure needed for vaccination storage and distribution.

But simply helping with vaccines will not suffice for the long-term. Longer-term, the Biden Administration should adopt a vocal and active stance in efforts to reform Ukraine's health sector. Ukraine must modernize and rebuild its medical system so as to be more independent from external influences. The U.S. should help safeguard this process by providing expertise, assistance, and equipment to Ukraine, in addition to consolidating its position as a close ally.

Fighting Disinformation

Ukraine is a valuable ally in fighting Russian disinformation. The U.S. should consider closer cooperation with Ukraine in digital and Artificial Intelligence (AI). On Mar. 11, 2021, at the 'Ukraine 30. Culture. Media. Tourism' forum, Head of the Presidential Administration Andriy Yermak announced the creation of a center to counter disinformation. The same day, President Volodymyr Zelensky signed a decree on the center which will sit within the National Security and Defense Council and will be apolitical. The President himself is expected to exercise necessary control and closely monitor activities. The U.S. should establish close cooperation with this center, which could help suppress and diminish Russian influence over regional politics.

Moreover, the Biden Administration should support Ukrainian think tanks and local NGOs working to fight disinformation. Through joint projects and increased funding, organizations like Ukraine Crisis Media Center, Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", VoxCheck, StopFake, Institute of Mass Information, Euromaidan Press, and others could focus more on disinformation campaigns that are harmful to national and international security situations.

Security and Defense

Importantly, the Biden Administration should approach Ukraine from a regional perspective with a goal of bringing greater security to the whole of the Black Sea, rather than focusing solely on Ukraine's domestic situation in terms of democratization of endemic corruption fighting. This would require the U.S. seeing past some differences, including views toward China. In a recent interview on the HBO series

Axios,⁵⁸ Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said that he didn't consider China to be a major geopolitical threat. His remarks were perceived to cause future friction with the Biden Administration and within Congress, who believe the opposite.⁵⁹

It is especially important to set aside some of these differences to facilitate stronger U.S. investment in military infrastructure, capabilities, and presence, particularly in the maritime sector. Ukraine has already reaffirmed a strong desire and readiness to increase NATO presence in the Black Sea.⁶⁰ The preservation and potential expansion of U.S. maritime presence, combined with an increased number of joint military operations, should form a key part of America's Ukraine policy.

The U.S. should adopt a more active role in resolving the impasse of the current peace process negotiations regarding the Donbas. As the European co-chairs of the 'Normandy Process', France and Germany have had little success in assisting the implementation of ceasefire agreements between Russia and Ukraine. The U.S. would be a strong addition to the negotiating table. It is a right for the U.S. to take the lead on Donbas negotiations and play a larger diplomatic role in the conflict resolution process. American presence during talks with Russia would help facilitate Ukraine's integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. This in turn would help establish secure and peaceful Black Sea.

The U.S. should push for enhanced security cooperation in the Black Sea by consulting with and mobilizing NATO Allies and partners. The Biden Administration should consider granting Ukraine the status of a major non-NATO Ally, while launching a NATO Membership Action Plan and establishing a permanent U.S. military presence in Ukraine.

Conclusion

Ukraine is faced with many potential new alliances which could meet the needs of Ukraine in the short term but destabilize the Black Sea region in the long term. The U.S. must ensure that the Black Sea remains stable and protected due to its geostrategic importance to the transatlantic community. It can only be done so by revising and adjusting its bilateral policies toward the littoral states in a way in which thinking about the region holistically prevails.

While Ukraine lags behind in its vaccine roll-out, Russia is claiming more control over temporarily occupied and annexed territories. Ukraine's health insecurity, combined with the ongoing military

58 Swan, Jonathan. "Exclusive: Ukraine's Zelensky says he doesn't feel China threat." Axios. January 31, 2020.

<https://www.axios.com/ukraine-zelensky-china-coronavirus-vaccines-e6a45253-1448-43a0-a846-b8d0f448eaa1.html>

59 Ibid.

60 <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-ukraina-nato-chorne-more/31121666.html>

conflict, has left the country weak against Russian hybrid warfare. Russia has created an opportunity out of COVID-19 to establish its 'passportization' policy in Donbas. It has also enhanced its militarization strategy in Crimea, which has led not only to isolation of the peninsula but also to its 'Russification.' Meanwhile, China has also seen COVID-19 as an opportunity, demonstrating ambitions to be closer to Eastern Europe by harmonizing relations with Ukraine in an economically beneficial way for both countries' way.

The decisions and actions of Ukraine during this pandemic could affect the future of the Black Sea security irreversibly. It is crucial for the U.S. to pay closer attention to the developments in the region and think about new and creative ways to transform and adapt its policy towards Ukraine in a way which can secure and protect the whole Black Sea region.

