Ukraine begs Europe for coronavirus vaccine

Jason Melanovski
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Ukrainian President Volodomyr Zelensky begged Europe's richest countries last week for assistance in obtaining coronavirus vaccines as the virus continues to rip through the country's impoverished population.

Meeting with newly elected Moldovan President Maia Sandu in Kiev, Zelensky said that countries like Ukraine and Moldova, which are part of the EU's Eastern Partnership program, "should be given increased attention by the EU states in matters of joint procurement procedures and accelerating the supply of vaccines."

The Eastern European country of approximately 42 million has reported over 1.2 million cases and 20,000 dead due to the pandemic. The ongoing recession may push more than 9 million people in the country into "extreme poverty," according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The fact that the virus continues to ravage the population is a direct result of the policies of the Zelensky government which, like its counterparts across Europe and the Americas, has pursued a policy of "herd immunity." Despite seeing daily case rates as high as 15,000 per day and the overwhelming of the country's short-staffed and decaying hospitals, the Ukrainian government refused to enforce any quarantine measures during the holidays. Instead, it waited until after Orthodox Christmas on January 7 to implement a limited two-week lockdown.

As the country's working class and elderly continue to disproportionately suffer the effects of the pandemic, the country's ruling oligarchy has subordinated its vaccination efforts to the whims of Western imperialism, refusing to purchase the more readily available Sputnik V from neighboring Russia.

US and European imperialism orchestrated a coup in Kiev in 2014 with the help of far-right forces under the fraudulent pretext of supporting "democracy." Subsequent Ukrainian governments have conducted a civil war against Russian-backed separatists in East Ukraine and have stood at the forefront of military provocations against Russia in the Black Sea region.

At the same time, they have implemented aggressive austerity measures against the Ukrainian working class which have pushed millions deeper into poverty and have signified further devastating cuts to the health care system. Now, while still providing military backing to the Kiev government in the civil war in East Ukraine, the US and NATO powers are refusing to provide even minimal vaccine assistance to what has become the poorest country in Europe.

After initial talks with the companies Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson collapsed due to the Trump administration's ban on vaccine exports, the country was left with few other options other than turning to Moscow for assistance. As it stands, the earliest delivery of the major Western vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna will not take place until at least late 2021. However, Zelensky stated last month that to accept the Russian vaccine would be "another geopolitical blow, it will be another strong information war on the part of Russia."

According to its developers, the Russian Sputnik V vaccine is more than 90 percent effective and markedly cheaper and more available than its Western counterparts. However, the vaccine has not undergone all the necessary trial phases before the government released it in Russia, and large sections of the Russian population therefore distrust the vaccine.

Facing pressure from his political rivals at home for refusing to accept medical assistance as people continue to die needlessly, Zelensky stated in a recent interview with the *New York Times*, "Of course, it is impossible to explain to Ukrainian society why not to take the vaccine from Russia if America and Europe do not give you the vaccine. It is impossible to explain that to anyone who dies."

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Zelensky, who usually profusely thanks his Western allies for their military assistance against Russia, bitterly complained to the *Times*, “We are supposed to be like political acrobats to manage to get into a priority list,” noting that the American ban on vaccine exports had “put Ukraine at the end of the line.”

His main political rivals from the “Opposition Platform—for Life” party, which is led by oligarch and Putin’s personal friend Viktor Medvedchuk, have used the vaccine issue to gain support. The party has begun collecting signatures for a petition, urging the government to allow for production of Sputnik V in Ukraine.

During a meeting with Putin this past fall, Medvedchuk obtained permission from the Russian President for Ukraine to receive the Sputnik V vaccine and obtained a license for Biolik, a pharmaceutical company based in eastern Ukraine, to manufacture the vaccine in Ukraine.

So far, Ukrainian medical authorities have outright refused to move forward with Sputnik V production. Echoing the stance of NATO and the United States, the country director of medical procurement stated, “We cannot rely on a Russian state company during an armed aggression against Ukraine.”

President Zelensky has seen his approval ratings steadily decline as the ongoing pandemic and its economic fallout have impacted the country’s working class hard. Moreover, while the promise to end the now nearly seven-year-long war in eastern Ukraine war had played a central role in his election in 2019, Zelensky has continued to subordinate his government’s policies to the US- and NATO-led war drive against Russia. The war, triggered by the Western-backed coup of 2014, has claimed the lives of over 14,000 people, displaced 1.4 million and left 3.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance.

Recent polls show that the pro-Moscow Opposition Platform—For Life party is now the most popular political party in Ukraine, ahead of Zelensky’s own Servant of the People Party.

Desperate to still somehow get a vaccine, Ukraine has turned to China and is set to receive 5 million doses from the Chinese company Sinovac Biotech starting in March. Another 8 million doses are scheduled to be delivered in March under the WHO-led COVAX global vaccine initiative, which is attempting to distribute vaccines to the world’s poorer countries. These 13 million doses will fall far short, however, from what is needed to implement a comprehensive vaccination program for the 42 million people living in Ukraine.

While the Ukrainian ruling class itself has been criminally negligent in combating the pandemic, the country has now also become a victim of the same “vaccine nationalism” that is plaguing all of the world’s poorest countries.

So far, COVAX has raised just $6 billion of the $7 billion it is seeking to finance deliveries of vaccines to 92 developing nations with limited or no means to purchase the vaccine on their own. Speaking last week while urging the world’s wealthiest capitalist countries and companies to stop making bilateral deals at the expense of COVAX, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stated simply, “Rich countries have the majority of the supply.”

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