

International

Fake news and mistrust leave Bulgaria lagging in COVID jab race

Only 15% of the population of 6.9 million people has been fully vaccinated

SOFIA: It's getting close to lunchtime and a COVID-19 vaccination center in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, is almost empty, a vivid example of the way the country's immunization effort is hamstrung by fake news and widespread mistrust. As a fourth coronavirus wave threatens, official data show that only 15 percent of the population of 6.9 million people has been fully vaccinated, far below the EU average of 53.3 percent.

"Ever since the start of vaccinations we have been lagging last," Health Minister Stoycho Katsarov said in a recent interview. On the streets of Sofia, it's easy to spot the attitudes that have led to the low uptake.

"Absolutely not!" replies 45-year-old construction worker Georgy Dragoev, when asked by AFP if he would get vaccinated. "I think that they're just spreading panic," he says, while taking his lunch break on a bench outside the vaccination center. "If this coronavirus exists and I catch it, I will somehow manage to beat it," he adds.

'Not an easy decision'

A recent Gallup poll showed that a total of 41.8 percent of Bulgarians said they didn't plan to get jabbed. Even some of those who came to get vaccinated have had their reservations.

Accountant Katerina Nikolova, 39, told AFP that it "was not an easy decision" for her, saying the expedited clinical trial procedure for the COVID-19 vaccines worried her. Outright fake news about the virus has also played a role. Since

mid-March, AFP has been running a fact-checking service in Bulgarian, and in that period, half the articles published have been related to coronavirus disinformation.

The theories range from the claim that the vaccine leaves magnetic chips implanted in people's arms—shared thousands of times on Facebook—to pictures of French football fans' victory celebrations after the 2018 World Cup being falsely presented as being from protests against France's "health pass".

Health Minister Katsarov has partly blamed Bulgarians' "susceptibility to conspiracy theories" for the low vaccine uptake but Nikolova said she was also confused by the conflicting views of experts invited on TV.

Such guests are often asked to comment on areas outside their expertise or are allowed to present scientifically dubious opinions. One of the voices invited to contribute to television debates, Atanas Mangarov, is infectious diseases associate professor and the head of the COVID-19 care unit at a Sofia hospital but has spread discredited theories on the virus, insisting mask-wearing and vaccines aren't necessary and promoting herbal teas as a treatment. Media expert Nelly Ognyanova says that the media have contributed to the poor standard of information.

"The media, the social networks, the public appearances of experts and other sources carry shared responsibility for anti-vaxxer sentiment and for mistrust about the role and safety of vaccines,"



SOFIA: A healthcare worker vaccinating a patient at a COVID-19 vaccination center at The Military Medical Academy in Sofia, where a variety of vaccines are available: AstraZeneca, Pfizer Biotech, Moders and Jansen. — AFP

she said. "It is not a secret that this is also part of a hybrid war led by the Kremlin," she added, referring to the role of Russian troll factories in spreading disinformation—in a country which has long enjoyed close cultural links to Russia.

Renewed fear

According to Parvan Simeonov from Gallup International, the scepticism towards vaccines also reflects Bulgarians' "resentment towards elites" and broader mistrust of authorities and of-

ficial information. According to official data, Bulgaria has registered just under 430,000 cases of coronavirus infection but experts and health authorities agree that this is definitely an undercount as access to free tests is limited and many sick people simply did not pay to get a test. Simeonov says vaccine uptake has further been slowed by the sheer number of people who have already been infected—or believe they have—and who have therefore delayed their jabs in accordance with medical advice. —AFP

How Spain took the lead on vaccinations

BARCELONA: Spain has become a leader of Europe's virus vaccination drive against COVID-19, due to a deep trust in the public health system and close-knit family ties that encourage people to get the jab to protect relatives.

More than 61 percent of Spain's population of 47 million is fully vaccinated, one of the highest rates among large European Union nations—ahead of Italy's 57.8 percent, 56 percent in France and 55.2 percent in Germany. The figure in the United States is 50.3 percent. One of the cornerstones of Spain's successful vaccine drive is trust in the health system, Josep Lobera, a sociology professor at the Autonomous University of Madrid, told AFP. And that means there is little vaccine hesitancy.

"We have an advantage with respect to other nations, because confidence in vaccines in general, especially childhood vaccines, is traditionally higher than in other European nations," said Lobera, who sits on the government's vaccine strategy committee. A study by the Imperial College London published in June found that 79 percent of people in Spain trusted COVID-19 vaccines, compared to 62 percent in the US, 56 percent in France and 47 percent in Japan.

Spain has been spared the large protests seen in France and Italy against mandatory vaccines for health care workers, and the creation of a health pass giving them access to routine activities such as dining indoors. The country did not need to make vaccination mandatory for teachers or other key workers, because



BARCELONA: People queue to receive a dose of J&J/Jansen COVID-19 vaccine in an itinerant vaccination truck sponsored by Spanish carmaker Seat in collaboration with the Catalan regional health service at the Triumphal Arch in Barcelona. — AFP

"practically everyone gets vaccinated voluntarily", Education Minister Pilar Alegria told news radio Cadena Ser on Monday.

One recent morning, a long line of people, mainly in their 30s, waited in the scorching sun to get into a mass vaccination center in Wizink sports arena in Madrid, which operates round-the-clock. One of those waiting was Ines Gomez Calvo, a 28-year-old graphic designer. She trusted Spain's public health system "100 percent, 200 percent", she said. Set up after Spain returned to democracy following the death of dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, the country's public health care system offers free universal coverage as a constitutionally guaranteed right. — AFP

17 jihadists, five volunteers killed in Burkina attacks

OUAGADOUGOU: Seventeen suspected jihadists and five members of a civil defense militia have been killed in an attack in northern Burkina Faso, security and government sources said yesterday. "Armed men arriving on about 20 motorbikes attacked the VDP (defense militia) camp in Bilakoka," located in Burkina's northern region of Sahel bordering Mali and Niger, on Wednesday, a government official told AFP. "The volunteers repelled the attack, neutralizing 17 terrorists. Five VDP members also lost their lives during the attack."

A security source confirmed the toll and said the armed forces were carrying out a "sweep" and securing the area. Burkina Faso, a landlocked and arid Sahel nation, has been battling attacks since 2015 from forces that include the Group to Support Islam and Muslims, which is affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Raids and ambushes have been concentrated in the north and east close to the borders with Mali and Niger, both of which have also faced deadly violence by jihadists. More than 1,500 people in Burkina have died and more than 1.3 million have fled their homes, in a population of around 20 million. In December 2019, the government set up the VDP — the French initials for Volunteers for the Defense of the Motherland — to provide support for the beleaguered armed forces. — AFP