

Bulgaria: Urgent need to tackle the COVID-19 crisis and improve the healthcare system

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GEORGE BOGDANOV & BOYAN ZAHARIEV – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

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Bulgaria is fighting what, in the country, looks like the most devastating wave of the pandemic, against a background of political change and rising inflation. It ranks first in the EU (second in the world) in the countries with the highest mortality levels from COVID-19, and its healthcare system is in severe difficulties. With a new government, approved by the Parliament after months of political deadlock, there is hope for better handling of the COVID-19 crisis in the months ahead.

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Description

According to figures collected through Our World in Data (19 December 2021), Bulgaria ranks first in the EU (second in the world) in the countries with the highest number of total confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people. The figures are 6,062/million for Peru and 4,362/million in Bulgaria. The third country on the list, with more than 4 thousand confirmed deaths per million, is Bosnia and Herzegovina (4,021); Hungary ranks fourth, with 3,896/million. Merely 27.1% of the Bulgarian population are fully vaccinated (two doses) against COVID-19, i.e. the lowest rate in the EU. The second lowest rate is Romania (40.4%); the EU average is 68.6%. The daily number of COVID-19 vaccination doses administered per 100 people (computed as the rolling seven-day average) is only 0.19.

In addition to the pandemic, there has also been a long political crisis in Bulgaria, as three parliamentary elections were held in 2021 (in April, July and November). This political turmoil has led to the imposing of much less severe public measures against the spread of COVID-19. The caretaker government introduced “green certificate” requirements in Bulgaria on 25 October 2021, later than in any other EU country. This certificate is now required for entry to indoor activities such as visits to shopping malls, restaurants and fitness centres. Exceptions are visits to pharmacies, banks and grocery stores. The certificate can be issued to anyone who has met one of the following conditions: vaccination against COVID-19; negative test result for COVID-19; recovery from COVID-19; and (as of 11 November 2021) sufficient antibody record.

Given that Bulgaria, together with Latvia and France, form the group of the most vaccine-sceptic countries in the EU, according to a 2018 EU report (Larson et al., 2018), antivax conspiracy theories and misinformation have found fertile ground in the country. It is thus no surprise that Revival (Vazrazhdane), one of the political parties that led protests against what they called the “medical fascism” of the green certificate (Kapital Insights 2021), successfully crossed the electoral threshold for entry into Parliament in November 2021.



Outlook and commentary

For decades, Bulgaria has failed to carry out a significant reform of its healthcare system. The main issues that the system faces include mass emigration of medical doctors and nurses, high average age of those remaining in post, chronic deficit in hospital funding, poor access to healthcare for the rural population and minorities, underdeveloped outpatient care, high out-of-pocket payments, high unmet medical needs and a high death-toll from both preventable and treatable causes (European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, 2021; Politico, 2020; Zahariev and Georgieva, 2018). The situation described above is putting a lot of pressure on an already heavily strained healthcare system.

The pandemic situation in Bulgaria is likely to worsen further throughout the winter, with continuing high levels of COVID-19 cases, high mortality and low vaccination rates.

Before these long-lasting issues are sorted out, clear and unambiguous measures are

needed to tackle the COVID-19 crisis in the short term, including a new pro-vaccination information campaign that adequately addresses the exact concerns of the unvaccinated majority (Euronews Witness, 2021).

On a positive note, the four political parties in the new (November 2021) Bulgarian Parliament have successfully reached a coalition agreement, which includes as a top priority overcoming the COVID-19 crisis. On 13 December 2021, a new government was approved by the Parliament. The coalition has agreed on a large-scale awareness campaign on the benefits of vaccination as well as a detailed epidemiological study (to assess the challenges facing the healthcare system in each part of the country), as part of the fight against COVID-19.

It now remains to be seen what specific steps the new government will take in the next few months.

Further reading

EU DinfoLab, [Bulgaria: The Wild, Wild East of Vaccine Disinformation](#) (08.04.2021)

Euronews, [Bulgaria's vaccine battle: the mistrust driving COVID's surge](#) (10.12.2021)

European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies (2021), [Bulgaria - Country Health Profile 2021](#)

Kapital Insights, [The Week: The inevitable fifth wave, the surf-master Radev and the boom of online retail](#) (22.10.2021)

Larson, H., de Figueiredo, A., Karafillakis, E. and Rawal, M. (2018), [State of vaccine confidence in the EU 2018 - Report for the European Commission](#)

Our World In Data, [Total number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths and cases per million people Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people, People fully vaccinated and daily number of COVID-19 vaccination](#)

[doses administered per 100 people](#) (20.12.2021)

Politico, [Bulgaria's health system on brink of collapse from coro-navirus crisis](#) (03.12.2020)

The Washington Post, [Hope collides with doubt, while covid deaths soar, in the EU's least-vaccinated country](#) (25.09.2021)

Zahariev, B. and Georgieva, L. (2018), [Inequalities in access to healthcare – Bulgaria](#), ESPN Thematic Report.

Author

[George Bogdanov](#) (National Network for Children) and [Boyan Zahariev](#) (Open Society Institute)

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