

Hungary emerges as an EU vaccination star amid surging cases

March 12 2021, by Justin Spike



Employees unload the newly arrived coronavirus vaccines from Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinopharm at the logistics base set up to in the parking lot of the government office in the 13th district of Budapest, Hungary, March 3, 2021. (Zsolt Szigetvary/MTI via AP)

Hungary has emerged as a European Union leader in COVID-19

vaccinations thanks to a strategy that sought shots from Russia and China as well as from inside the bloc, spurring increasing trust in jabs from eastern nations.

But that strategy is up against a skyrocketing rise in new COVID-19 cases and deaths blamed on a more infectious virus variant first found in Britain that is putting an unprecedented strain on Hungary's health care system. A new round of lockdown measures took effect Monday to curb the surge, which saw deaths averaging around 150 per day and hospitalizations and new cases breaking records set during the previous peak in December.

As of Friday, 11.9% of Hungary's adult population had received at least one dose of a [vaccine](#). That is the second-highest rate of vaccination in the 27-member EU after the small island nation of Malta and substantially above the EU average of 7%. With five vaccines approved for use in Hungary, more than in any other EU nation, more than 1.2 million Hungarians have received a jab in the country of fewer than 10 million, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The vaccination campaign is only growing in importance, for Hungary has the 7th worst death rate per 1 million inhabitants in the world, at 16,627 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins.



Boxes of Sputnik V vaccines are unloaded from a truck at a warehouse of Hungaropharma, a Hungarian pharmaceutical wholesale company, in Budapest, Hungary, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (Zoltan Mathe/MTI via AP)

Dr. Karoly Dery, a general practitioner in Hatvan, a town 35 miles east of Budapest, said the rapid spread of the virus has led to increased acceptance of all vaccines.

"I always tell anti-vaccination people that any vaccine is better than a month on a ventilator and possible death," Dr. Dery told The Associated Press. "There's nothing uglier or more awful than death by suffocation."

Right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban broke with the EU's common procurement program to purchase millions of doses from Russia and China that were not approved by the EU's medicines regulator. He has been harshly critical of the speed of the EU's vaccine rollout.

In February, the country became the first in the EU to begin using China's Sinopharm and Russia's Sputnik V vaccines, even as polling showed that public trust in non-EU approved vaccines was low. A January survey of 1,000 people in the capital of Budapest by pollster Median and the 21 Research Center showed that among those willing to be vaccinated, only 27% would take a Chinese vaccine and 43% a Russian vaccine, compared to 84% who would take a jab developed in Western countries.



In this file photo taken on Friday, Feb. 19, 2021, Nurse Szilvia Lukacs administers a shot of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V to a patient at Zala County Szent Rafael Hospital in Zalaegerszeg, Hungary, as the vaccination with Sputnik V against the new coronavirus continues in the country. Russia's boast in August that it was the first country to authorize a coronavirus vaccine led to skepticism because of its insufficient testing on only a few dozen people. Now, with demand growing for the Sputnik V, experts are raising questions again, this time over whether Moscow can keep up with all the orders from countries that want it. (Gyorgy Varga/MTI via AP, File)

Dr. Bela Merkely, the rector of Semmelweis Medical University in Budapest, told the AP that Hungary's exceptional performance in vaccinations can be attributed to its purchase of the Russian and Chinese vaccines. He said the initial public distrust is being overtaken by a sense of urgency to bring a devastating third surge of the pandemic under control.

"Hungary has more vaccines because it gave emergency approval to the Sputnik and Sinopharm vaccines," he said, adding that he had received a Sputnik V jab. "(When) people ask which is the best, I always say, 'The best vaccine is the one that's in my arm.' A vaccine that is in transit or is sitting in the refrigerator ... cannot protect a single human life."

Other EU countries are taking notice. Slovakia's prime minister, Igor Matovic, angered members of his governing coalition when he made a secret deal to purchase 2 million doses of Sputnik V this month, while the president of the hard-hit Czech Republic has written to the leaders of Russia and China requesting emergency doses.



A pharmacist holds a packet of Sputnik V vaccines to be used for the first dose in the pharmacy of the Borsod-Abauj-Zemplen County Medical Center and University Teaching Hospital in Miskolc, Hungary, Tuesday, March 9, 2021. (Janos Vajda/MTI via AP)



A pharmacist holds a packet of Sputnik V vaccines to be used for the first dose in the pharmacy of the Borsod-Abauj-Zemplen County Medical Center and University Teaching Hospital in Miskolc, Hungary, Tuesday, March 9, 2021. (Janos Vajda/MTI via AP)



Boxes of Sputnik V vaccines are ready to be unloaded from a truck at a warehouse of Hungaropharma, a Hungarian pharmaceutical wholesale company, in Budapest, Hungary, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (Zoltan Mathe/MTI via AP)



Boxes of Sputnik V vaccines are unloaded from a truck at a warehouse of Hungaropharma, a Hungarian pharmaceutical wholesale company, in Budapest, Hungary, Thursday, March 4, 2021. (Zoltan Mathe/MTI via AP)



Boxes of Sputnik V vaccines at a warehouse of Hungaropharma, a Hungarian pharmaceutical wholesale company, in Budapest, Hungary, Thursday, March 4, 2021, after a shipment of 280,000 doses of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V arrived in Hungary. (Zoltan Mathe/MTI via AP)



Employees unload the newly arrived coronavirus vaccines from Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinopharm at the logistics base set up in the parking lot of the government office in the 13th district of Budapest, Hungary, March 3, 2021. (Zsolt Szigetvary/MTI via AP)

Merkely expects Hungary's new lockdown restrictions and increasing vaccination rate to produce results within three to four weeks and the latest surge to be under control by mid-May. Still, he says, Hungarians won't be safe until all countries in the world have access to vaccines.

"A global pandemic cannot be managed locally," he said. "As long as COVID-19 is still present in the world, then not even vaccinated countries will be safe because a mutation can form at any time."

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