

Bulgaria, EU's least vaccinated nation, faces deadly surge

September 8 2021, by Stephen McGrath



A man drags an oxygen container outside the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Despite one of the European Union's highest death rates from COVID-19, and as the country faces a rapid surge of infections due to the Delta variant, people in the Balkan nation are proving the most hesitant in the 27-country bloc to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

Standing outside the rundown public hospital in Bulgaria's northern town of Veliko Tarnovo, the vaccination unit's chief nurse voices a sad reality about her fellow citizens: "They don't believe in vaccines."

Bulgaria has one of the highest coronavirus death rates in the 27-nation European Union and is facing a new, rapid surge of infections [due to the more infectious delta variant](#). Despite that, people in this Balkan nation are the most hesitant in the bloc to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

Only [20% of adults in Bulgaria](#), which has a population of 7 million, have so far been fully vaccinated. That puts it last in the EU, which has an [average of 69 %](#) fully vaccinated.

"We are open every day," Yordanka Minekova, the chief vaccination nurse who has worked at the hospital for 35 years, told The Associated Press. "But people who want to be vaccinated are very few."

Krasimira Nikolova, a 52-year-old restaurant worker, has chosen not to get vaccinated, saying she has doubts over the vaccines' effectiveness, even though the shots have been shown to be highly effective in preventing serious illness and deaths.

"I don't believe vaccines work," she told the AP. "I already had the virus. I don't believe it's so dangerous."



Yordanka Minekova, the chief vaccination nurse holds a container of Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Despite one of the European Union's highest death rates from COVID-19, and as the country faces a rapid surge of infections due to the Delta variant, people in the Balkan nation are proving the most hesitant in the 27-country bloc to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru

But Sibila Marinova, manager of Veliko Tarnovo's intensive care unit, says the full COVID-19 ICU ward in her hospital shows that's simply not true.

"100% of the ICU patients are unvaccinated," she told the AP, adding that staff shortages are only piling on more pressure.

And she said she's angry that so many Bulgarians are refusing to get jabbed.

Bulgaria has access to all four of the vaccines approved by the EU—Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson. But since the start of the pandemic, more than 19,000 people in Bulgaria have died of COVID-19, the EU's [third-highest death rate](#), behind only the Czech Republic and Hungary. In the last week, an average of 41 people have died each day.

In response, the government imposed tighter restrictions Tuesday. Restaurants and cafes must close at 11 p.m. and their tables are limited to six people. Nightclubs have been shuttered and cinemas and theaters are limited to half capacity. Outdoors sports arenas are limited to 30% capacity.



People walk in a corridor at the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Despite one of the European Union's highest death rates from COVID-19, and as the country faces a rapid surge of infections due to the Delta variant, people in the Balkan nation are proving the most hesitant in the 27-country bloc to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru

"The low vaccination rate forces us to impose these measures," Health Minister Stoycho Katsarov said.

Despite being in a vulnerable age group, 71-year-old retiree Zhelyazko Marinov doesn't want to get vaccinated.

"I think I'm healthy enough and have a good natural immunity," he said, adding that he could be persuaded to get vaccinated if he couldn't travel without a vaccine certificate.

Mariya Sharkova, a public health law specialist, believes that Bulgaria's worryingly low vaccine uptake is the result of residents' low trust in official institutions, along with fake news about the shots, political instability and a weak national vaccination campaign.

"In Bulgaria, we don't have good health literacy," she told the AP. "Many people choose to believe conspiracy theories and fake news."

Only vaccines that are mandatory in Bulgaria—such as measles, mumps and rubella—have a high uptake. Sharkova said some blame has to lie with the government's vaccination program.



People walk in a corridor at the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Only 20% of Bulgaria's population of 7 million have so far been fully vaccinated, making it the lowest vaccination uptake in the EU, where the average is 52%. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru

"They didn't build any strategy on how to fight vaccine hesitancy," she said. "We didn't have any real information campaign for the vaccines. The ministry of health relies mainly on announcements on the ministry's website, and I don't think anyone actually goes on and reads it."

"The best policy for such hesitant countries and populations as ours are mandatory vaccines," said Sharkova, who is dismayed that national TV channels often invite vaccine-skeptic doctors to be on their programs.

But making COVID-19 vaccines mandatory could risk further polarizing the issue, she said.

Hriska Zhelyazkova, a 67-year-old military officer from the coastal city of Burgas, says she distrusts vaccines because "they were created so quickly"—apparently unaware that years of research laid the groundwork for the vaccine shots, which now have been used in hundreds of millions of people with exceedingly rare serious side effects.



Children's drawings, the one on the left reading "Together We Will Defeat COVID-19" hang from a string at the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Only 20% of Bulgaria's population of 7 million have so far been fully vaccinated, making it the lowest vaccination uptake in the EU, where the average is 52%. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru



Men walk outside the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Despite one of the European Union's highest death rates from COVID-19, and as the country faces a rapid surge of infections due to the Delta variant, people in the Balkan nation are proving the most hesitant in the 27-country bloc to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



Men sit on the corridors of the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Despite one of the European Union's highest death rates from COVID-19, and as the country faces a rapid surge of infections due to the Delta variant, people in the Balkan nation are proving the most hesitant in the 27-country bloc to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



A child's drawing that reads "Together We Will Defeat COVID-19" hangs from a string at the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Only 20% of Bulgaria's population of 7 million have so far been fully vaccinated, making it the lowest vaccination uptake in the EU, where the average is 52%. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



People hold banners that read "Freedom for Businesses" and "There is no COVID-19 - Let's go back to work" during a protest by restaurant workers in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 19,000 people in Bulgaria have died of COVID-19, a grim statistic that makes the country's death rate from the disease the EU's third-highest behind only the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru



A waitress raises her arms while watching a protest by restaurant workers in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Only 20% of Bulgaria's population of 7 million have so far been fully vaccinated, making it the lowest vaccination uptake in the EU, where the average is 69%. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru



Yordanka Minekova, the chief vaccination nurse speaks during an interview with the Associated Press outside the state hospital in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Despite one of the European Union's highest death rates from COVID-19, and as the country faces a rapid surge of infections due to the Delta variant, people in the Balkan nation are proving the most hesitant in the 27-country bloc to get vaccinated against COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



A man wears a mask in the colors of the Bulgarian flag while attending a protest by restaurant workers in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 19,000 people in Bulgaria have died of COVID-19, a grim statistic that makes the country's death rate from the disease the EU's third-highest behind only the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



Krasimira Nikolova holds a spoon while attending a protest by restaurant workers in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Only 20% of Bulgaria's population of 7 million have so far been fully vaccinated, making it the lowest vaccination uptake in the EU, where the average is 69%.Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



Krasimira Nikolova holds a pot and spoon while attending a protest by restaurant workers in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Only 20% of Bulgaria's population of 7 million have so far been fully vaccinated, making it the lowest vaccination uptake in the EU, where the average is 69%. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



A small child is backdropped by a mural in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 19,000 people in Bulgaria have died of COVID-19, a grim statistic that makes the country's death rate from the disease the EU's third-highest behind only the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda



A banner that reads "There is no COVID-19 - Let's go back to work" is left behind after protest by restaurant workers in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 19,000 people in Bulgaria have died of COVID-19, a grim statistic that makes the country's death rate from the disease the EU's third-highest behind only the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Credit: AP Photo/Andreea Alexandru



The Asen's Monument, in Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria, Thursday, Sept. 2, 2021. Since the start of the pandemic, more than 19,000 people in Bulgaria have died of COVID-19, a grim statistic that makes the country's death rate from the disease the EU's third-highest behind only the Czech Republic, and Hungary. Credit: AP Photo/Vadim Ghirda

Still, she said she may get vaccinated if authorities slap tougher restrictions on unvaccinated people.

Back at the Veliko Tarnovo hospital, pro-vaccination drawings colored by children hang on the walls. "You are our superheroes," one caption read.

But Minekova, the vaccination nurse, isn't optimistic about the future.

"Somehow, I think it's too late," she said. "The right moment has been missed. I don't see a way right now to solve this."

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