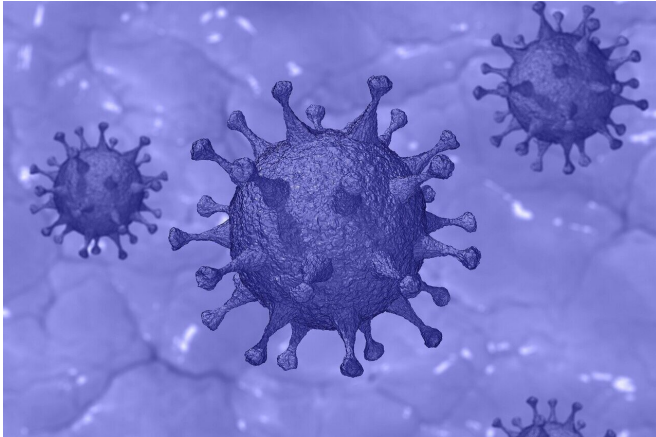


Majority of Russians believe coronavirus is a bioweapon: poll

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Close to two out of three Russians believe that the coronavirus is a man-made biological weapon and less than a third are willing to get vaccinated, a poll said Monday.

Observers say the findings reflect a distrust towards authorities fuelled by the lack of transparency during the pandemic and deteriorating relations with the West.

According to the survey by the independent Levada Centre, 64 percent of respondents said that COVID-19 was artificially created and is a "new form of [biological weapon](#)" while 23 percent believed the virus appeared "without human intervention".

The poll carried out in late February among 1,600 respondents also found that the number of Russians willing to get vaccinated against the virus has dropped to 30 percent from 38 percent in December.

Among those not wanting to get the vaccine, 37 percent said they fear side effects, 23 percent are

waiting for results of clinical trials and 16 percent said they "do not see any sense" in getting the jab.

Russia's homemade Sputnik V vaccine, named after the Soviet-era satellite, was initially received with scepticism over its fast-track registration in August, ahead of large scale clinical trials.

But *The Lancet* [medical journal](#) in February published results showing it to be safe and more than 90 percent effective.

Russians, however, maintain a distrust towards the Kremlin, inherited from Soviet times, that has been fuelled by a lack of clarity from the country's leadership during the health crisis.

Mortality data published in February showed that the actual number of [coronavirus](#) deaths in Russia last year could be significantly higher than what was reported by the government.

There have also been no official figures on the progress of the vaccination drive, although in late February a health ministry epidemiologist said that around four million Russians had received the jab.

"The Kremlin launched Sputnik as an ideological weapon without even waiting for the end of clinical trials," Levada Centre sociologist Alexei Levinson said.

He told AFP that this "greatly alerted Russians", who are already suspicious of their [pharmaceutical industry](#).

According to Levinson, Russians are more prone to believing in [conspiracy theories](#) during "particularly tense times".

After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 sparked international condemnation and sanctions on Moscow, Russians have lived "like in a besieged fortress," Levinson said.

"The world for Russians has become hostile and uncomfortable".

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