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Montenegro: the deteriorating pandemic situation

Montenegro is struggling with a growing number of people infected with SARS-CoV-2. In order to avoid overloading the healthcare system, the country introduces further restrictions. Vaccines, which are still lacking, are the nation's best chance to improve the situation. The inconsistency of messages from the Ministry of Health leads to an increase in dissatisfaction with the government among citizens.

Increase in the number of cases. The number of people infected with the coronavirus has increased in recent weeks. Igor Galić, the director of the Institute of Public Health, emphasized that Montenegro ranks among the top countries, both in Europe and in the world, in terms of the most cases of infections (per 100,000 of people). Estimates place the number of active cases above 8,000. Moreover, hospitals are 67.9% full. There are plans to open another hospital for people suffering from COVID-19 in the southern part of the country. A laboratory in Berlin, where samples have already been sent for testing, confirmed the presence of the British variant of the coronavirus in Montenegro.

In view of the deteriorating situation, on February 10, the Ministry of Health decided to increase measures aimed at reducing the scale of the spread of the coronavirus. These new measures will be valid until at least February 24. Organizing any public gatherings and moving between cities during the weekend (from 9.00 pm on Friday to 5.00 am on Monday) are limited. In addition, hours of operation for clothes stores as well as restaurants, gyms, cafes, shopping centres, and betting shops were reduced from 700 to 1600. In turn, food stores may be open between 0700 and 2000. Night clubs and discos were closed.

Due to the particularly bad situation in two municipalities – Tivat and Budva – stricter restrictions were introduced. All stores, except those selling food, were closed, as well as hairdressers, cosmetics, betting shops, shopping malls, and gyms. Schools closed in-person education and students learned remotely. Moreover, theatres, cinemas, museums, and galleries were closed. On February 15, the local authorities in Budva, based on the recommendations of the Institute of Public Health and the Ministry of Health, introduced further restrictions, closing playgrounds, prohibiting residents from using promenades, beaches, parks, and other public places where people could gather. Further, the Ministry of Health issued an order prohibiting the local population from leaving the territory of the municipalities of Tivat and Budva. Two days later, on February 17, the government also prohibited catering activities in catering facilities in Podgorica, Nikšić, Cetinje, Kotor, Herceg Novi and Ulcinj.

Pending vaccines. In October 2020, the previous government signed an agreement according to which Montenegro joined the mechanism of the World Health Organization, Covax, which guarantees that the country is to receive 248,800 doses of the vaccines. Since January, the Montenegrin government has been regularly announcing that the first doses will soon be in Montenegro. Health Minister Jelena Borovinić Bojović emphasizes that the government is doing everything to make it happen as soon as possible. According to its announcements, the Russian Sputnik V vaccines will appear this week with the delivery of 5,000 to 15,000 doses with a total of 50,000 expected eventually. It should be added that the Institute for Medicines and Medical Devices of Montenegro (Crnogorski Institut za lijekove i medicinska sredstva, CINMED) only approved the Russian vaccine for Montenegro market on February 11. In the meantime, AstraZeneca has also applied for registration of its product for approval in Montenegro. The country is to receive 84,000 doses of this vaccine. It was planned that its first contingent would be delivered to the country at the end of February. In turn, vaccines from Pfizer and BioNTech are expected to arrive in early March. The Minister of Health also admitted that Montenegro had contracted for 150,000 doses of the Chinese vaccine from Sinopharm.

As emphasized by the Institute of Public Health, Montenegro is already technically prepared for the distribution of vaccines. Vaccinations of priority groups, which include health care workers, the elderly, people staying in nursing homes, and representatives of emergency services are to be carried out at 40 points in the country. If vaccines were

delivered to Montenegro – as emphasized by the Montenegrin epidemiologist Novica Vujošević – the entire society could be vaccinated within a month – that is, approx. 450,000 people.

The Montenegrin government has been criticized by both the opposition and the president for mismanaging the pandemic crisis. President Milo Đukanović states that vaccinations could start as early as January 24, because three days earlier he informed the Prime Minister about the offer of investor Petros Stathis, who wanted to give Montenegro 10,000 doses of the Sinopharm vaccine. However, the government explained that authorizing vaccines is performed at the state level. It is worth adding that the Oleg Deripaska Foundation, managed by a Russian entrepreneur, has also announced that it is able to provide Sputnik V vaccines to the state. The Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), the largest opposition party, asked Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić to dismiss the Minister of Health over a series of irresponsible actions that led to the catastrophic pandemic situation in the country. Moreover, one of the Montenegrin non-governmental think tanks, Montenegro International, asked directly the presidents of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, and Albania, Ilir Meta, to start vaccinating Montenegrin citizens who live in the border areas in order to “prevent a humanitarian catastrophe.”

Unexpectedly, on February 16, Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović announced that Montenegro would receive the next day the first round of 4,000 vaccine doses provided by Serbia. At the same time, he thanked both Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić for this “disinterested and human gesture, which is an excellent introduction to better bilateral cooperation between the two countries.” As emphasized by the Minister of Health, these will be Russian vaccines that will be delivered in two rounds – 2,000 of each set of doses. Accordingly, the vaccination process will start next week. It should be added that earlier (February 14), Serbia transferred the first contingent of the vaccine to North Macedonia as well. The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, also announced that if enough doses are left in his country, some of them will be transferred to Montenegro.

Conclusions. Montenegro, apart from Kosovo, is the only country in the Balkans where the vaccination process has not yet started. The delays and the growing number of infected people have a negative impact on the image of the new government, which in the eyes of some citizens, seems ineffective in fighting the pandemic. This dissatisfaction points to the inconsistent information the Ministry of Health has given to the citizens of Montenegro.

The worsening pandemic situation in Montenegro is and will be used by the opposition and President Milo Đukanović to criticize the government and draw attention to its ineffectiveness and lack of professionalism. In a situation where the new government has a minimal majority in parliament, the inability to engage in a constructive dialogue with opposition groups, especially on key issues from the point of view of the state's interests (the fight against the pandemic is precisely such an issue), will negatively affect the stability of the political situation in Montenegro.

The delayed vaccination process and the errors in the management of the pandemic crisis may also affect Montenegro's tourism industry, which is an important source of income for the state and its citizens.