



Weekly Briefing

Croatia external relations briefing:
Balancing Between the West and the East: The Case of Croatia
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Summary

This paper will address the two main concerns in Croatia related to the COVID-19 pandemic at the moment: the rise of people who got infected over the last few weeks and the lack of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Both of these problems have been discussed in other European Union member states as well, but Croatia has been specific due to liberal measures that were introduced only a month ago, in time when the number of infections started to rise again, and for the fact that the country is among those with the lowest rates of vaccinated population.

Introduction

After the number of COVID-19 infected people in Croatia skyrocketed in the last few weeks and the delays of vaccine shipments have gone to a new distance, it became reasonable to ask what was the strategy of the country's government in acquiring the much-needed vaccines and to what length it was prepared to go in order to arrange safe shipment with enough doses to speed up the process of vaccination. A few months ago, the government officials in Croatia were safe to say skeptical about the Russian and Chinese vaccines, but in this situation, it seems that many of them have changed their minds.

A Change of Rhetoric Regarding Russian and Chinese Vaccine

At the beginning of the race for the COVID-19 vaccines, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, as well as Minister of Health, Vili Beroš, and Minister of Interior, Davor Božinović, were insisting that any deal reached unilaterally or bilaterally, behind the curtain of the European Union's knowledge, was deemed highly unlikely due to the initial plan reached during the talks with the leaders of the European Commission that all member states would negotiate with vaccine manufacturers only under the auspices of Brussels. When asked by the media and reporters whether the public can expect a change in vaccine policy, after it was obvious that Croatia was among the EU countries with the lowest levels of people who got one or both doses, the Government officials still insisted on their initial position, meaning that they have decided to shift the responsibility for getting the vaccine away from themselves and place it in the hands

of the European Union. However, in recent weeks, it appears that Croatian decision-makers became aware of the fact that by following this agreement, the rates of vaccinated people would not go upwards in any time soon.

Only a few days ago, the Minister of Health commented: "We have established contact with manufacturers of the Chinese vaccine, or more precisely, with manufacturers of two types of Chinese vaccine. We have been given some preliminary information and talks will continue"¹. At the beginning of March, while speaking at the cabinet meeting, Prime Minister said that the Russian vaccine Sputnik V has also been thoroughly and heavily discussed with Moscow, but the vaccine would first have to be approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA). Only then, the Government would start the formal procedure to procure Sputnik V, but this time, as Plenković said, on a bilateral level². The European Union policy on vaccine distribution, the position of Croatia in this equation, as well as the arrangements of some member states that clandestinely started to negotiate with vaccine manufacturers was also addressed by Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz. In his announcement that Austria and Denmark will no longer rely on the European Union when it comes to vaccine procurement, Kurz warned that a few countries, such as Bulgaria, Latvia, and Croatia will come short for their doses, specifying that if current trends continue "the Netherlands will have received double the quantity of vaccines per head than Croatia by the end of June"³.

The Rise of COVID-19 Infections

The Civil Protection Directorate led by aforementioned Beroš and Božinović, in addition to Krunoslav Capak and Alemka Markotić, still appears to be rather reluctant to declare a third wave of the coronavirus crisis in Croatia. On the contrary, they seemed to find logic in this whole process by naming social gatherings and people's relaxation due to several measures that were recently lifted as the main reasons why the numbers of infected people have risen in the past few weeks. Krunoslav Capak who is the head of the Croatian Institute of Public Health underlined that there will be no suspension of AstraZeneca vaccine administration for those over 65 years, when responding to claims that almost 30% of people have refused to be

¹ N.N. 2021. Croatia establishes contact with Chinese COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers. *Hr.n1info.com*
<https://hr.n1info.com/english/news/croatia-establishes-contact-with-chinese-covid-19-vaccine-manufacturers/>

² Government of the Republic of Croatia. 2021. Plenković: Government more than ready to procure Sputnik V vaccine <https://vlada.gov.hr/news/plenkovic-government-more-than-ready-to-procure-sputnik-v-vaccine/31622>

³ N.N. 2021. Kurz: Croatia short-changed in distribution of vaccines, secret deals exist. *Hr.n1info.com*
<https://hr.n1info.com/english/news/kurz-croatia-short-changed-in-distribution-of-vaccines-secret-deals-exist/>

vaccinated with AstraZeneca, adding that side effects of both AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccine have been minimal⁴. To make sure that people will be confident and responsive to the Government's efforts in getting an AstraZeneca vaccine, the Prime Minister, the head of Croatian Parliament, and Minister of Health decided to put a joint effort by having a shot of AstraZeneca vaccine themselves with Plenković jokingly added that reporters may consider the side-effects of AstraZeneca if they would tomorrow find him behaving strangely. Regardless of this humor attempt, the numbers are rising once again and, in many cases, it was reported that the British variant of the virus has been present. A week prior to this writing, Croatia had 2265 new cases in only three days period, while a week before that, the number estimated 1547⁵, which is a clear indication that the country has slowly been dragged into the turmoil of the coronavirus uncertainty again, no matter whether we blame the British variant, irresponsible people, or the sunny weather.

The Problem with Vaccine Distribution

Speaking at the press conference on unequal vaccine distribution in Europe, Plenković said that Croatia got only 17% of the total number of promised AstraZeneca doses. Interestingly, the Prime Minister said that during the negotiations on vaccine procurement, nobody could assume that people across Europe would become skeptical of AstraZeneca and that manufacturers would not follow the initial agreements on vaccine distribution. However, the more reasonable question would be why the European Union did not have any backup plan while making the terms with manufacturers and why did it allow to be played out in this whole process. As it now stands, the European Union got only 30 million AstraZeneca vaccines, while the agreement stood at 120 million doses. In Croatian terms, the Government ordered via the European Commission 2.7 million doses of AstraZeneca, 1.9 million doses of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, and a million doses of both Moderna and Johnson&Johnson vaccine. While newspapers started to speculate that Croatia had ordered the large sums of AstraZeneca due to its cheapness⁶, Plenković highlighted that the main reason for buying the AstraZeneca vaccine was its availability. He further elaborated by saying that the initial assessment was that only 2.4

⁴ N.N. 2021. New Coronavirus Infections Up 46% Week on Week. *Total Croatia News*

<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/news/51467-new-coronavirus-infections-up-46-week-on-week>

⁵ N.N. 2021. New Coronavirus Infections Up 46% Week on Week. *Total Croatia News*

<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/news/51467-new-coronavirus-infections-up-46-week-on-week>

⁶ Stošić, Petar. 2021. Naručili smo ogromnu količinu najjeftinijeg cjepiva. Problemi s njim se gomilaju. *Indeks.hr*
<https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/narucili-smo-ogromnu-kolicinu-najjeftinijeg-cjepiva-problemi-s-njim-se-gomilaju/2261220.aspx>

million Croatian citizens would want to be vaccinated and the Government's plan was, therefore, to order 2.5 as many vaccines to make sure that, eventually, everyone could get a vaccine if they change their minds. Unfortunately, as it stands now, only around 311.448 people got vaccinated, of which 232.239 have received one dose and 79.209 both doses. Krunoslav Capak said that “the vaccination process was continuing according to plan, adding that the first third of the second phase of vaccination, covering persons older than 65 years and chronic patients, had been completed (...) younger people would be prioritized after the completion of the second phase”⁷.

Discussion During the European Council Summit

During the European Council summit, held only a few days before this writing, the Austrian Chancellor was once again a leader of those who urged the member states' leaders for addition vaccine supplies for his country which would later be fairly distributed between Austria, Czech Republic, and Croatia⁸. Mark Rutte, Dutch Prime Minister, was somewhat skeptical about Kurz's proposal to give Austria more vaccines due to the shortcomings of AstraZeneca, but suggested that priority should be given to Bulgaria, Croatia, and Latvia, the countries which are among those with the lowest vaccination rates. As reported by Financial Times, “hopes of an agreement vanished after Kurz said Vienna would veto any distribution deal that did not include an enhanced share for Austria” which, apparently, angered the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel⁹. Furthermore, it was recently revealed that AstraZeneca stored 30 million doses in Italy to be transferred to Great Britain. AstraZeneca replied that 13 million of these doses were intended for poor countries, while the rest was supposed to go to the European Union.

Conclusion

As far as Great Britain's role is concerned, Boris Johnson argued against the accusations that his country does not want to export the vaccines manufactured on their territory and

⁷ N.N. 2021. 311,448 Croatians Vaccinated, 79,209 With Both Doses. *Total Croatia News* <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/news/51606-311-448-croatians-vaccinated-79-209-with-both-doses>

⁸ Peel, Michael, Khan, Mehreen, Fleming, Sam. 2021. EU leaders clash over vaccine distribution in tense summit. *Financial Times* <https://www.ft.com/content/486a65fe-0608-4230-b9d5-c990f10d5be8>

⁹ Peel, Michael, Khan, Mehreen, Fleming, Sam. 2021. EU leaders clash over vaccine distribution in tense summit. *Financial Times* <https://www.ft.com/content/486a65fe-0608-4230-b9d5-c990f10d5be8>

accused the European Union of “vaccine nationalism”¹⁰. All in all, the recent summit of European leaders does not guarantee that the pending problem with vaccine distribution would be resolved any time soon. In Croatia, people are still unsure about Russian and Chinese options, however, as times go by, this solution appears to be more and more likely.

¹⁰ Stošić, Petar. 2021. Je li istina da je EU izvezla 41 milijun doza cjepiva, a Velika Britanija i SAD nula? *Indeks. hr* https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/eu-je-dosad-izvezla-41-milijun-doza-cjepiva-velika-britanija-koliko-znamo-nula/2263744.aspx?index_ref=key_topics_d