



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Bulgaria social briefing:**

## **Protests Against the Introduction of a Mandatory Eu Digital Covid Certificate and the Spread of Anti-Vaccine Sentiments in Bulgaria**

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# **Protests Against the Introduction of a Mandatory Eu Digital Covid Certificate and the Spread of Anti-Vaccine Sentiments in Bulgaria**

## **Summary**

*Last month Bulgaria launched its COVID-19 “Green Certificate” as a mandatory requirement for access to restaurants, theatres, cinemas, concert halls, gyms, clubs and shopping malls as the country faced a surge in coronavirus infections. Bulgarian restaurant, tourism, fitness and retail professional societies organized a national protest in Sofia and several other cities and towns, demanding changes to the “green certificate” rules which they said were introduced hastily and are discriminatory. They listed their demands as including antibody test results as a basis for such a certificate. In a few weeks Bulgarian authorities have surrendered to the demands of the restaurant industry and announced that a green certificate would be issued for people with large amounts of COVID-19 antibodies. At the same time, Bulgaria continues to have the highest percentage of unvaccinated people in the EU. Moreover, strong anti-vaccination sentiment persists in the country.*

Within the last month Bulgaria was facing a surge in COVID-19 infections and deaths amid one of the lowest vaccination rates in the 27-nation European Union. It has had the highest COVID-19 mortality rate in Europe and 94% of those deaths were unvaccinated people. Bulgaria was battling its fourth and worst wave of COVID and the government tightened restrictions in an effort to bring down the infection rate.

A month ago due to the fact that the number of infected people with Covid19 was growing and the number of deaths was also increasing the health authorities decided to take additional measures in order to limit the spread of the infection.

Health officials blame public mistrust in vaccines and the government — just one in four adults is fully vaccinated — for the current infection spread. That is why the government decided to make the so called EU Digital COVID Certificate mandatory requirement for access to restaurants, theatres, cinemas, concert halls, gyms, clubs and shopping malls. The so called “Green Certificate” is also mandatory for staff at hospitals and nursing homes and university students need it to be allowed into in-person classes.

Universities, restaurants, shops with an area of over 300 square meters, hotels, cinemas, theatres, and gyms all have to require the Bulgarian green passport before people may enter.

Hospital visits have completely been suspended until the epidemiological situation improves and all members of tour groups and organized visits to tourist sites must also show the Bulgarian COVID certificate.

Only public transport, essential services, and entrance to schools and kindergartens remain unrestricted as children under 12 do not need to carry the pass.

The Green Pass have to prove vaccination, being post-illness, or a negative result of an antigen or PCR test.

With the news of the introduction of the COVID 19 Green Certificate in Bulgarian society, strong tensions and divisions began to grow, as many people perceived the measure as discriminatory. The reason for this is the fact that the level of vaccinated people in society is extremely low. Only around 25% of Bulgarian adults are fully vaccinated.

Bulgarian restaurant, tourism, fitness and retail professional societies organized a national protest in Sofia and several other cities and towns, demanding changes to the “green certificate” rules which they said were introduced hastily and are discriminatory. The organizers of the protests said that instead of resolving the medical crisis, the system was deepening the economic one. Bulgarian restaurant associations said also that on the first two days the system went into effect, turnover of restaurants dropped by 80 per cent.

The organizers of the protests listed their demands as including antibody test results as a basis for such a certificate, the state to provide free tests, including state and municipal administrations in the “green certificate” system, and that the system should come into use only when the country is classified as a “dark red” or “red” zone for Covid-19 morbidity.

They said that there should be an urgent solution for people not recommended to receive vaccinations on medical grounds.

The protesters said that there should have been a grace period before the system was introduced, but in practice there had not been one.

The protest was against the health measures of the caretaker government, which according to business representatives are inadequate, and the system for applying green certificates is discriminating large groups in the society. The other argument of the protesters was that the measure risks throwing the country into an even deeper economic crisis instead of resolving the health issue.

All around the country owners and employees of restaurants blocked some of the busiest intersections in the city centers of the big cities, blocking the traffic. Tourism organizations also expressed their dissatisfaction in many big cities in the country organizing demonstrations.

Thousands of restaurant owners, chefs, waiters and bartenders were protesting in cities across Bulgaria against the government's decision to impose a mandatory COVID-19 health pass on people seeking to enter indoor venues.

Restaurant and hospitality associations organized the protest saying that the government introduced the requirement too quickly for people to prepare for it. The head of the Association of Restaurants urged authorities to adopt measures that businesses would be able to comply with.

In the capital of Sofia, protesters blocked a major intersection during rush hour, creating traffic chaos. Later, they marched to the government headquarters to demand the resignation of the health minister and warned that they will keep up the pressure on the government until their demands are met.

Officially, about 470,000 Bulgarians have recovered from COVID-19, but it is reported at least one million Bulgarians survived COVID-19 but have not been tested. The government first insisted that the common European approach does not recognize antibodies without diagnosing the disease by test.

A few weeks later Bulgarian authorities have surrendered to the demands of the restaurant industry and announced that a green certificate would be issued for people with large amounts of COVID-19 antibodies. The EU Commission has announced that there is not enough data to allow antibodies to justify a European green certificate, but states are free to develop their own solutions. The Bulgarian health ministry announced a similar position on 26 October but has changed it under external pressure from restaurateurs and against the backdrop of the 14 November elections.

So finally the Health ministry introduced green certificates for antibodies valid only for Bulgaria for 90 days.

The main goal was to give the certificate to people who are well protected from infection. It will be given to people who have had the disease asymptotically, to people who have bought an antigen test from the pharmacy and have seen that they are positive, but have not gone to the hospital.

There is a requirement that the antibodies must be 10 times above the protective limit determined by the tests to have real protection against coronavirus.

In the last week, Bulgaria has seen a 20% decline in new COVID cases. This decrease happened after introducing the green certificate system and the transition of schools to online teaching. Since the last week, the youngest students returned to school in order if their parents allow them to be tested for the virus twice a week.

One of the most important issues related to the low level of vaccination in the country is that of the reasons related to the strong anti-vaccine feelings in the society.

Conspiracy theories, security concerns, threat downplaying or simply rebellion - whatever the reasons for refusing to be vaccinated against COVID-19, they seem to have found fertile ground in Bulgaria to take root. Large part of the Bulgarian population believe in various theories such as: vaccines are an attempt to change human DNA, they are used for microchipping, they cause sterility, diseases, they are more dangerous than the virus, they are simply useless etc.

Since the appearance of the first case of infection in the spring of 2020, along with the new coronavirus in the country, a parallel pandemic of fake news and conspiracy theories broke out. The rhetoric "mutates" from simple denial of the virus to anti-vaccine suggestions, with the "vaccine causing infertility."

All the time rumors were circulating that hospitals were offering money to record in someone's death certificate that the person had died of Covid 19. The protective mask was described as a "muzzle" that the government wants to put on its citizens. All sorts of claims about the harm of masks, miraculous treatments of COVID-19, theories that 5G technologies are to blame for the spread of the virus, etc. have flooded social networks for months.

A sociological study of attitudes toward COVID-19 found that older people and university graduates were more attracted to conspiracy theories. One explanation, according to anthropologists is that older people are distrustful because they remember the communist times, when official news was often fake. People with a high level of education often think that they are competent enough in areas beyond the acquired level.

## **Conclusion**

Bulgaria has the EU's lowest vaccination rate and together with this is facing widespread vaccine hesitancy. According to most of the sociological surveys, the leader in the reluctance to vaccinate in the EU is Bulgaria, where the percentage of those who refuse vaccination is about 26 percent. Distrust of vaccines continues to exist locally and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. These processes are also fueled by widespread misinformation. The media constantly report news, the public is flooded with information, which often includes unverified facts that misinform and under the pressure of the "hopeless" situation often become a truth that many people believe.

Unfortunately, the combination of distrust of health authorities and state institutions and belief in all sorts of conspiracy theories leads to severe consequences for society, both in terms of health and in terms of its cohesion and unity, which is necessary to overcome all social and economic crises facing Bulgaria.