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SUMMARY

Surveys of public sentiments show that Bulgarians are the most skeptical about immunizations against Coronavirus, which is why our country is among the last places in the EU in terms of vaccination coverage. The aim of this study is to identify the causes of negative attitudes and to formulate recommendations for effective solutions that raise the reliable public awareness and minimize skepticism. Both documentary and sociological methods were used in the study. 459 people were interviewed and 43 in-depth interviews were conducted within the period of November-December 2021. Conclusions and recommendations: The absence, for a long time, of a national system-structured information campaign and the later misconducted one, combined with a wave of infodemia, are the main reasons for the negative sentiments about the vaccination against Covid-19. The creation of permanent information centers in settlements and the opportunity for personal contact of citizens with locally proven medical authorities will help to overcome the negative attitudes.

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I. INTRODUCTION

For more than two years now, the world has been living in a Covid-19 pandemic. The application of vaccines against the virus that causes the disease is a crucial part of the possibility to handle this challenge. In this regard, the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria has ensured the availability of sufficient quantities of AstraZeneca, Pfizer and

Moderna vaccines approved for use in Europe. Surveys of public sentiments show that Bulgarians are the most skeptical about immunizations against coronavirus, which is why our country is among the last places in the EU in terms of vaccination coverage. According to data of the Unified Information Portal, as of 30.04.2022, 4,386,264 doses have been administered. The total number of persons having gone through a completed vaccination course is 2,055,820 (29.6% of the population in the country). We are also last in the administration of booster doses. Considering the average percentage for the EU countries being 51.4%, the revaccinated persons in Bulgaria are only 10.8% of the population [1]. Unfortunately, the phenomenon of “fake vaccinations” poses a problem for many EU countries [8]. Bulgaria does not make an exception, from where it follows that the officially reported number of immunized persons is probably lower, given the existence of bad practices for reporting immunizations without such having been performed at all.

Insufficient vaccination coverage is also a worrying issue for the migration process. Over the last decade, “since the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on promoting worker mobility within the EU (2010/2273 (INI)), migration processes have increased, especially among young people.” In order to avoid reckless risks, it is imperative that the conditions of residence in the country we want to go to [4] are studied carefully. This implies the obligation and responsibility to comply with anti-epidemic measures, including through mass vaccination, introduced at both national and European levels, in order to control the Covid pandemic.

The many unknowns in the outbreak of the pandemic relating to the diagnosis, treatment, complications and vaccination against Covid-19, as well as the anti-vaccination sentiments, have sparked a worldwide wave of misinformation and fake news reaching the public through various communication channels [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) defined the rapid spread of this type of malicious information as “infodemia”, which can be even more dangerous than the virus itself [7,8].

National vaccination campaigns in most European countries started as early as December 2020 and gave good results in terms of high vaccination coverage. Only at the end of March 2022, the Ministry of Health launched an information campaign “+ me” about the benefits of vaccines and vaccination against Covid-19. Within the initiative, a website www.плюсмен.бг has been created, where everyone can find answers to the questions they ask themselves in connection with the pandemic and vaccines [5].

Despite the efforts of experts and institutions, at European and national levels, to change negative attitudes, the problem of non-vaccination remains persistent. This determines the relevance of the topic related to the study of the possibilities for helping to overcome the skepticism among the Bulgarian population regarding the immunization against Covid-19.

The aim of the study is to identify the causes of negative attitudes and formulate recommendations for effective solutions that raise the reliable public awareness of vaccination against Covid-19 and minimize skepticism.

In order to achieve the aim thus set, the following tasks need to be solved:

1. To study and analyze the motives for refusing vaccination;
2. To identify the preferred sources of communication;
3. To study the impact of personal consultations with a medical professional on attitudes towards immunization.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

Both documentary and sociological methods were used in the research study. Data from an anonymous standardized questionnaire survey conducted among 459 people who attended informative talks held in enterprises from the city of Varna, as well as 43 in-depth interviews with men and women aged 40-65 conducted after public consultations, were analyzed by the author of the article personally, in the period November-December 2021.

The study does not claim to be representative, however, it provides an opportunity to identify the main reasons for the hesitation and skepticism about vaccination against Covid-19, to identify trends related to trust in the health system and the pharmaceutical industry, and to formulate recommendations for reducing the number of people with negative attitudes.

III. EMPIRICAL VERIFICATIONS

Insufficient activity in the vaccination process in the country has been reported due to the following reasons:

- No national information campaign;
- Initially misrepresented information creating increased expectations in people to prevent infection with the virus after application of vaccines and discrepancy between those attitudes and reality;
- Contradictory media messages from various experts;
- Growing lack of trust in the government, institutions and experts discussing the topic.

As a result, the Municipal Council of Varna decided to hold informative talks and consultations among citizens in order to raise awareness with scientifically proven facts about the benefits of vaccination, possible side effects and contraindications for various diseases [6]. During this period, representatives of the municipal medical establishments involved in the campaign held more than 60 meetings which were attended by over 1,500 people and consulted over 170 people. In three of the company teams with talks held (Public Transport EAD, Municipal

Waste Processing Plant EOOD and secondary school), some of those present (459) responded to the invitation to participate in a survey and in a direct interview (43).

In the distribution of the respondents by gender and age, men predominated (83.5%), which can be explained by the nature of the respondents' work. The largest share (49.9%) were persons aged 55-65 years, followed by those aged 40-55 years (39.6%), those up to 40 years of age were 7.3% and those over 65 years - 3.2%. Respondents with secondary education predominated (74.6%), 21.2% were those with higher education and 4.2% with primary education. More than a third of the respondents (38.9%) reported having some chronic illness.

Those who had gone through Covid-19 represented 39.6% of the respondents, 13.1% were not sure if they had it, and 47.3% categorically denied to have had it. A significant proportion of patients (71.8%) were diagnosed through antigen and/or PCR tests, 22% reported having antibodies after being tested, and 6.2% had not tested but had the typical symptoms of the disease.

The share of vaccinated persons among the respondents (with one or two doses administered) was only 12.6%, with a significant part (77.1%) not planning to be immunized (49.4% NO + 27.7% Rather NO) (Fig. 1)

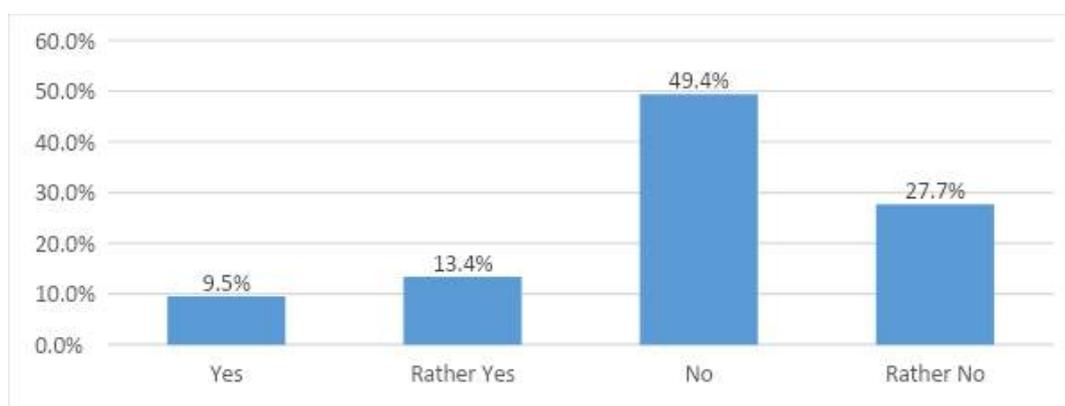


Fig. 1: Do you have any plans to get vaccinated against Covid-19?

Respondents with a categorical decision to be immunized were five times less than those who had a categorically negative answer.

Quite a few of the respondents (68.5% = 41.7% YES + 26.8% Rather YES) reported having concerns about their health as a result of immunization. Only 17.6% were at peace about their health after vaccination and gave a categorically negative answer, while 13.9% expressed some doubts. Respondents' fears were related to allegations spread through various communication channels, most often the Facebook network. The largest share (74.5%) were those who were concerned about the "short period of creation of the vaccines", 47.6% about the "formation of blood clots" and 25.2% about subsequent "infertility". Respondents' concerns were also related to "DNA change" (14.2%) and

"individual chipping" (7.5%). The anxiety and tension in a large part of the respondents (39.9%) was caused by the requirement for signing an "Informed Consent" by the immunized, which, according to them, released the pharmaceutical company from liability in case of any complications after vaccination.

The most common and accessible sources representing the main information channel are the television media (63.6%), a significant role is played by communication with relatives and acquaintances (34.9%), followed by social networks (32.8%), physicians (including GPs) (28%) and others (11.4%). Respondents expressed varying degrees of trust in information sources (Fig. 2).

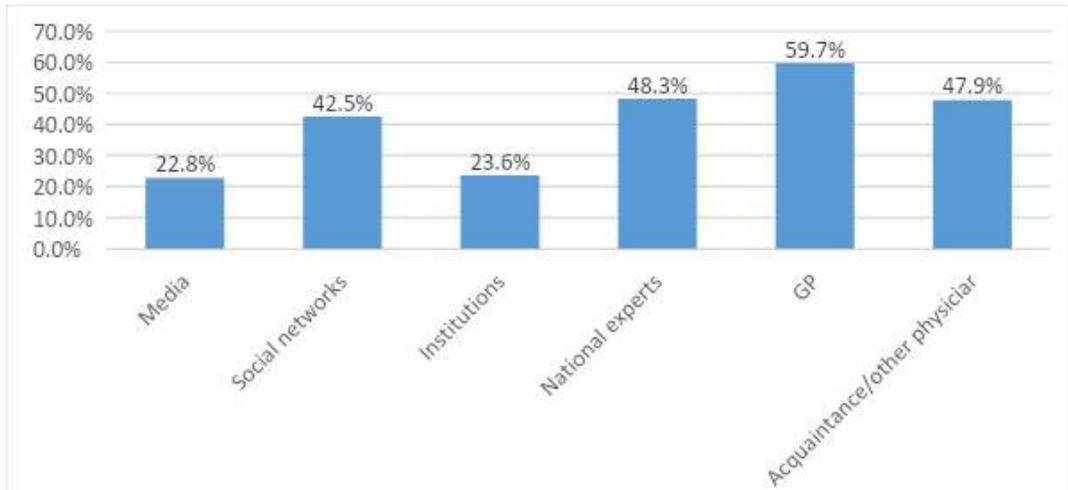


Fig. 2: Which of the following information sources do you trust? (more than one answer is possible)

GPs (59.7%), national experts (48.3%) and acquaintances/other physicians (47.9%) were the most trusted. Although the media and social networks are the main sources of information, trust in them is not high. It is noteworthy that the respondents had more trust in social networks

than in the media. The least trust was registered in institutions (23.6%).

From the graph in Fig. 3 we learn about the benefits of the respondents' participation in educational meetings.

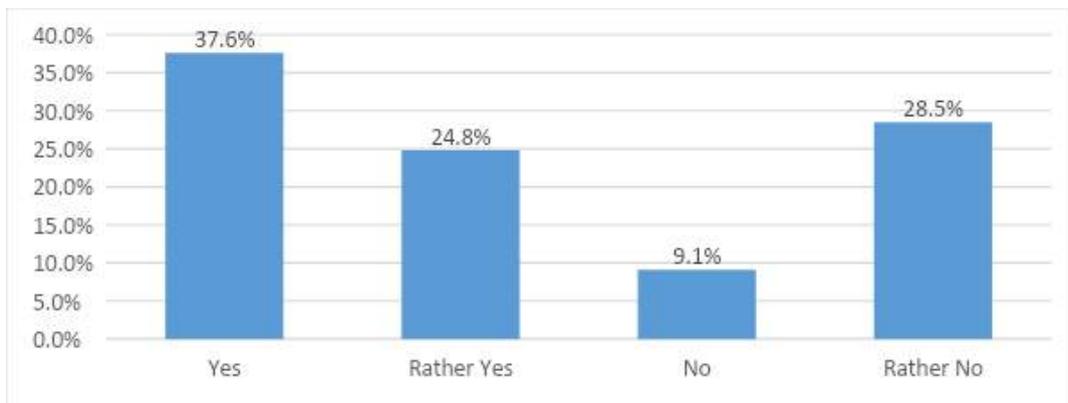


Fig. 3: During the informative talk, did you receive answers to the questions about the vaccination against Covid-19 which cause you concern?

More than half of the respondents (62.4% = 37.6% + 24.8%) were satisfied with the information presented during the organized talks and received a satisfactory answer to the questions that concern them. Only 9.1% were categorically disappointed.

A significant part of the respondents (73.4%) reported that they would like to receive personal advice on issues related to vaccination and their personal health (Fig. 4).

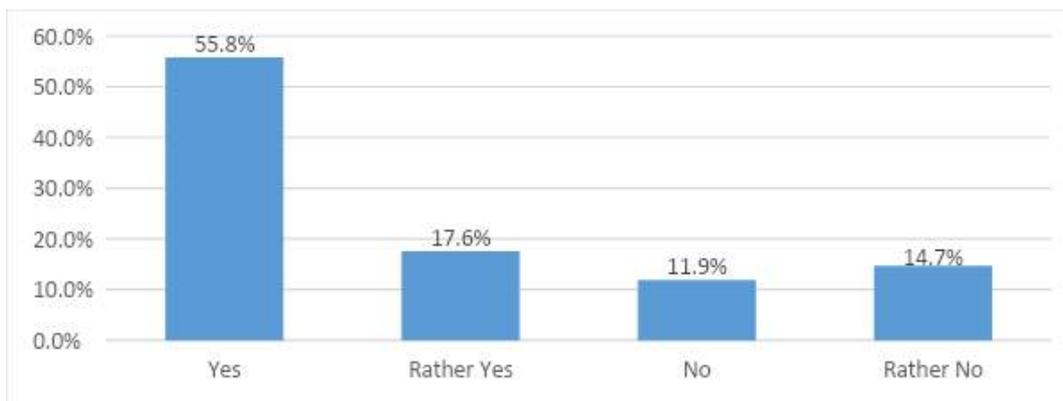


Fig. 4: Would you take the opportunity to have a personal consultation with a physician/GP about the vaccination of you and/or a relative?

A quarter of them (26.6%) were not interested in further information that they could receive in individual consultations.

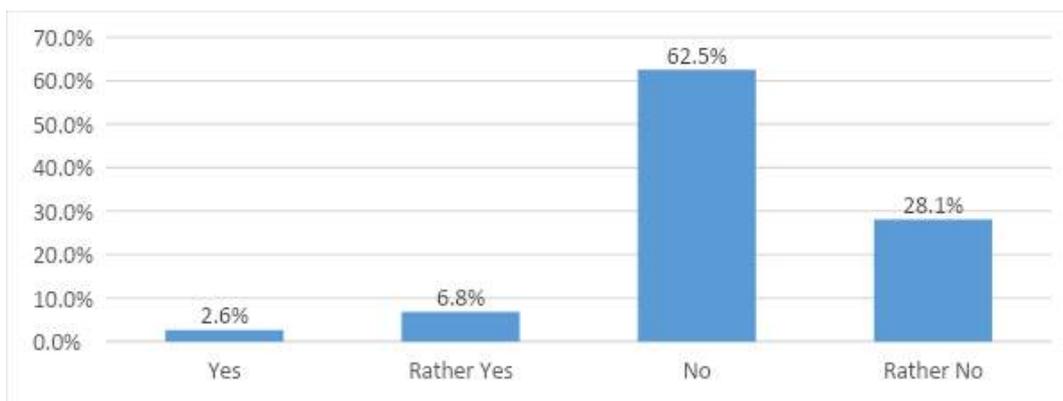


Fig. 5: If you answered NO to the first question, did the informative talk change your attitude towards vaccination?

Despite the approval of the informative talk by a large part of the respondents, only 2.6% reported a change in their attitude towards the vaccination against Covid-19, while those being hesitant but having a positive attitude was another 6.8%. The share of those who denied the need for immunization, keeping their negative attitude unchanged, remained significant (90.6% = 62.5% NO + 28.1% Rather NO).

The results of the direct interviews conducted confirm the trend of the anonymous survey. Dominant reasons for refusing vaccination were: “not tested enough”, “quickly appeared on the pharmaceutical market”, “I am not sure how they will affect my health”. The majority of the participants stated that Covid disease was a

“global conspiracy” caused by the “financial interests of the major pharmaceutical industries”. Skepticism was heightened by the lack of trust in the “government” and the “health care system”. Most interviewees wished to use “personal consultation”, “have contact with a physician they know and trust”, “discuss the specific risks to their health”, “ask about their chronic illness and that of a member of their family”, “choose which vaccine to get” and “when the right time is to get immunized”. The possibility of “feedback from a known physician”, “consultation in case of side effects” would “reduce the tension and fear of the unknowns” related to immunization and would “give a sense of security and peace of mind”.

Within a month after the informative meetings and personal consultations conducted, 19 respondents sought assistance from the author and were vaccinated in the immunization office of the municipal medical establishment which organized part of the educational talks. The lack of uniform information about all those present at the informative meetings and about any possible subsequent vaccinations of some of them do not allow to assess the effectiveness of the municipal program.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The absence, at the beginning of the pandemic, of a national, system-structured information campaign and the later misconducted one, combined with the lack of trust in government and institutions, as well as a wave of infodemia spreading mainly on social networks, are among the main reasons for the existence of negative attitudes towards the vaccination against Covid-19.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Overcoming skepticism is only possible by:

- Joining the efforts of all stakeholders at both national and local levels in conducting the information campaign.
- Establishing permanent information centers at various locations where medical specialists will consult citizens on vaccination, while checking their health.
- Involving locally proven authorities and maximum level of spread of reliable information among users.
- Strengthening personal contact and feedback between citizens and the physician they trust.

Conclusion: Since the spring of this year, we have seen a significant decline in the incidence of Covid-19 in all countries, which has led to the abolition of a number of restrictive and anti-epidemic measures. Unfortunately, scientists' concerns about the development of the next pandemic wave in the fall remain. Conducting a national campaign in a new way, bringing the information about the Covid-19 vaccines as close

to the people as possible, will help change attitudes among those who are hesitant.

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