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**АКТОРНІСТЬ ЄС В ЧАСИ
COVID-19 ТА ПОЛІТИКА
ЩОДО СУСІДІВ**

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THE RISING POLITIZATION OF COVID VACCINES IN THE EU: THE JOURNEY FROM NECESSITY TO POLITICAL TOOLKIT

In an effort to ensure a decrease in the number of the COVID-positive deploying various countermeasures, the political picture is getting more chaotic, taking different paths to return to new normality in 2021.

The number of cases of infection is multiplying again, taking into account new variations of coronavirus diseases (Ritchie, 2020). Such a spread could disrupt plans of Europeans to have safe and proper vacations. However, this is of less concern to European leaders, as vaccines keep hospitalizations and deaths lower than in 2020.

It refers to EU leaders who are changing their view of the virus, assessing hospitalization rates more than the number of infections.

Thus, European countries are trying to find the appropriate balance in their approaches: France and Italy are pursuing more prudent policies, requiring vaccination certificates for certain professions. Hungary went in the opposite direction and in July 2021 lifted all restrictions as if the pandemic was over.

In essence, Europe has entered a new phase of the pandemic, but political leaders are struggling with a new toolkit: the effect of vaccines; the risk of more strains; and a potential risk of long-lasting side-effects. At the same time, Europeans are desperate to return to normal life, and



their leaders want to kick-start economic growth and continue political campaigns.

In fact, the EU didn't manage to present an appropriate and quick response to the coronavirus disease and its outcomes in political, economic and social dimensions. Some of the politicians were searching for government officials responsible for the upraise of COVID (the dissolution of the government in Italy in February 2021 or the situation with Slovakia, when Prime Minister Igor Matovič unilaterally negotiated purchase of 2 million doses of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V COVID-19 before the vaccine is approved by the European Medicines Agency (Janicek, 2021) or focus on minimizing political influence from the opposition by simply depriving it of economic funding (Hungary). The response to the pandemic has polarized the views of citizens in many countries.

New elections are waiting for Germany and the Czech Republic in autumn this year. Therefore, the desire of the political parties to find a compromise decreases, and therefore the messages to the population were carried out through various channels of communication. For example, most communication with the people was carried out by politicians, including Prime Minister Babiš in the Czech Republic, who did not listen to experts and fought the pandemic based on his political needs.

Despite the outbreak of infections and hospitalized patients, Bulgaria allowed the hospitality sector to reopen on March 1, 2021. Thousands of protests preceded this by Bulgarians, who accused the government of colluding with the oligarchs, of failing to eradicate corruption and eradicate poverty. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, who was awaiting the parliamentary elections, seems to have sought to find a balance between opening the country and adhering to certain pandemic security measures.

As a result, European polls marked low trust for public institutions and think tank experts. The reasons for that in many EU countries, such as Hungary, France, Romania and Bulgaria, are that the population of these countries does not receive enough information about vaccines and is not confident in the transparency of vaccination campaigns. In addition, it is

believed that not much time has passed to test vaccines sufficiently for their safety.

Moreover, the upraise of disinformation about vaccines twilight governments to overcome this challenge.

At the current vaccination rate, 75% of the EU population will be vaccinated by mid-September, and this level may be enough to resist the virus.

However, there is a new trend to mark COVID-related impact in places where vaccines are widespread. In recent weeks, the number of cases in France and Germany has increased, but there has been no equivalent increase in mortality. The 25 wealthiest countries and regions worldwide have operated with 18% of the world's vaccine doses, although their share of the population relative to the world is only 9% (Paton & Langreth, 2021).

Unfair distribution of vaccines could also allow the virus to continue to circulate and generate more alarming strains that could evade immune protection from vaccines and pose a threat to everyone, including rich countries. This would be particularly worrying if these strains advanced in early winter 2022, when the conditions for respiratory viruses arrived.

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