

Balkans school reopenings and low vaccination rate drive latest wave of coronavirus infections

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29 September 2021

COVID-19 infections and deaths have returned to record-high levels in Romania, Bulgaria, and other Balkan countries following the reopening of schools.

Since the pandemic began, more than 1 million of Romania's 19.4 million residents have contracted the virus, and 36,230 have died. Last Wednesday alone, there were 130 deaths. Between the second and third waves, that number had fallen to two on some days.

The number of new daily infections on Friday returned to the level of last December, i.e., 7,676. Officials say it could rise to 20,000 by early October. At the same time, the number of unreported cases is enormous. According to estimates by the health organization MedLife, infection figures are five to seven times higher than the officially reported numbers.

As of last Wednesday, only 32 intensive care beds were still available in the entire country, but these beds could not be used because of a lack of properly trained staff.

The reason for the dramatic increase in infections is the opening up of schools after the summer vacation, combined with the country's low vaccination rate of just 30 percent. Even now, 40 percent of medical staff and teachers are not vaccinated. After schools were closed for extended periods last year, unrestricted face-to-face classes resumed on September 13. Now schools have become hotspots of transmission. According to the Ministry of Education's figures, which are likely to be a significant underestimation, 3,362 students and preschoolers and 1,200 school employees have been infected.

Experts have long warned against opening up schools, predicting a rapid rise in infection and death rates. "Schools act as an accelerant for transmission in

communities. It's like driving in first gear in the community and then immediately shifting into fifth gear when children attend school," explained health expert Razvan Chereches.

While universities are partially switching back to online lectures, all of Romania's political parties—government and opposition—have agreed to keep schools open in the interest of the economy. In light of the possibility of new elections, all of the parties have stated that there will be no lockdown or the reimplementation of the protective measures introduced last year. Following the loss of its majority, the country's right-wing government led by Florin Cițu is expected to call for a new election.

COVID-19 infections are also rising sharply in neighbouring Bulgaria. Last week, 516 people died as a result of the disease, the highest number this year. Of the country's 7 million inhabitants, almost half a million have become infected, 20,350 have died, and more than 4,700 people are currently in hospital, with around 400 in intensive care. The situation is extremely tense because the Bulgarian health care system was in a disastrous state even prior to the pandemic. Since then, the situation has only worsened.

Last week alone, 152 new infections were reported among medical staff. This means that 14,287 employees in this sector have now been infected. Information on how many have died is not available. In schools, the situation is similarly devastating. As with medical staff, only 30 percent of teachers have been vaccinated against COVID-19. According to the Ministry of Education, one in five teachers has already been infected with the virus.

When schools opened on September 15, just 2

percent of students had been vaccinated. The spread of the virus in schools was directly enabled by the government. Education Minister Nikolay Denkov explicitly allowed celebrations in schools when classes began, and the country's interim government is doing nothing to increase vaccination rates. In mid-August, just 15 percent of the population had been vaccinated, and even now Bulgaria is at the bottom of the list in Europe for vaccination rates.

In November, following yet another failure to form a government, the third parliamentary election this year is expected to take place. All of the parties are united in opposing any new measures to contain the pandemic.

In Kosovo, with a population of 1.9 million, a total of 16,000 infections and 2,931 deaths have been reported, although the number of unreported cases is likely to be many times higher. The country's clinics have been at the edge of their capacity in recent weeks. A nurse at Pristina University Hospital told Radio Free Europe it was no longer possible to care for patients with one nurse responsible for 20 people. Patients often had to be cared for by relatives, which further increased infections in the clinics.

The small country's criminal governments have completely neglected the health care system. A paltry 3.5 percent of gross domestic product is spent on it annually, according to 2019 figures. As is the case in many other Balkan and Eastern European countries, a majority of doctors, nurses and other health professionals have long since migrated to other European countries, because local wages are not enough to survive on.

Prime Minister Albin Kurti had contested the election campaign last winter by rejecting renewed protective measures. A total of 50 children have already had to be hospitalized for a serious course of infection, even though schools were still closed. On Friday, Kosovo's Health Minister Arben Vitia announced that schools would reopen starting September 27. The government thereby rejected a demand by the state-run National Institute of Public Health to further postpone the start of school.

In Serbia, numbers have risen to the level of the first wave. Of the nearly 7 million residents, 906,000 have been infected so far and over 8,000 have died. Again, the number of unreported cases is likely to be higher.

The WHO representative in Serbia, Marian Ivanusha,

commented on the seriousness of the situation, "Every day in Serbia, as many people die as the number of passengers on a bus. If that's not worrying, I don't know what is." While initially the pace of vaccination in Serbia was very high, the government has since halted all efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19. Across Europe, Serbia has the highest rate of new infections.

In Montenegro, the seven-day average reached new records in September. About 500 new infections are reported daily. Again, the country's clinics are bursting at the seams, with only about 41 percent of the population vaccinated, and the number of severe infections is increasing.

In North Macedonia, a devastating fire disaster at an improvised COVID-19 clinic in September shed light on the dire situation in the country. In the town of Tetovo, a fire killed 14 patients and injured 12, some seriously. According to reports, an exploding oxygen tank may have started the fire. Local media reported that there had already been difficulties with the oxygen tanks and associated equipment last month.

The makeshift facility, assembled from containers, is one of about a dozen set up to supply clinics that are completely overloaded with coronavirus cases. Here again, less than 30 percent of the population is vaccinated.



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