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**Vaccines  
save lives.**

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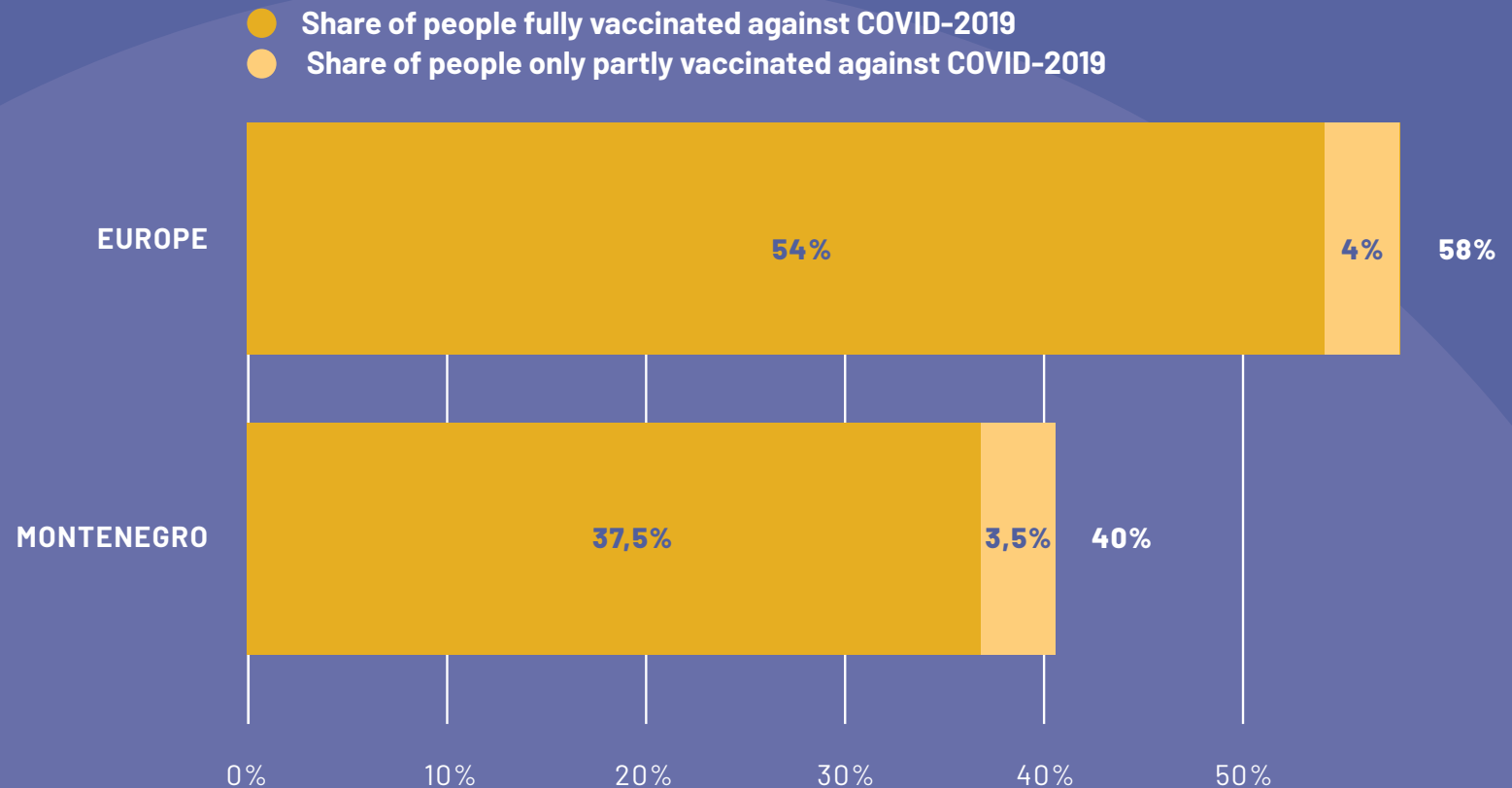




## Immunization process in Montenegro

As of the time of writing this report, **233,183 citizens**, or a little over **36% of the entire population of Montenegro**, have been vaccinated.

We are yet again lagging behind Europe, as European countries have vaccinated more than half their populations:

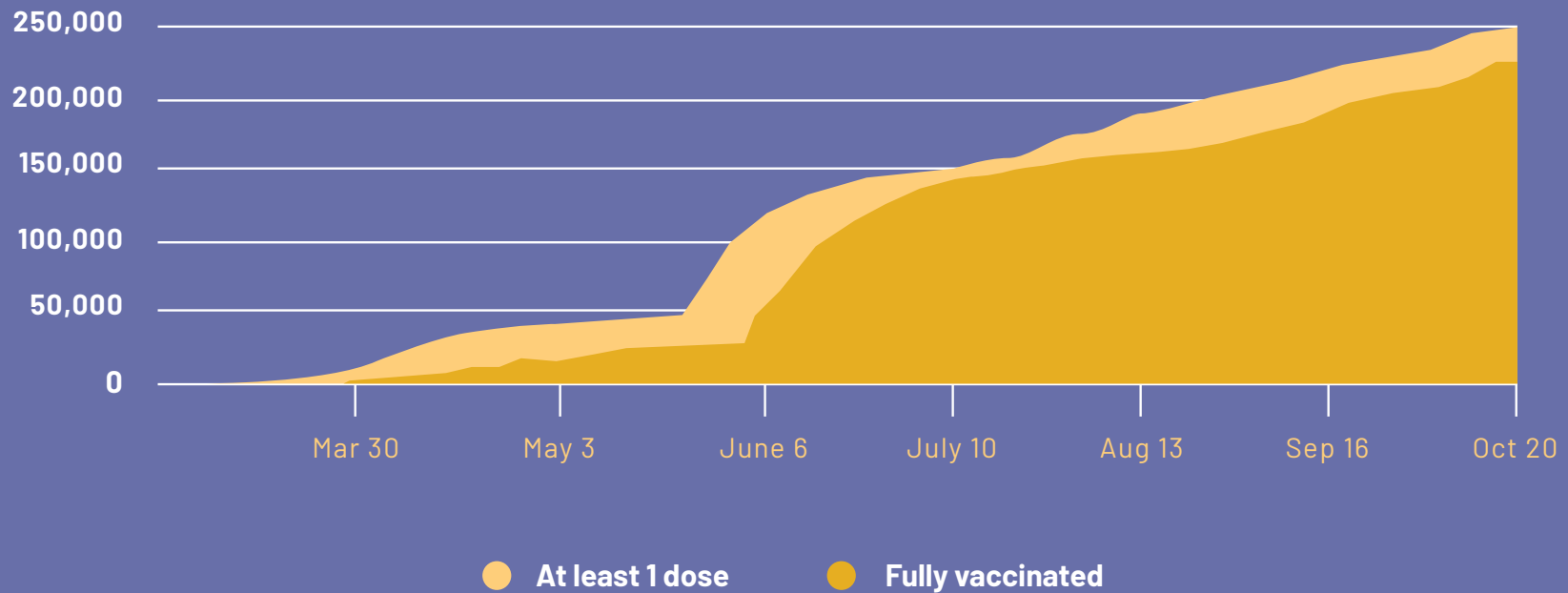


Montenegrins can choose between Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Sputnik V and Sinopharm.

**Source:** Official data collated by Our World in Data. This data is only available for countries which report the breakdown of doses administered by first and second doses in absolute numbers.



But, let us first go back to how it all started. First vaccine doses were shipped to Montenegro in late February, and were initially administered to health care workers and vulnerable groups, the Risan nursing home residents being among the first. Mass vaccination started in May with a promising turnout in the early days of the vaccination process. An unexpectedly high number of citizens were interested and even "jumping" the vaccine ques to receive their first dose. However, after all those who eagerly awaited the vaccines got their shots, the pace slowed down and a slow rate of vaccination has been recorded in recent months.





According to the latest survey conducted by Ipsos in late July, the number of citizens who refuse to be vaccinated has dropped from 44 to 35 percent between January and July. Survey findings indicate that half of Montenegrin citizens who have not yet been vaccinated against COVID-19 plan to do so, while one-third say they will turn down a vaccine. The rest still remains undecided.

Among the hesitant cohort are mostly citizens who say they are not sufficiently informed on the subject matter, while among those who do not want to be vaccinated are largely people who do not trust health care institutions and who are not worried about contracting coronavirus, as well as those who are suspicious of all vaccines and believe that they are to be avoided altogether.

## The effects of “vaccine diplomacy”

Montenegrin citizens were generally able to choose from Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm or Sputnik V vaccines. Immunization started with the roll-out of Russia's Sputnik vaccine, but the majority of citizens received the Chinese vaccine, as this particular vaccine was most widely available. A large number of doses of AstraZeneca vaccine was delivered to Montenegro through the COVAX mechanism. At the end of the summer, Pfizer vaccine doses started coming in on a regular basis.

Those who were skeptical were then wondering which vaccine they should take. Certain media have been promoting particular vaccines. The information provided to citizens were veiled in propaganda narratives and disinformation campaigns.

Vaccines coming in from the West were mostly accompanied by a negative campaign led by "competing manufacturers" from Russia and China... Although transparency is expected to increase credibility, the transparent disclosure of safety research data for

vaccines produced in Western countries was actually used to stir up campaigns aimed at undermining confidence in their safety and effectiveness. Thus, the transparently published side effects of vaccines have been used to build up an effective propaganda narrative about the fatal consequences that await anyone that dares to take these vaccines. Even the European Union warned of an orchestrated campaign and pro-Kremlin disinformation, which, as they said at the time, were being deliberately spread so as to undermine confidence in vaccines. Although being the first one to reach our region, the Russian vaccine has not yet been approved by the World Health Organization and the European Medicines Agency, and we still know very little about it. However, it may be concluded that the advertising campaign meant to promote Sputnik V may have surpassed all the others. This campaign was mostly led by medical professionals tied to Russia, who have been praising Sputnik V as the best of all the vaccines produced, causing no side effects and being an easy-to-manage shot. The media that joined in its promotion



were for the most part producing biased reports, without offering concrete evidence and seizing the opportunity to discredit Western vaccines.

World Health Organization has granted approval for a Chinese vaccine Sinopharm in early May, and only then did we actually get some reliable data from testing procedures. Although practically no information were available about its safety and efficiency up until then, Montenegrin citizens have been gladly opting for this particular vaccine. This might have been due to the

soothing narrative surrounding this vaccine: the Chinese vaccine was produced using the good old, well-known technology that has been tried and tested for decades, a lot of time has been invested in producing it and it is therefore considered to be safe.

Of course, our choice of a vaccine should not be based on foreign policy preferences but on medical advice. Doctors recommend the vaccine that suits us best, all the while making note of the fact that any vaccine is better than no vaccine at all.

## Disinformation and vaccine conspiracy theories

From the onset of the pandemic to the time of writing this analysis, our platform Raskrinkavanje.me has exposed more than 150 false claims exclusively targeting the COVID-19 vaccines.

The fact-checking performed into these texts indicate that vaccine-related disinformation is being spread through several dominant narratives.

The microchipped vaccines conspiracy theory has been very prominent from the beginning. It sways citizens into refusing a vaccine for fear that they might be "tracked" day and night. The microchipping theory further fits into broader conspiracy theories, such as that of powerbrokers secretly controlling the world and working on depopulating the Earth in collusion with tech companies.


Once the immunization started, one of the most dangerous deceptions was the one about vaccines causing infertility, and citizens became growingly concerned about how vaccines might affect their reproductive health. This disinformative narrative also fits into broader narratives of

world depopulation plans and of a global pharmacomafia scheming to get as many people sick as possible.

Dangerous narratives about made up deaths after vaccination are a major threat to the health of citizens as well as public health, and such disinformation get thousands of shares on social media. Conspiracy theorists have put in a lot of work in backing and spreading the narrative of death cases caused by vaccines and thousands of disinformation were spread about vaccines increasing mortality or deaths of famous people being linked to vaccines.

We fact-checked hundreds of posts containing disinformation about the composition of the vaccines, claiming that the COVID-19 vaccine contained, among other things, parts of aborted fetuses, toxins, contaminants, DNA-altering materials, RFID microchips, infertility agents, carcinogenic matter and even the remains of lab monkeys.

According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate, the vast majority of COVID-19 disinformation and conspiracy




theories are coming from as few as 12 people on social media. Then they get thousands, even hundreds of thousands shares. Online space is the perfect ground for spreading conspiracy theories, as they are easily translated from other language and reach different countries and regions.

Public opinion polls conducted in the previous period indicate that such disinformation hold a major sway over the public. A recent UNICEF survey reveals that 35% of Montenegrin citizens believe in a conspiracy theory saying that global elites manufactured the COVID-19 to genetically modify humans through vaccines. Three-fifths of citizens (61%) in Montenegro believe that a group of powerful people is secretly controlling the world.

Surveys around the globe suggest that one's belief in conspiracy theories is largely sparked by fear. The survey conducted in Montenegro shows that young people are not only less likely to believe in COVID-19 conspiracy theories, but are also less afraid of contracting the virus. While 44 percent of Montenegrin citizens see the coronavirus as a serious threat to themselves personally, the same is said by only 25 percent of young people aged between 18 and 29.


We have asked a psychologist about the reasons behind such findings and what makes someone believe that they are being tracked by Bill Gates instead of believing in the importance of immunization as it actually protects them from severe forms of the disease.





*“In situations of great uncertainty, great tragedies and catastrophes that befall us all as humanity, we tend to come together in groups; in social psychology this is known as the crowd psychology. In this psychology of the mass, we no longer “use our own head” but instead embrace attitudes, thoughts and conclusions of other people and we function this way, and the media actually rest on this psychology of the mass. I truly understand that people need to find information and that everyone has a need to find their own way for dealing with this problem, but we definitely need to approach the information we are given with responsibility, both as a society and as individuals, we need to take responsibility in making this information available and we must have a highly developed critical thinking.”*

— Lidija Pejovic, psychologist



The media space of Montenegro has been fraught with disinformation for years, and there are still no concrete democratic measures to confront this issue. A dangerous disinformation campaign has definitely marked the coronavirus pandemic, and it is still not winding down. It is therefore important to understand its scope and the threat it poses to public health and to humanity as a whole. Fact-checkers review contents shared on social media on a daily basis, but the volume of conspiracy theories and fake news is often overwhelming. Given the vaccination rates, the public opinion, the propaganda and disinformation circulating, we come to a conclusion that what we need is an all-round social media campaign. The Ministry of Health of Montenegro launched a campaign promoting the importance of vaccination

and drawing attention to a multitude of disinformation about the virus itself and the vaccines. However, it is clear that both institutions and the media need to be more actively engaged in this important struggle. Apart from undermining democracy and social development, disinformation are now also posing a great threat to public health, which, in any case, is the top priority. In emergencies such as this, the competent institutions need to make quick decisions, but these decisions must also address this important issue. A more transparent approach to citizens with accurate, verified information and a campaign that will unequivocally expose vaccine-related conspiracy theories must be among the priorities of health institutions.





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This publication is a part of the project supported by the Balkan Trust for Democracy (BTD) a project of German Marshal Fund of the U.S. and the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by the Center for Democracy and Transition (CDT). The views and opinions expressed do not reflect the views and opinions of BTD, GMF, USAID or the Government of the U.S.