What is behind the Initial Frenzy over the Dangers of the Omicron Strain?

In recent days, the media and political establishment in many countries have been discussing the emergence of Omicron coronavirus variant and the strengthening of the fight against its spread.

According to the World Health Organization, the new strain of coronavirus has many mutations, some of which are designated as a Variant of Concern (VOC). In this regard, WHO stated that preliminary data indicate an increased risk of reinfection compared to other variants. Moved by this knowledge, scientists in various countries began to make statements in the media, calling the new variant of the coronavirus the worst they have seen since the pandemic started.

A new omicron strain could cause more than half of all coronavirus infections in the European Union in the coming months, reports the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, ECDC. “Vaccinations for those either not yet vaccinated or who have not completed their vaccine course and boosters for those over 40 years of age are imperative...,” ECDC Director Andrea Ammon is quoted as saying.

Previously, the WHO said that a new strain of coronavirus has already been identified in 23 countries, and the number is constantly increasing. At a meeting convened in late November at the initiative of the UK, the G7 discussed the global health situation following the discovery in South Africa of a new Omicron strain, which has been listed by WHO as a COVID-19 mutation of concern. And while South African doctors are urging their Western counterparts not to panic, more and more countries are restricting or stopping air travel to Africa. Because of the transportation restrictions imposed, many travelers can’t get home. The Omicron strain has already brought
“transportation chaos” around the world. However, studies show that it is too late to close borders: the new strain managed to enter Europe in mid-November before any officially detected cases of infection.

Against this backdrop, countries are tightening sanitary measures due to the risk of spreading a new strain of Omicron. Thus, Germany may approve mandatory vaccinations before the end of the year and put the issue to a parliamentary vote no later than January.

The UK has decided to extend booster vaccination to all adults, and the health pass will be compulsory in public places. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said all adults would be offered revaccination by the end of January.

Greece imposes monthly fines of $113 for unvaccinated citizens over 60 years old. According to the British media, the money collected from the fines will go to the needs of the country’s health care system. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis reported at a cabinet meeting, that 66% of the population in the country of 11 million had been fully vaccinated, but 500,000 people over the age of 60 had not yet been vaccinated.

Austria also plans to introduce monetary fines for those who ignore an invitation to vaccination twice. The maximum fine for those refusing vaccination will be €7,200. However, the country needs to get additional Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine supplies to continue the vaccination campaign after Christmas. There are now more than 130,000 vaccinations per week in Lower Austria, with no real vaccine shortage yet. In this regard, Federal Ministry of Health of Austria points out that owing to changed recommendations of experts on revaccination, the issue of vaccine supply has become particularly acute. The EU, which distributes vaccines to European countries according to population size, initially ordered the third component of the vaccine from Pfizer, expecting to receive it nine months after the peak of vaccination with the second component - in March, April, and May 2022. However, it became clear that immunity declines faster in many people, and there is a significant need for revaccination in December 2021. The EU has placed an additional order, as the problem with the extra quantity of vaccines needed could affect many countries in the coming days.

However, vaccination rates vary even in Europe. While in the wealthy areas of Belgium, the vaccination rate is over 80%, only about 20% have received at least the first dose of the vaccine in the poorer suburbs of Brussels. The mayor of Saint-Josse, located close to the EU institutions, where most migrants live, and the population suffers from poverty, personally convinces people to sign up for injection and hands out vouchers for PCR tests, Euronews reports.

Pharmacies are stretched to their limits In France: once the PCR test was shortened to 24 hours, the flow of people wishing to be tested has increased dramatically. At the same time, some pharmacists have to accept those who want a booster dose of the vaccine after hours, BFM TV reports. According to French media publications, the coronavirus epidemic has thrown away the progress made in France in preventing and controlling the spread of AIDS. HIV testing has fallen by 14% in the past year, and anti-disease associations fear a rise in infections, particularly among at-risk groups such as migrants, sex workers, and gay men.

According to a White House press release, the USA is stepping up its fight against the coronavirus with pre-departure testing protocols. All incoming international travelers must take tests within one day before departure, regardless of citizenship or vaccination status. US National Guard fighters who refused to be vaccinated will not be paid their salaries, The Washington Times writes, referring to the internal order of the Pentagon.

Current immunity to coronavirus in humans reduces risks from Omicron, but one should not presume that the new strain does not cause severe effects of the disease, said Anna Popova, Head of Rospotrebnadzor. “Even if this new virus can somehow circumvent already-formed immunity, it won’t be 100% circumvention. The immunity formed after the previous disease and after vaccinations will still make health risks from this new virus very small,” said Popova. The head of Rospotrebnadzor also said that the coronavirus is gaining its seasonality and is coming to us like other seasonal viruses.

With the spread of the new Omicron strain hotly debated around the world, the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter says the pandemic has drawn attention to the modern world order in which countries act only in their own interests and spit on others. International cooperation is coming apart at the seams at the slightest setback. The Omicron strain has again exposed the chasm between the affluent North and the poor South. A continent like Africa, where less than seven percent of the population is fully immunized, is at significant risk of becoming a kind of greenhouse. The virus can mutate into new, more infectious variants over there. Much has been written about small donations to poor countries, crumbs from the table of the rich, sometimes some of these donated doses were expired. Rich countries have not lived up to their promises under Covax, an international collaborative vaccine project designed to
level up the access. So far, the USA has sent only 22% of the promised doses to poor countries, the EU only 15%. Plans to temporarily waive patenting rules so that vaccines can also be produced in poor countries have stalled due to resistance from EU members such as Germany.

Until now, international licensing and access to the Russian vaccine Sputnik V, which has already proved excellent against various coronavirus strains, has been delayed for apparently political reasons. The issue of recognition of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V in Europe is political and ideological, Hungarian Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó said.

This lack of recognition is not surprising, given the particular financial interest of Western circles and, above all, the USA in keeping the vaccine market in their own hands for fabulous profits. For example, Pfizer said that its vaccine generated $3.5 billion in revenue in the first three months of 2021, and for all of 2021, the manufacturer expects $26 billion in revenue. Pfizer shares its profits from the drug with BioNTech, which reported €2 billion in revenue in the first quarter. AstraZeneca’s vaccine earned creators $275 million in revenue in the first quarter of 2021; analysts forecast sales of the company’s COVID-19 vaccine at $1.9 billion in 2021. Johnson & Johnson reported that its vaccine generated $100 million in revenue in the first three months of the year, and, according to The Guardian, the company plans to deliver at least 1 billion doses in 2021, bringing it to about $10 billion. In the first quarter of 2021, US startup Moderna generated $1.73 billion in vaccine revenues and said that the amount would grow to $18.4 billion over the year.

As Forbes columnist Joshua Cohen notes, vaccine makers are aware of the possibility of revaccination, so they want to increase their revenues. According to a Morningstar report, the COVID-19 vaccine market will peak in 2021. It could be worth $67 billion, with the majority of sales expected to come from just two vaccines, Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, in both 2020 and 2021.

Under the circumstances, it cannot be ruled out the hype raised in many Western countries regarding the insidiousness of the new strain may be dictated by the increased interest of the traditional Western pharmaceutical companies that produce vaccines from COVID-19, in obtaining even higher profits. To some extent, this is confirmed by Dr. Richard Besser’s recent statement on NBC News. According to him, the concern around the new omicron coronavirus strain has a lot of unanswered questions, and scientists have not yet figured out how infectious and deadly the new strain will be and whether current vaccines will be able to counteract it.

Valery Kulikov, political expert, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.