INTRODUCTION

In the last 3 years, during the 2019-2022 period, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about inevitable changes related to the attitude and the way in which the citizens react to the following circumstances: the fear of the disease’s spread, symptoms and consequences of the inflection and the attitudes towards the measures undertaken by the government [1, 2]. Worldwide the focus was on news mainly related to COVID-19, keeping the Bulgarian society, as well as humanity all over the world, in a state of constant anticipation. Those thoughts and attitudes were accompanied by higher levels of anxiety and...
fear about how the disease would unfold and what its consequences would be.

The purpose of the article was to present and analyze the public attitudes, awareness and fears regarding the COVID-19 disease in our country.

In order to achieve our objective, we outlined the following questions:

1. Were the participants in the questionnaire aware of the COVID-19 disease?
2. What were the present fears related to the spread and progression of the COVID-19 disease among the respondents?
3. What were the manifestations of post-COVID-19 syndrome in those who were infected with the illness?
4. What was the citizens’ attitude towards the measures undertaken by the executive authorities in relation to limiting the spread of COVID-19?
5. To what extent were the citizens ready to adhere to the measures introduced by the government in an effort to prevent and limit the spread of COVID-19?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey was conducted between August 1st, 2022 and September 1st, 2022 via an anonymous questionnaire consisting of 24 closed questions [3]. The anonymity of the participants was maintained fully, in accordance with all the requirements and the code of ethics and confidentiality. A total of 1861 people, aged 18-69 years and older, took part in the survey after being selected randomly. The data were statistically processed via MS Excel. The system maintains a module for the performance of numerous activities, such as statistical analysis of data, which can be used for analyzing experimental procedures, including descriptive statistics, construction of histograms, various methods for comparison of excerpts, calculation of correlation coefficients, regression, dispersion analysis and others. The results were processed, so that we achieved qualitative and quantitative analysis of the resulting data.

RESULTS

The performed questionnaire survey covered 847 women with relative share of 45,6% and 1011 men – 54,4%, as well as three participants who didn’t indicate their gender.

The participants were distributed into the following age groups: 18-29; 30-39; 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, and over 69. A total of 1854 (99,6%) of the respondents replied – 846 women and 1008 men. When it comes to the age distribution, men and women aged 50-59 predominated (25,8%), followed by those of 30-39 – 23,5%, and 40-49 – 22,9%. The percentage of respondents in the age group of 18-29 was lower – 18,9%. The lowest share of participants was that of individuals over 69 years – 8,5%. Overall, 72% of the respondents were in the active age from 30 to 59 (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group – sex distribution</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-29</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>194</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>240</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>306</td>
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<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>69+</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To the question about place of residence, answers were provided by a total of 1851 (99,5%) respondents – 842 women and 1009 men. Overall, 82% of them answered that they reside in the capital Sofia and 15% – that they reside in another town or a province center. Those who have noted they live in the villages were only 3%.

The highest number and relative share of the respondents were employed (1397 or 73,9%), and the non-active (unemployed and not looking for a job) were only 1,5%. The unemployed looking for a job were 3,5%, and the students – 7%. Some of those who have answered with “retired because of disability” have chosen also the “employed” or “pensioner” answer, which accounts for the highest number of answers.

The results of the conducted survey demonstrated a high interest in the issues related to COVID-19. The Internet was the main source of information about issues related to COVID-19 – 29,8% of the respondents. Overall, 29,5% of women and 30,1% of men relied on information found online. Another 26% of Bulgarian citizens got information from TV news and shows, whereas the official specialized website (https://coronavirus.bg/) was the third ranking source of information – 15,9%. The relative share of the adult population in the country, who stated that they were not interested in the topic and were not looking for information, was relatively high – 14.1%. Most often, this group included respondents who did not fear getting infected, young people and people with low education (Figure 1).
The 1850 persons who provided answers (847 women and 1003 men – a total of 99.4% of the respondents) were asked the question “Do you fear getting infected with COVID-19?”. Of them, 650 provided an affirmative answer (35.1%). The relative share of women who answered that they fear getting infected was 27.9% and it was significantly lower than the relative share of men who did – 41.3%. A negative answer was provided by a total of 1200 respondents – 64.9%. The relative share of women who did not fear getting infected was 72.1%, whereas in men the share was significantly lower – 58.7%.

Overall, 35.1% of the participants answered that they have been infected with COVID-19, and, in 844 (68.0%) of them, the disease progressed lightly at home. The disease was severe in 336 (or 27%) of the participants, but they didn’t need to be hospitalized. A total of 54 (4.3%) respondents answered that they had to be admitted to a healthcare institution, and 8 or 0.6% were treated in an ICU.

In 70.7% of women, the disease progressed without complications. This happened in 65.8% of men. However, 29.6% of men and 23.8% of women reported the disease was severe without requiring hospitalization. The share of women admitted in a hospital was higher than the one of men – 4.9% and 3.9%, respectively, whereas, when it comes to the patients, who required intensive care, the opposite hold true – 0.5% of women and 0.7% of men.

The question “Did you experience post-COVID-19 syndrome and how did it present?” allowed for more than one answer. A total of 2546 answers were provided – 1025 by women and 1521 by men. The most frequent symptom of post-COVID-19 syndrome was being easily fatigued (26.7%), followed by shortness of breath – 13.4%, persistent cough – 11.6%, joints and muscle pain – 10.8%, insomnia – 8.4%, circulatory complications – 6.9%, and hair loss – 6.1%.

The measures undertaken by the executive authorities in relation to the spread of COVID-19 were more easily accepted by the Bulgarian citizens, compared to the measures undertaken by the legislative authorities (Figure 2).

The higher approval of the actions performed by the government to prevent the spread of the illness in the population is normal, as the legislators have primarily engaged the executive authorities with this process.

The actions undertaken by the government in relation to COVID-19 have been approved by 46.4% of the respondents – 40.0% of the women and 51.9% of the men. Overall, 25.9% of the respondents have reported that they didn’t approve these actions (26.3% of those were women and 25.6% were men). "No particular opinion" was stated by 27.7% – the share of women who provided this answer was significantly higher than the one of men – 33.8% of women and 22.5% of men.
Public attitudes, awareness and fears related to the spread of COVID-19...

The actions undertaken by the parliament in relation to limiting the COVID-19 spread were approved by 37.5% of the respondents (32.5% of women and 41.8% of men). Overall, 30.2% of the respondents stated they did not approve of the actions undertaken by the Parliament – 35.0% of the women and 26.2% of the men. The share of those who have answered “I have no opinion” was 32.3%, with no significant difference between the two genders – 32.5% of the women and 32.1% of the men.

The respondents’ opinions were divided based on their assumption of the effectiveness of the measures undertaken to counteract and limit COVID-19. The results demonstrated an insignificantly higher share of people who believed that the anti-epidemic measures would not achieve the desired effect on the spread of the virus (37.1%) (Figure 3).

More than half of the respondents (52.5%) reported that they had adhered to all the provisions of the government bodies related to limiting the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas 36% of the respondents adhered only to some provisions. The share of respondents who noted they did not adhere to the provisions was low – 7%. The share of people who were not familiar with them was low, too – only 4.5% (Figure 4.)
DISCUSSION

We could draw the following conclusions, on the grounds of the performed analysis of the citizen’s opinions on public attitudes, awareness and fears about the COVID-19 disease:

1. The main source of information to the respondents on issues related to COVID-19 was the Internet (29,8%), followed by TV (26%) and the specialized website (Single information portal) – 15,9%.

2. More than one-third (35,1%) of the respondents was afraid of getting infected and an equal share of participants reported that they have been infected with COVID-19. In 68,0% of them the disease unfolded in light manner at home, and it was severe but without necessitating hospitalization – in 27%.

3. The most frequent symptom of post-COVID-19 syndrome was being easily fatigued (26,7%), followed by shortness of breath (13,4%), persistent cough (11,6%), joint and muscle pain (10,8%), insomnia (8,4%), circulatory complaints (6,9%) and hair loss (6,1%).

4. The actions taken by the government to limit the spread of the COVID-19 were approved by 46,4% of the respondents and the parliament’s actions – by 37,5%.

5. More than half of the respondents (52,5%) adhered to all the provisions of the governmental bodies related to limiting the COVID-19 pandemic, while 36% of the respondents adhered to only some of the provisions.
CONCLUSION

The anxiety triggered by the unknown consequences of the situation that has emerged with COVID-19 was a huge challenge to Bulgarian society, as well as to humanity in general [4, 5].

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the various EU member-states, including Bulgaria, and accelerated fragmentation between various groups of people, when it comes to gender, age, education and social status [6, 7, 8].

These are the grounds on which this survey was performed with the aim of rapidly accumulating crucial and necessary data from Bulgarian citizens, with the hopes that an adequate preventive reaction is produced by the Bulgarian government.

The survey could be useful in understanding what were the public attitudes, awareness and fears related to the COVID-19 disease in the Republic of Bulgaria during the pandemic.

Disclosure Summary: The authors have nothing to disclose.

REFERENCES

3. https://srzi.bg/