

Hungary first in EU to approve Chinese Covid vaccine

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Hungary on Friday became the first EU member to approve the Chinese-made Sinopharm COVID-19 vaccine, a week after it also broke ranks with Brussels by issuing a provisional permit for Russia's Sputnik V jab.

"Today the National Institute of Pharmacy and Nutrition (OGYEI) gave

its approval for the Sinopharm vaccine," Chief Medical Officer Cecilia Muller told a briefing.

A few hours later Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto announced on his Facebook page that Hungary had agreed to buy "five million doses" of the vaccine, "enough to vaccinate two and a half million people" out of Hungary's population of 9.8 million.

"Delivery will be carried out in four stages, in four months," he said.

Earlier on Friday Prime Minister Viktor Orban said that he would choose the vaccine for his own inoculation.

"The Chinese have known this virus for the longest time, hence probably they know most about it, so I will wait for my turn, and when I choose I will want the Chinese vaccine," Orban said.

Budapest expects to order 500,000 doses of the Sinopharm jab for delivery in February, Orban's chief-of-staff said Thursday.

Last week Hungary became the first EU member to approve Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, and said it had agreed to buy two million doses of the jab.

A decree published Thursday and in effect from Friday allows the foreign minister to license any vaccine that has already been administered to more than one million people, without requiring the Hungarian pharmaceutical authority to sign it off.

The Hungarian government says the decree was needed to speed up the approval process. It also provides for approval if a vaccine has been used in three other countries, including at least one EU or EU-candidate country.

Orban said Hungary was monitoring how mass inoculation with a Chinese vaccine is proceeding in neighbouring Serbia, an EU candidate country that is home to a sizeable community of ethnic Hungarians.

Earlier this month, Serbia became the first European country to start a mass vaccination programme with one million doses delivered by Sinopharm.

The Hungarian Chamber of Doctors struck a cautious note in reaction to Friday's news, urging OGYEI to license "products only in transparent compliance with the rules of pharmaceutical safety, after examination in accordance with the rules of the European Medicines Agency".

The group said a careful approach was essential "so that our medical colleagues can recommend and administer (vaccines) in good conscience".

Orban has long courted both Moscow and Beijing as part of what he calls a "pragmatic" foreign policy, and regularly is at loggerheads with Brussels, particularly over migration policy.

Criticising the slow pace of delivery of jabs from the EU's joint procurement programme, Orban said that his government must "stand on two legs" and is looking beyond the EU for vaccine supplies in the US and Israel, as well as Russia and China.

Hungarians' willingness to get inoculated is one of the lowest rates in the EU but has been rising in recent months.

In a survey published by opinion research firm Publicus on Friday, six out of 10 Hungarians said they would want to get vaccinated, up from four out of 10 in November.

The most popular choices were the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines, with the Russian and Chinese jabs least popular.

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