

The Power Struggle Derailing Romania's Vaccination Campaign

Article by Raluca Besliu
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Between high Covid-19 death rates, an Orthodox Church sending mixed messages about vaccination, hospital fires, and the fall of their government, the trust of the Romanian people in the state has plummeted. Now in the grips of the fifth wave of the pandemic, the pressure to step up the vaccination drive is mounting. Raluca Besliu explains how the vaccination campaign conceals a power struggle and why its failure could push the country past breaking point.

Despite recent campaigns by the Romanian government to increase the vaccination rate, less than 41 per cent of its adult population has received two jabs, making Romania the second least vaccinated country in the European Union, after Bulgaria. While around 60 per cent of those over 65 or living with chronic diseases are not yet vaccinated, Romania entered its fifth pandemic wave in January 2022. The Romanian Health Minister anticipates around 50,000 daily new cases by mid-February, a record number of infections for the country, which already surpassed 40,000 new infections at the beginning of February.

The root causes of the low vaccination rate are deep-seated and complex, embedded in the Romanian collective psyche for the past three decades. Some of the key ones include the destitute state of the Romanian healthcare system, the lack of support from key actors, such as the Orthodox Church, and an enormous distrust in the government.

In the fall of 2021, the vaccination campaign became the backdrop for a vicious political fight between political parties interested in gaining access to Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Funds (PNRR) soon to be disbursed by the European Union (EU).

At a time of profound uncertainty, fear, and anger, the ineffective vaccination campaign may deepen public distrust of the Romanian government, creating a breeding ground for extremism and far-right ideology. On the other hand, a national crisis could mark a turning point, sparking a complete overhaul of Romanian society and promote the rise of new political actors.

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A healthcare system notorious for its failings

Long before the pandemic started, the harsh realities of the medical sector convinced many Romanians to avoid using medical services entirely. The current situation only reinforces people's scepticism, which cannot be mended with a vaccination campaign.

A notorious failure, Romania's medical system is consistently ranked as the worst in the EU by the [Euro Health Consumer Index](#). The Romanian political class left it to decay after the fall of communism. The country has the [lowest medical expenditure](#) per inhabitant in the EU, less than a tenth of spending by some of the best performing countries, such as Sweden and Denmark.

Since 1989, the Romanian government has only managed to build [three new hospitals](#) in the country. The third opened in Falticeni in September 2021 after 30 years of construction. The existing hospitals are in dire need of restoration. Between 2020 and 2021, 11 fires broke out in the country, five of which led to deaths. Most of these [fires happened in the medical units](#) where Covid-19 patients received oxygen therapy, as the slightest spark can produce a disaster. Fearing the conditions in health facilities, many [Romanians diagnosed with Covid-19](#) have chosen to treat themselves at home.

Mixed signals from the Orthodox Church

The vaccination campaign could perhaps have been accelerated if key trusted actors in the country had lent it their support. Instead, some of them used their influence over the Romanian population to challenge vaccination covertly or overtly. The Romanian Orthodox Church, the second most trusted institution in the country, is a prime example.

According to INSCOP Research, in 2021, 69.7 per cent of the Romanian population [placed their trust](#) in the army and 64 per cent in the Orthodox Church. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the [Romanian institutions](#) that enjoy the least support in the country are the presidency (25.3 per cent), the government (25.3 per cent), and the parliament (12.2 per cent).

Some Orthodox bishops and priests have actively opposed vaccination in front of their congregations. The confessor of the [Dura Monastery in Moldova](#) was cited in October 2021 as stating that the pandemic did not exist and the vaccine was intended to implement chips that control the body through 5G networks. Similarly, Archbishop Teodosie Petrescu, who heads the diocese of Tomis, said in October 2021 that vaccines were not safe and called for a mobilisation of believers against the use of the green vaccination certificate.

The [Romanian patriarchate](#) disavowed the archbishop's and clergy's anti-vaccination calls, stressing its belief that the "church and religious cults cannot issue opinions in relation to a problem that is strictly medical, as is vaccination. They cannot formulate an ideologic belief either for or against vaccination." Instead, the patriarchate's communique announced that each person should freely decide on the immunisation, ideally after consulting a medical professional.

The Romanian Orthodox Church seems more concerned about succession questions than acting as a moral compass for its followers.

According to journalist Catalin Tolontan, since many in Romania do as the preacher says, it is difficult to reach people on vaccination without the church's involvement. In an exchange with Radio Free Europe, political analyst Cristian Pirvulescu stressed that the Orthodox Church is in fact afraid to send a clear pro-vaccination message because of the strong conspiracy and anti-scientific radical movement at its core. There is currently a power struggle in the Church for succession between a pro-Europe, moderate group and an anti-European, traditionalist one. This in-fighting constrains the patriarch to remain moderate in his actions and maintain an ambivalent position. A clear pro-vaccine stance could possibly cause an internal schism in the Orthodox Church.

Pope Francis, the leader of the Catholic Church, set a precedent for the Romanian patriarchate to relinquish its neutrality and pick a side. Not only did Pope Francis get vaccinated, but he also called for widespread vaccination across the world and decried the "baseless information or poorly documented facts" complicating the response to the pandemic. Pope Francis set a personal example, thus engaging his Catholic followers in a process of combating the pandemic.

An example even closer to home is that of the Greek Orthodox Church, whose leadership has officially endorsed vaccination and whose head Archbishop Ieronymos announced in May 2021 that he had been vaccinated. Throughout 2021, the Greek Orthodox Church repeatedly urged its congregations to get vaccinated, thus setting an Orthodox precedent on the matter. The difference is that the Romanian Orthodox Church's leadership seems more concerned about succession questions than acting as a moral compass in distressful times for its followers.

Festering distrust of government

Arguably the greatest reason for people's scepticism about the vaccination campaign is their deep-seated distrust of political institutions. Romania has faced a crisis of trust in political institutions since the fall of communism over 30 years ago. Contributing author Claudiu Tufis argues in *Atlas of Social Values*, a book analysing responses to surveys on Romanian values, that public confidence in institutions has been consistently low since the early 2000s. Behind this lack of trust lie reasons such as the country's economic state – Romanians see a stagnant economy showing no signs of improvement despite the country's human and natural resources – and politicians fixated on squabbles and in-fighting.

Tufis argues that distrust of institutions gradually transforms into a lack of trust of the entire political system and its principles. It is not surprising, therefore, that this creates favourable conditions for the rise of individuals on the political scene and in other spheres who are challenging the democratic principles underpinning the system. In 2020, Romania faced the stunning rise of its first far-right party in decades, AUR, which gained 9 per cent of electoral seats in Parliament during its first participation.

The country's management of the vaccination campaign has only added to this distrust, as it was soon politicised by certain parties and high-level political actors. In June 2021 USR-PLUS, an alliance formed of two of the newest parties in Romania, launched its own vaccination campaign to inform citizens about the vaccine's benefits. The alliance pitched tents and spread promotional materials across the country while announcing that party

members would visit areas with the lowest vaccination rates to promote the vaccine.

According to public health expert Razvan Chereches, this was a grave mistake, as the national vaccination campaign needed complimentary efforts headed in the same direction, not multiple campaigns with different messages and approaches. According to Chereches, a party that invests its resources in an autonomous campaign does not aim to help the citizens but rather promote itself. This type of action reflects poorly on USR-PLUS, and it deepens public distrust of political actors and institutions.

At the same time, other high-level politicians gave the public a false sense of hope that the pandemic was over. In May 2021, Romania was the first country in the EU to ease restrictions despite missing its mid-year target of vaccinating 5 million people. At the time, it had only vaccinated 25 per cent of the 4.4 million eligible adults. The authorities thought they could incentivise people to get vaccinated by showing them the benefits of lifted restrictions.

During a press conference in Brussels in June 2021 as the vaccination campaign slowed, Klaus Iohannis announced that the campaign had been a success and that Romania had stopped the pandemic. He added that because the country had so few new cases – fewer than 100 at the time – there was no more interest in vaccination.

This sense of hope was soon dashed when the fourth and most brutal pandemic wave swept through Romania in August 2021. In October 2021, Romania ranked 3rd in the world for the rate of new deaths. It reached the 2nd highest per capita Covid-19 death rate that same month. Despite the wave's severity, the Romanian government kept schools and businesses open and only chose to impose the digital green certificate requirement for some activities.

This response was partly enabled by the major political crisis Romania suffered in September 2021, which led to the replacement of Prime Minister Florin Ciuțu of the National Liberal Party (PNL). The crisis began with a disagreement between the two major parties forming the governing coalition, PNL and USR-PLUS, about a major investment programme intended to develop Romanian rural settlements. PNL supported the investment programme while USR-PLUS opposed it because it disapproved of putting funds in the hands of local barons and corrupt local leaders pursuing their own interests and ideals. Ciuțu's response to USR-PLUS skipping a meeting was to replace Justice Minister Stelian Ion (USR-PLUS) with Interior Minister Lucian Bode (PNL). In retaliation, USR-PLUS, with the backing of the far-right party Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), started a motion of no-confidence against Prime Minister Ciuțu, shortly after which all USR-PLUS ministers resigned.

While the fourth wave of the pandemic raged on in the country, with some people needing to be transferred outside of Romania for treatment, Romania's political parties were squabbling over forming a new ruling coalition. The quarrelling lasted almost three months: at the end of November 2021, the Social Democratic Party (PSD) leadership voted unanimously to govern in a coalition alongside PNL and UDMR, in a cabinet led by a prime minister from PNL, Nicolae Ciuțu.

USR-PLUS led the country ruthlessly and knowingly into a political crisis at a time of deep

difficulty and suffering. The message to the population was clear: the country's politicians were more interested in power and control than ensuring the safety and wellbeing of citizens.

The political dispute between parties had a very high stake: control over the large amounts of funds that Romania will gradually receive from the EU recovery fund. Romania is set to receive 14.2 billion euros in grants and 14.9 billion in loans to conduct investment and reform measures that should allow the country to emerge stronger than prior to the pandemic.

As the possibility of entering government improved, PSD leaders missed no opportunity to ask for a renegotiation of some of the chapters of the Romania's recovery plan. After entering government, the Social Democrats managed to obtain the decentralisation of the recovery plan, with the inclusion of the Agencies for Regional Development (ADR), country councils, and local authorities as contracting parties. This could be another corrupt tactic to divert funds into the hands of local barons.

A long-term prospect is that these funds will not be adequately used to develop Romania. Dacian Ciolos, the leader of USR, stressed that a governmental failure or misappropriation of the EU funds could lead Romania into a Eurosceptic and sovereigntist sphere.

Destitution and silver linings

The greatest danger is that the combination of the misuse of funds with the ineffectiveness of the vaccination campaign is likely to deepen Romanians' mistrust of political institutions, further enabling the rise of extremist and far-right movements. One of the biggest winners of the 2021 political crisis was the far-right party AUR. USR-PLUS legitimised AUR through their joint no-confidence motion against the prime minister, which has given the party a boost in the polls of voter preferences.

In the most recent poll commissioned by PSD, AUR rose from 15 per cent in November 2021 to 17 per cent in December 2021. USR-PLUS experienced a one-percentage drop in the same period. So far, the other major parties have avoided outright collaboration with AUR, perhaps taking note of its consequences for USR-PLUS. However, PSD has consciously maintained cordial relations with AUR and considers it a potential alternative, in case the governing alliance with PNL falls apart, especially as the far-right party continues to rise in the polls.

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Combined with the upswing of the far-right is the demise of new centre-right entities, such as USR-PLUS, whose creation a few years back was received with hope by a population in need of change. The disillusionment with the new parties will likely most acutely affect young urbanites and intellectuals, activists, and artists, who had been their biggest supporters.

It is difficult for new political parties to emerge and develop in this landscape of distrust and disillusionment, especially those of green and progressive inclination. Still, the fact that Romania is at a breaking point creates an important opportunity: more than ever, Romanians crave good leadership with integrity and the ability to find solutions that can help the country progress, especially now that the EU recovery funds are about to be disbursed.

The pandemic has revealed the depth of Romania's systemic flaws. It will leave the country in shambles, with a depleted and desolate population, in immediate need of rebuilding. The question is: will there be anyone to step up to the plate and rebuild it?



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