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Orthodoxy and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania and Bulgaria: Political Turmoil, Informal Networks, and Religious Scepticism

by Lucian N. Leustean

Romania and Bulgaria stood out in the European Union as the countries with the lowest COVID vaccination rates. The article argues that Orthodox churches have played an influential role regarding the ways in which the population adhered (or failed to adhere) to national health measures. In Romania, the Church was divided between official and informal networks of social and political power which led to an increase in the far-right movement. In Bulgaria, the Church was closely associated with the government's stance towards supporting health measures and, in the long term, political protests became associated with anti-vaccination program.

Keywords: Orthodox Church, Romania, Bulgaria, COVID-19 pandemic, political protests, far-right political parties, the European Union, nationalism.

Introduction

Low COVID vaccination rates coupled with high death rates mark Romania and Bulgaria as exceptionally abysmal compared to other European Union (EU) countries. In November 2021, *The Guardian* published an article with an unsettling title: "Morgues fill up in Romania and Bulgaria amid low COVID vaccine uptake."[1] The article pointed out that the countries had the European Union's "highest daily death rates from COVID-19, after superstition, misinformation and entrenched mistrust in governments and institutions combined to leave them the least vaccinated countries in the bloc." What brought Romania and Bulgaria together was not only the fact that they were two predominantly Eastern Orthodox countries, but that they had the lowest vaccination rates in the European Union: 34.5% of Romania's population received two jabs, while in Bulgaria, the figure was even lower at 23.04% of the population. The figures in these two Eastern Orthodox countries contrasted with those of Western Catholic Spain, Malta, and Portugal in which over 80% of the population was vaccinated.

Data from John Hopkins University which monitored COVID-19 cases around the world between 1 March 2020 and 15 February 2022, shows a contrasting picture to that of other EU member states. In 2022, while in the category of "Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people," both countries are

somewhat around average, much lower than Germany and similar to that of the United Kingdom and Italy (Figure 1), Bulgaria and Romania rank first in "Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people" (Figure 2) and lower than other EU countries in regard to "Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol" (Figure 3). The link between the lack of vaccination and high mortality rate is evident in all these graphs.

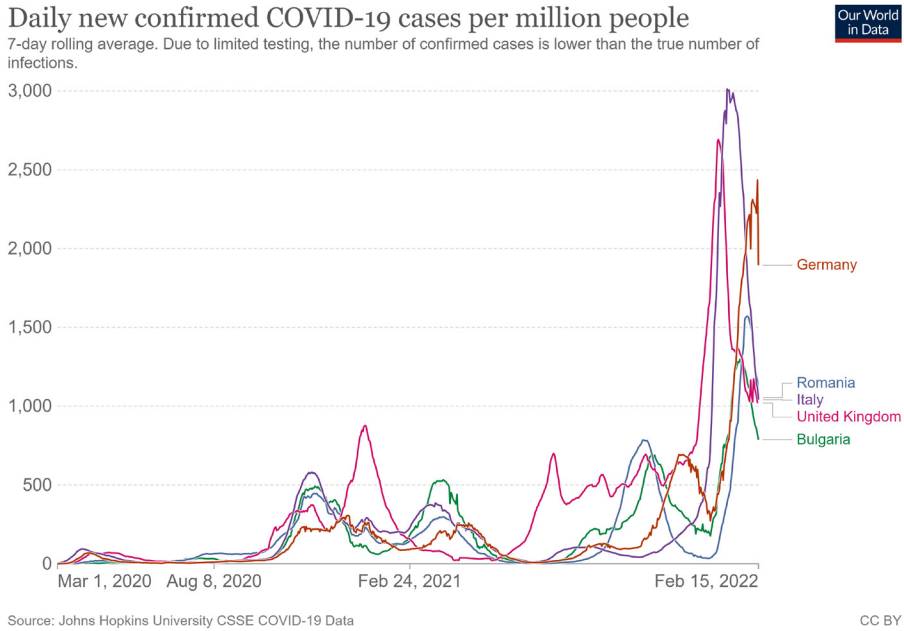

Figure 1. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people. Source: Our World in Data.

Orthodox churches are imbedded in the social fabric of Romania and Bulgaria. At the institutional level, Orthodox churches have retained close relations with the state authorities. The pandemic showed that institutional links have limits and that conformity to health measures relates to religiosity rather than top-down directives from religious and political leaders. In both countries, the Orthodox Church is considered to be one of the most trusted institutions by the local populations. However, the main difference between both countries is in terms of public attendance of religious services. In Bulgaria, despite over 70% of the population identifying as Orthodox and noted as one of the most secular states in Eastern Europe, just between 7%[2] and 9%[3] of the population are regular churchgoers; while in Romania, 24% of the population attend services on a weekly basis.[4]

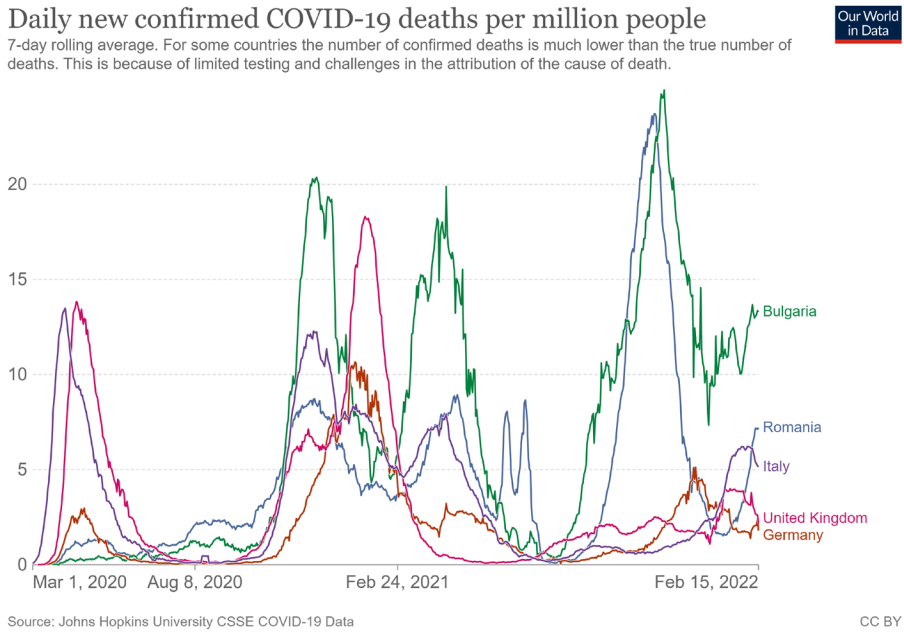

Figure 2. Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people. Source: Our World in Data

This article investigates the interplay between religious and state authorities from January 2020, when the World Health Organization announced that a novel coronavirus emerged in Wuhan City, Hubei, China, until February 2022, at the end of the fourth COVID-19 wave when European countries began to lift pandemic restrictions. How have Orthodox churches, as institutional communities, in Romania and Bulgaria perceived the COVID-19 pandemic? In which ways have Orthodox churches in these countries responded to national state mobilisation in observing strict health measures and national vaccination programs? This article argues that in Romania, the Church was divided between official and informal networks of social and political power which led to an increase in the far-right movement. In Bulgaria, the Church was closely associated with the government's stance towards supporting health measures and, in the long term, political protests became associated with an anti-vaccination program.

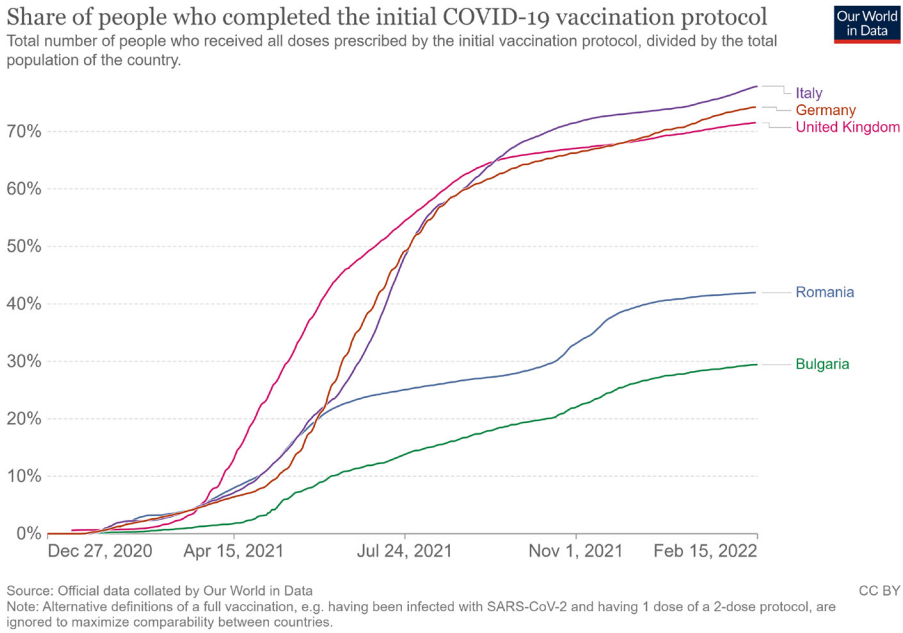

Figure 3. Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol. Source: Our World in Data

Romania: Between Formal and Informal Channels of Religious Communication

The pandemic started in an electoral year. In November 2019, the *Partidul Național Liberal* (National Liberal Party) appointed its prime minister, Ludovic Orban, to lead a minority government, and secured the re-election of President Klaus Iohannis, a pro-EU and reformist politician. The start of the pandemic in the winter of 2020 delayed the electoral process to autumn. Local elections were held on 27 November 2020, and legislative elections on 6 December 2020. The turnover was the lowest since 1989 with only 32% of the population voting.

The elections saw the emergence of a new right-wing political party which was set up only five months before the start of the pandemic, the *Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, or AUR, (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) with 9.17% of votes (541,935 people) enabling it to reach 14 seats in the Senate and 33 in the Chamber of Deputies. The AUR was registered as a political party in September 2019 with an initial platform promoting the unification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova. The meteoric rise of the new party was due to a combination of factors including the absence of the right-wing Greater Romania Party from the Parliament since 2012, the strict health restrictions imposed by the government in tackling the pandemic and the religious card employed by the party's political

leadership.

As evident throughout 2020 and 2021, the ambiguous position of the Romanian Orthodox Church (RomOC) leadership towards the most appropriate ways of responding to the pandemic, the challenge of political decision, the lack of national mobilization to involve Orthodox parishes, and the pressure from monastic communities towards what was perceived as state interference in religious life, are key to understanding the low figures of vaccinated people.[5]

At first, the RomOC's response was similar to that in neighbouring Orthodox countries, namely a national debate on the use of liturgical tools in administering the sacraments. The most significant controversy was the use of the spoon in receiving the sacrament of the Holy Communion, seen in theological terms as the transfigured bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. In response to the pandemic, the Romanian government issued the Military Ordinance no. 1 on 17 March 2020, and the Military Ordinance no. 2 on 21 March 2020, which restricted the movement of people with the whole country going into lockdown.[6] On 22 March the Holy Synod of the RomOC issued further instructions clarifying the Church's position. Orthodox services continued to be performed but without the physical presence of the faithful; they were transmitted via online networks and, at the national level, by the Church's channels, Trinitas TV, and Radio Trinitas. The faithful was encouraged to arrange a religious space for prayers inside private homes and to refrain from travelling to the nearby church. The priests were allowed to travel to administer Holy Communion or Holy Confession only after following travel regulation instituted by the local authorities. All faithful were encouraged not to leave their homes expect in an emergency. The Church was able to perform only three sacraments in person inside church buildings with the presence of the faithful, namely baptisms, weddings, and funerals, restricted to only eight people.

In addition to observing strict state measures, the Church provided its own weapons fighting against the disease, namely public processions with relics of saints. On 5 April, for the third time in the last three centuries, and for the first time since 1947, the relics of Saint Parascheva, protector of Moldova, from Iaşi left the metropolitan cathedral and went on public procession to Roman city, Piatra Neamţ, Tîrgu Neamţ, and three monasteries in the region, Bodeşti, Văratec, and Agapia. In all of the cities and villages to which the relics travelled, bells rang, and people welcomed the procession from their balconies.[7] On the same day, a procession took place in Bucharest, when the relics of Saint Dimitrie based in the patriarchal cathedral toured the key sites in the capital with prayers to end the pandemic.[8]

The exceptional travel restrictions meant that churches were unable to celebrate the Orthodox Easter on Sunday, 19 April. Informal channels of communication protesting against religious restrictions spread through Facebook. For example, Father Marcel Malanca, Dean of Negreşti Oaş in north-western

Romania, challenged the measures imposed by physician Raed Arafat, head of the Department for Emergency Situations, by claiming that his Department had no authority to shut churches.[9] The 2020 Easter was celebrated without the faithful in a largely symbolic gesture which demonstrated the powerful influence of the Church throughout Romanian society; with the help of local volunteers, each local parish organised impromptu ceremonies in which people were given the Holy Easter Light at home.[10] The dramatism surrounding the Easter celebration reached climax at the end of April when the Church announced that Archbishop Pimen of Suceava and Rădăuți was infected with the virus. The 90-year-old prelate was transported by helicopter to Bucharest where he died one month later.[11]

On 15 May, after the first wave of the pandemic and the lifting of partial travel restrictions, in consultation with the government, the RomOC issued new guidance on how to celebrate religious services. The faithful was able to attend services inside or outside a church, however, keeping a two-meter distance and following strict hygienic measures. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals were now able to accommodate sixteen people. The Holy Synod decreed that the use of a single spoon in administering the Holy Communion was not a standard requirement and that discussions were underway with other Orthodox churches.[12]

These decisions were welcomed by the clergy. In a highly unusual gesture, which reflected dissatisfaction with the state authorities, Archbishop Teodosie of Constanța, decided that in his diocese the Church would celebrate a second Easter to be held one week later, on the night of 26–27 May. The decision, which did not follow church norms, was presented by the Romanian Patriarchate as the desire of the local hierarch rather than a coordinated policy.[13]

On 2 December 2020, the Pfizer–BioNTech vaccine developed in Germany received temporary regulatory approval in the United Kingdom which began the first large-scale vaccination program. In the following weeks, most EU countries followed suit and approved the Pfizer–BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, and on 30 December 2020, the UK approved a second vaccine, the Oxford-AstraZeneca COVID-19. The relatively fast process of developing and approving vaccines was regarded with high scepticism across Eastern Europe, and Romania was no exception. The change of government and the unexpected rise of the right-wing party in the December 2020 legislative elections led to an increase in the usage of religious symbolism in political speeches. The ambivalence of the RomOC towards the vaccination programs was evident in its communication with the faithful. Officially, the Church remained committed to health measures instituted by the state authorities. Each parish was instructed to promote a booklet titled "*Vaccinarea împotriva COVID-19 în România. Gratuită. Voluntară. Sigură*" ("Vaccination against COVID-19 in Romania. Free. Voluntary. Secure"), however, the hierarchy did not send any pastoral letters to the faithful in supporting the vaccination process. The booklet was presented by the Church as the most important measure in

communication directly with the faithful while local clergy were able to exert their authority as they saw fit regarding the most appropriate publicity means, such as speaking to the people, distributing, or placing it in the church where people could see it.[14]

The encouragement of far-right conspiracies became evident around Easter. In his pastoral letter, Bishop Sebastian of Slatina and Romanați, lamented that the previous year when the Church was forced to celebrate without the faithful was the "saddest Easter after the murder of Our Lord Christ." He doubted the efficacy of the vaccination program and claimed that the invention of new vaccines in just under a year was an example of "resetting the world." A similar approach to denouncing health measures which linked to far-right ideology came from Archbishop Teodosie of Constanța. At the same time as the government instituted social distancing and banned public events, he encouraged pilgrimages to continue in his diocese. When asked by a reporter if he felt that he would have people's lives on his conscience, he replied that "If it is time to leave this life, people go to God anyway." He asserted again his scepticism that the vaccine was beneficial and claimed that, in his view, "The Holy Communion is the most authentic vaccine."

The clash between these two visions in the Church continued. In June 2021, Abbot Zenovie from Nechit Monastery in Neamț county gave a sermon which was widely circulated in the mass media and highly criticised by both the Patriarchate and health officials. In an apocalyptic message, he claimed that the vaccine was

> *[...] anything, but not a vaccine. All those who have been vaccinated should expect the following diseases: terrible skin diseases, kidney failure, strokes, heart disease, neurological diseases, paralysis. People who have been vaccinated, in combination with the new unknown - the epidemic - will not be able to walk, they will be zombies, just like we see drug addicts. It will be the worst epidemic on earth.* [15]

Similar sermons were uttered in other monasteries. Teodosie Paraschiv, an influential clergyman from the iconic Durău Monastery, gave several sermons in which he claimed that a world government was imposed by aliens, and that the world population will be controlled through vaccine chips and magnets implemented during the vaccination program. He encouraged the faithful to oppose the vaccine for themselves and others: "You are getting vaccinated; you have signed your death sentence. Don't poison your children!"[16]

The Patriarchate's official position continued to be consistent with that of the health officials. Vasile Bănescu, the spokesman of the Patriarchate, asked the faithful to follow the local authorities rather than conspiracy theories or "apocalyptic mixing of vaccination with faith and theology."[17] In July 2021, Archbishop Nifon of Târgoviște had a similar message claiming that "the Christian Church is against ignorance, against superstitions of all kinds."[18]

Public pressure became more evident on the Patriarch himself to declare his

support for the vaccination program. On 22 July, when Patriarch Daniel turned 70 and was decorated by President Iohannis in a public ceremony, Bănescu pointed out that the Church has many times presented its official position over the last few months. Bănescu stated that "the Patriarch was a person like everyone else," "an individual with a personal medical profile," "who consulted with his doctors" and that "vaccination was a right not an obligation."[19] The uncertainty over the Patriarch's stance towards the vaccine lasted until November 2021, when Romania held one of the highest mortality rates in Europe. At the end of a meeting in the Parliament, the Patriarch was approached on the corridors by journalists and asked why he was not vaccinated. His brief response, "Of course, I am vaccinated, that's it" was impromptu and veiled in secrecy rather than a coordinated reaction of encouraging the faithful. He referred to the Church and state's authorities' official position that medical records were confidential and that all people should make a decision after discussion with their personal doctor.[20]

Bulgaria: Political Turmoil and Religious Scepticism

As in Romania, in the first two years of the pandemic, Bulgaria witnessed political uncertainty. Boyko Borisov, the second longest serving Prime Minister, who ruled the country intermittently since 2009, was at his third mandate in 2020. His pro-European Union conservative populist party, *Grazhdani za evropeĭsko razvitie na Bŭlgariya*, or GERB, (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria), ruled together with two far-right parties, IMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO) and the *Natsionalen front za spasenie na Bŭlgariya*, or NFSB (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria). Bulgaria faced a major political crisis when the office of President Rumen Radev, a critic of Prime Minister Borisov, was raided by representatives of the specialized prosecutor's office on 9 July 2020, an act which led to widespread demonstrations lasting nearly a year, until 16 April 2021.[21] In May 2021, Borisov resigned, and two snap elections followed in July and November.

The Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) stood out among South-eastern European countries as the only Church which continued to hold the Easter service in the first year of the pandemic. By contrast, in Greece, services were held only with cantors and clergy; in Romania and Serbia, the Church accepted the ban; in Ukraine and Russia, some churches were closed, particularly in the densely populated areas. The only country which followed a similar approach to that in Bulgaria was Georgia, where the Georgian Orthodox Church refused to follow government advice.[22]

The BOC's stance and the holding of the Easter service was coupled with the government's religious card in support of its policies. Uncertainty over the best way of responding to the pandemic was evident in the first few months of 2020.[23] Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech claimed that only those who had a weak faith were contaminated and that "In no way has the contagion been transmitted and spread in churches where sacraments are performed! There have never been epidemics

in the Church."[24] On 10 March 2020, Patriarch Neophyte sent a letter to the faithful in which he encouraged attendance indicating that churches were open mainly because "The Holy Mysteries cannot be carriers of infection or any disease, but are a medicine for the healing of the soul and health."[25]

The Church's ambivalent stance was echoed by political leaders. Yordan Kirilov Tsonev, Deputy Chair of the Parliamentary Group "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" with studies in economics and a doctorate in Orthodox theology from Sofia University, stated that "no virus or infection can be transmitted during the services […] I will take the Eucharist from the shared spoon today because I genuinely believe that it brings us salvation."[26]

The Church's message was close to the far-right discourse. Volen Siderov, a Sofia city councillor and chairman of the nationalist party Attack, encouraged people to disobey the state of emergency. After Prime Minister Boyko Borisov and Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, Head of the National Operational Headquarters for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic, appealed to the population to follow restrictions and stay at home, Siderov sent a press release with the headline: "Go out en masse at Easter and prove that God is above Mutafchiyski!"[27] The Church hierarchy's response to criticism of performing services was presented as following "God's Providence." Metropolitan Anthony for Central and Western Europe stated that if church buildings were shut, it would have been perceived as the Church "abandon[ing] the faithful in this difficult time […] God's providence is beyond any logic."[28]

In early June, as in many East European countries, the government relaxed its restrictions. Political clashes between the ruling coalition and the opposition became evident when Borissov's GERB party and the Socialist Party began to hold large-scale electoral gatherings which attracted a fine of 3,000 leva (around 1,500 euros) for not following social distancing. A few weeks later, the COVID-19 cases started to spike reaching 3,984 people and 207 deaths. Borissov himself was fined 300 leva for not wearing a protective mask during a religious service at Rila Monastery.[29] On 18 August, the Church announced that Metropolitan Ambrose of Dorostol passed away after being admitted to hospital with coronavirus symptoms.[30]

The Church's stance of continuing to perform services led to hierarchs and clergy not disclosing publicly when they became ill. An exception to the lack of public trust was in November 2020, when, in a radio broadcast Metropolitan Kyprian of Stara Zagora expressed his gratitude to doctors after he recovered from the virus. The broadcast mentioned that one priest from Vidin, two priests from Sofia and three priests from Nevrokop diocese died the previous week.[31]

With its public image affected by close relations with the political authorities and a lack of transparency regarding the number of ill clergy, the Church hierarchy attempted to present a more inclusive attitude towards those affected by the pandemic. On 10 December 2020, after a meeting with Bishop Polycarp of

Belogradchik, Prime Minister Boyko Borissov gave a public address on national television in which he pointed out the latest measures. Patriarch Neophyte's proposal that, from 20 to 26 December during the Christmas period, the clergy would go to hospitals and sprinkle the patients with holy water.

On 27 December 2020, the vaccination program was officially launched in Sofia with the first vaccines being received by two state and religious officials, namely Kostadin Angelov, Minister of Health, and the 75-year-old Bishop Tikhon of Tiberias, vicar of Patriarch Neophyte.[32] On 29 December, Borissov held a meeting with Bishop Evlogiy of Adrianople, abbot of the Rila Monastery, in which he expressed his gratitude for the Church's support, however, no public statements in support of the vaccination program was issued by the Church. The Holy Synod of the BOC only issued a short a statement confirming that Bishop Tikhon's vaccination was only a personal decision based on his previous medical training before he joined the Church hierarchy rather than a coordinated religious policy.

No other statements were made by the Church in relation to the vaccination schedule across the country. Bulgarian theologians defended the view that the Church did not become publicly involved in the national vaccination program for fears of being accused of becoming "an instrument of state policy."[33] In the following months, church-state relations did not lead to any major changes in support of the vaccination program. Prime Minister Borissov's four-year term ended on 12 May 2021, amid mass national protests, while Patriarch Neophyte's health deteriorated and he was hospitalised twice, in April and in June. The Holy Synod issued official statements with vague updates on his illness advising that he was not suffering from COVID-19.[34]

The election of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov in December 2021 represented a change in state policy towards the Church. For the first time in the last two decades, Petkov did not invite Patriarch Neophyte to attend the oath and inauguration ceremony of his premiership held in the National Assembly. Petkov was dissatisfied with the close relations between the previous administration and the Church hierarchy and the lack of Church support towards the vaccination campaign. Tense relation continued until the end of the fourth wave and the lifting of international travel restrictions.[35]

Conclusion

The lack of national mobilisation in Romania and Bulgaria towards mass vaccination programs demonstrated not only a mistrust in state institutions but most importantly that informal networks of communication and religious scepticism dominated public attitudes. In Romania, religious pressure exerted by influential hierarchs and monastic circles added to the mistrust of the local population into health measures. In the long term, religious scepticism fuelled the rise of far-right discourses. In Bulgaria, despite following the government health

measures, the Orthodox Church was allowed to hold the Easter service in the first months of the pandemic. Religious uncertainty towards the best way of engaging with health measures and increasing dissatisfaction with state authorities dominated the Bulgarian political protests.

The Orthodox Churches in both Romania and Bulgaria were deeply embedded in social structures. No health measures could be implemented by state authorities without the direct involvement of local and high-ranking religious leaders, not only because they reached rural populations, but also due to the legacy of church-state relations in defining the identity and religiosity of the faithful. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that, in both countries, state authorities could not work in a societal vacuum and that the Orthodox Churches were influential actors in ensuring that local populations adhered (or failed to adhere) to national health measures.

About the author

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