

Romanian health care system collapsing under COVID-19 surge

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As schools are being reopened throughout the European Union, a deadly surge is devastating Eastern European countries, including Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic States.

Romania, like many other Eastern European countries, has already been hit hard by the pandemic. Previous waves officially claimed more than 39,000 lives. However, this number is a gross understatement.

In April, an official inquiry into unreported coronavirus deaths led to the dismissal of the country's health minister who initiated it. Even though it was a whitewash exercise, the report showed significant gaps in the reporting of COVID-19 deaths, with thousands of people missing. According to health experts, death data for the second part of 2020 show a sobering 42,252 excess deaths, compared to the official 19,659 COVID-19 deaths for the same time period.

From the beginning of the pandemic, the entire political establishment pushed for herd immunity policies and the removal of the limited health measures implemented in the first half of 2020. In 2021, the country had one of the highest rates of economic growth in the EU, fueled by the bipartisan drive to eliminate any restrictions. One of the chief priorities has been the opening of schools, which had mostly remained closed over the previous period.

The reopening of the schools began on September 14, as the fourth wave of COVID-19 was mounting. One month later the situation is catastrophic. Community transmission has skyrocketed, with the seven-day average of over 14,000 cases, the highest ever during the pandemic. The highest number of deaths was recorded on October 19, when 574 people lost their lives. Seven-day average deaths stand at 345 deaths.

Pediatric cases have also exploded. Over 2,000 cases are reported each day among people under age 20. On October 18 over 450 children were in hospital and 36 in ICUs. At least 10 children's lives were lost.

The country's health system is collapsing under the weight of the pandemic. ICU beds are completely full and hospitals are increasingly running short on medical oxygen, which is vital for COVID patients. In the meantime, patients are

admitted and treated in emergency rooms and makeshift tents in front of hospitals.

On-the-ground reports paint a horrid picture, already so painfully familiar in many places of the world: medical personnel completely overwhelmed, patients dying in wheelchairs and ambulances parked outside full hospitals, the selection of patients for available ICU beds or beds with an oxygen supply.

On October 1 a fire broke out in the ICU ward of Constanta's county hospital, killing seven patients. It was the tenth such hospital fire in the country in less than a year. In January, four people died in a fire in the ICU of Matei Bals Institute in the capital Bucharest and 10 patients lost their lives in an ICU fire in November at Piatra Neamt County hospital. Three patients died in April in a mobile ICU unit when the oxygen supply system broke down.

While none of the official investigations returned any conclusions, these terrible accidents are undoubtedly the product of a decrepit health system stretched to its limit. The official response of government officials during the summer was that they were preparing for the fourth wave by opening hundreds of new ICU units. Most of these units, however, were barely worth the name, with many only hastily repurposed clinical beds. Most hospitals function in old and unventilated buildings full of bacterial infection.

In these dramatic circumstances, there is no explanation for the government's reckless actions other than intentional infection of the population. Prior to October 1, as the scale of the incoming disaster was more than obvious, the government decided to cancel its own previous provision that schools would move to online learning when the incidence level exceeds six cases per 1,000.

A flurry of haphazard "expert consultations" and decisions over several days completely disconnected schools from local or national disease activity records. In a series of self-damning declarations, the education minister said in the same breath that "expert medical advice" will determine the outcome and that the previous provisions were never meant to be applied.

The same level of “expertise” is used to argue that children’s well-being is protected inside schools and that schools are “controlled environments.” This while students and parents are subjected to a plethora of confusing half measures, with classes often switching between online and offline, inadequate testing, obfuscation by local health authorities and, increasingly, the traumatizing experience of seeing relatives, teachers and colleagues fall ill or die.

The callousness and cynicism of the herd immunity precepts being followed by governments around the world were accurately captured in the declaration of the Romanian health minister, speaking on October 7, a day when 282 lives were lost in the country: Vaccination or natural infection “are the two options through which we will get immunity. If we will not choose the former, some say we will get immunity anyway by the latter, which is more difficult. Some get through it more easily, others with great difficulty and others still don’t make it.”

There is growing opposition to these murderous policies, with parents voicing their concern and outrage on social media and keeping their children at home.

Official unions are complicit in the government’s policies. Teachers unions have remained silent on school reopening, insisting on measly mitigation measures. They have also launched right-wing attacks on teacher vaccination drives and the introduction of green-light passes in schools.

Faced with a massive loss of life and the collapse of the health care system threatening even more lives, the authorities will only allow for the most token mitigation measures. Economic life is unaffected and even large public and religious gatherings are allowed.

This is what “living with the virus” looks like: destructive waves that take thousands of lives each week, alternating with periods of lower transmission when “mere” hundreds die.

Romania has the second lowest vaccination rate in the EU, with just under 30 percent of the population having received two doses. Government figures and the media have focused solely on this aspect to shift the blame for the tragedy on the victims of the disease.

While it is true that mortality is heavily concentrated in the unvaccinated population, vaccines alone would not have prevented the surge. Large cities, where transmission is highest, have higher vaccination rates of over 50 percent. But breakthrough cases, waning immunity and unvaccinated youth and children mean that the virus can transmit freely in the absence of any public health measures.

In part the low vaccination rate is caused by the incessant promotion of individualism and the lowest social instincts by the bourgeoisie over the last 30 years of capitalist restoration. On the other hand, the normalization of right-

wing views on the pandemic by the official establishment and the repeated government claims that the pandemic “had been beaten” have contributed to the low vaccination rates.

As the ruling elites attempt to normalize mass death, immense social pressures are building up. The answer of the bourgeoisie throughout the world has been to promote fascist movements.

In Romania, the fascist AUR (Alliance for the unity of Romanians) party was conjured up out of the anti-lockdown movement and propelled into parliament in November 2020. There, far from being marginalized as many pundits assured it would be, it has been transformed into a kingmaker.

On October 5 the ruling coalition of the conservative National Liberals (PNL) and free-market Save Romania Union (USR) broke down, and the government lost a no-confidence vote. In the process, AUR not only determined the arithmetic of the vote, but was also promoted as an anti-establishment force. It was subsequently invited to talks with the country’s president, along with the other major parties.

But the fascists’ main focus is to terrorize the streets in preparation for the developing working-class opposition. In the spring, when the third wave was raging, the fascists were allowed to mobilize lumpen and criminal elements and patrol the streets of cities, blocking hospitals and ambulances and attacking journalists and paramedics.

This constitutes a warning to workers who must develop their own counterstrategy. The fight against fascism, and the fight against the pandemic, requires the building of an independent socialist movement in the working class.

We call upon all our readers in Romania to attend the October 24 webinar sponsored by the WSWS and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). This webinar will explain the case for eradication and provide the public with the critical knowledge necessary to develop a broad-based and international movement to end the pandemic and reclaim the future.



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