

2 Orthodox Churches and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Romania and Bulgaria

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Introduction

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 two countries had the European Union’s (EU) ‘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’. The extent of the death rate in Romania was presented by Cătălin Florin Cîrstoiu, a doctor and manager of the Bucharest University Emergency Hospital, who commented: ‘A village is vanishing every day’.² Bulgaria faced a similar situation. In *The Guardian*’s analysis, what brought Romania and Bulgaria together was not only the fact that they were two predominantly Eastern Orthodox countries, but also that they had the lowest vaccination rates in the European Union: 34.5 per cent of Romania’s population received two jabs, while in Bulgaria, the figure was even lower at 23.04 per cent 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 per cent of the population was vaccinated.

How have Orthodox churches in Romania and Bulgaria, as institutional communities, perceived the COVID-19 pandemic? In what ways have Orthodox churches in these countries responded to national state mobilisation in observing strict health measures and national vaccination programmes? To what extent have the vaccination rates in Romania and Bulgaria been influenced by the discourse of political leaders, Orthodox hierarchy, lower clergy, and lay intellectuals? This chapter 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. The chapter examines the social mobilisation of religious actors and state bodies, legislation frameworks, and public statements, drawing on ethnographic data collected on a research trip to Romania in September 2021. The analysis is divided into three sections: an overview of religious responses in Romania and Bulgaria; an examination of case studies, with an emphasis on the key religious and political actors; and a comparative section concluding the investigation, identifying common patterns of religious mobilisation. The section on Romania includes the wider

narrative of religious and health mobilisation in Europe and around the world. The section on Bulgaria focuses on key events in the country without repeating the same key dates on pandemic waves mentioned in the previous section.

Romania: The Ambivalence of the Orthodox Church

The 2011 census noted a population of 20,121,641 people, divided according to the following religious backgrounds: Eastern Orthodoxy (81.04 per cent), the Catholic Church (4.33 per cent), the Greek-Catholic Church (3.3 per cent), Calvinist (2.99 per cent), and Pentecostal denominations (1.80 per cent). The Muslim population numbered around 64,000, while the Jewish community 3,519 in 2011. A relatively small number of people declared themselves atheists (21,000), while around 19,000 people stated that they did not follow any religion. Romania stands out in the Eastern Orthodox world as the country with one of the highest percentages of population trust in the Romanian Orthodox Church (RomOC), the largest religious confession in the country.

After joining the European Union in 2007, many Romanians migrated to Western Europe, with figures ranging from two to three million in Italy and Spain and large communities in Germany, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. A comparison with the religious situation at the end of the Cold War shows that the Orthodox Church has constantly witnessed an increase in the number of its congregations, while the number of practising faithful has been declining. In 2014, the church counted 14,513 priests and deacons servicing 15,218 places of worship, and 637 monasteries and sketes with over 8,000 monks and nuns—a contrast to around 8,000 priests in 1989. In 2008, the Orthodox Church began a programme of cooperation with the government to work in joint social projects, including medical and spiritual assistance. Over the last two decades, clergymen were allowed to enter politics at local and national levels, and since 2008, church hierarchy, including lower-ranking clergy, has been exempted from verification of their communist past and previous collaboration with the security services, the *Securitate*. The engagement of the church in political disputes has benefited nationalistic parties, such as the Greater Romania Party and the New Generation—Christian Democrat Party, which have made constant references to Orthodox values. However, with the exception of the leader of the far-right Greater Romania Party, which reached the runoff phase of the presidential elections in 2000, both parties have gradually lost support among the electorate: the Greater Romania Party scored 1.47 per cent in 2012, while the New Generation—Christian Democrat Party—scored 2.2 per cent in 2004.³

Orthodoxy and the 2020 Electoral Year: ‘No Matter How Many Hospitals We Have, if We Do Not Have the Resurrected Jesus Christ, We Cannot Escape from this Great World Crisis’

The pandemic started in an electoral year. In November 2019, the National Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*) 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 liberals aimed to replace the Social Democratic Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*) as the largest in the Parliament in the national elections planned for June 2020. The start of the pandemic in winter 2020 delayed the electoral process until autumn. Local elections were held on 27 November 2020 and legislative elections on 6 December 2020. The turnout was the lowest since 1989, with only 32 per cent of the population voting. Despite holding power, the liberals came in second. The distribution of popular votes among the main parties were as follows: the Social Democratic Party came first (29.32 per cent of the vote), followed by the National Liberal Party (25.58 per cent) and the Save Romania Union (*Uniunea Salvați România*) (USR PLUS) (15.86 per cent), while the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (*Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România*) reached 5.89 per cent.

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 Alliance for the Union of Romanians (*Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor*, AUR), which gained 9.17 per cent of the vote (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, on an initial platform of 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.

After underperforming in the legislative elections, Prime Minister Orban resigned. On 23 December 2020, Florin Cîțu from the National Liberal Party took over as the prime minister in a coalition which involved the Save Romania Union and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania. In September 2021, after the Save Romania Union decided to leave the government and following internal clashes in the Liberal Party, in November 2021, Cîțu was replaced by Nicolae Ciucă, a retired general and former Minister of Defence.

The ups and downs of the political scene and the rise of right-wing politics have been intertwined with the response of the Romanian Orthodox Church towards the pandemic at local and national levels. As was evident throughout 2020 and 2021, the ambiguous position of the church leadership with regard to the most appropriate ways of responding to the pandemic, the challenge of political decision, the lack of national mobilisation to involve Orthodox parishes, and the pressure from monastic communities towards what was perceived as state interference in religious life were key in understanding the low numbers of vaccinated people.

As an EU member, Romania followed closely the international monitoring of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. On 21 January 2020, the Romanian government introduced restrictions on people arriving from contaminated regions. 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 the Orthodox liturgy, the faithful receive the bread and wine with a single spoon from a chalice, with the priest offering them to each individual. This practice is different from the Catholic ceremonial, where the priest hands the unleavened bread to worshippers without the use of a spoon or a chalice. Health authorities regarded the use of the same spoon in administering the Holy Communion as a prime factor in the transmission of COVID-19. The church debated the best practice for offering the sacrament while remaining faithful to the theological understanding of transubstantiation. If the body and blood of Christ were of a divine nature, it was argued, they could not carry a deadly virus and infect the faithful. Faced with adopting a stance which would mediate between medical and theological views, on 28 February 2020, the church hierarchy confirmed that the faithful ‘may exceptionally ask the priest to use their own spoon’ in the Holy Communion.⁴ The change of practice faced criticism from those in monastic circles, who feared that it would alter the Orthodox doctrine. In the subsequent months, the Holy Communion debate continued and gradually led to resistance towards what was seen as interference from secular powers.

In response to the pandemic, the Romanian government issued the Military Ordinance no. 1 of 17 March 2020 and the Military Ordinance no. 2 of 21 March 2020, which restricted the movement of people and sent the whole country into lockdown.⁵ 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 were encouraged to arrange a religious space for prayers inside private homes and to refrain from travelling to their nearby churches. The priests were allowed to travel to administer Holy Communion or Holy Confession only after following travel regulations instituted by the local authorities. All faithful were encouraged not to leave their homes except 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. The Holy Synod’s statement ended with a clear message supporting medical procedures and indicating that:

...the exceptional measures taken by the authorities are aimed at protecting our own health and the health of those around us. Life and health are gifts from God, but we have a duty to protect and cultivate them with permanent responsibility.⁶

In addition to observing strict state measures, the church provided its own weapons to fight 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 from Iași, protector of Moldova, left the metropolitan cathedral and went on public procession to the cities of Roman, Piatra Neamț, and Tîrgu Neamț, and to three monasteries in the region: Bodești,

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 inclusion of monasteries in the region of Moldova not only added symbolic weight to the procession but also aimed to alleviate tension among the faithful. An increasing number of monastic clergies started to link the pandemic with apocalyptic times and expressed right-wing conspiracy theories. The sudden medical rush for a COVID vaccine was regarded as the use of the spear which confirmed Christ's death on the cross, while the closure of churches was nothing less than the decision of a police state and the 'Antichrist's world government'. Right-wing conspiracy theories started to circulate among the population, with clergy stating that survival of the pandemic was similar to the communist period, with some monks claiming that a new wave of religious persecution was imminent, which in turn would become even harsher.⁹

The exceptional travel restrictions meant that churches were unable to celebrate the Orthodox Easter on Sunday, 19 April. This led to discontent among the clergy. An example was Father Mihail Milea, chair of the 'Saint Sava' Foundation in charge of social programmes in Buzău, who wrote a letter to President Iohannis asking for his direct involvement in influencing the health authorities. Father Milea pointed out that it was possible to celebrate Easter in Israel, Bulgaria, and Georgia. He ended the letter by stating what many clergy felt, namely: 'No matter how many hospitals we have, if we do not have the resurrected Jesus Christ, we cannot escape from this great world crisis'.¹⁰ Informal channels of communication protesting against religious restrictions spread through Facebook. Father Marcel Malanca, Dean of Negrești Oaș 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.¹¹ 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.¹² The widespread mobilisation demonstrated not only the solidarity of the population facing the pandemic but also that the church retained a prime role in people's lives. The dramatism surrounding the Easter celebration reached a 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.¹³

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 were able to attend services inside or outside a church; however, they had to maintain a 2-metre distance and follow strict hygienic measures. Baptisms, weddings, and funerals were now able to accommodate up to 16 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ In the subsequent months, Archbishop Teodosie became one of the key supporters of a national anti-vaccination programme.

After enabling in-person religious services, particularly in an electoral year, in June 2020, the date when initial national elections were due to be held, Prime Minister Orban was careful to dissociate himself from the image of a political leader shutting churches. In an interview, he stated that the new measures should not be perceived as new by pointing out:

I made the decision to allow services to be held inside the churches as well. Here I would like to make a point. We did not close churches. Churches were opened during this period. The only thing that was not allowed was the officiating of the services. For example, various events were allowed for baptisms, marriages, with a limited number of people at the family level. Also, the churches were not closed, so those who published articles in the media regarding the reopening of the churches did not tell the truth correctly.¹⁶

The international race to produce the first vaccines were not completely overlooked by religious discourse. In June 2020, China approved the CanSino vaccine for military usage, and in August 2020, Russia approved its own Sputnik V vaccine for emergency use; however, their fast authorisation process was received with caution in the EU and the United States. A major shift took place at the end of the year: 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 programme. In the subsequent weeks, most EU countries followed suit and approved the Pfizer–BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, and on 30 December 2020, the United Kingdom 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, affecting not only the Orthodox but also other religious communities. In December 2020, a Romanian pastor based in the United Kingdom encouraged the Baptist community in his country to dispel the idea that the vaccine was a malefic project and perceive it instead as a blessing sign from God.¹⁷

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 use of religious symbolism in political speeches. The turn towards the church demonstrated a shift in public opinion towards religion-state relations. A survey conducted by the Centre for Sociological Research Larics between 30 November and 7 December 2020 revealed two key findings. First, the RomOC became the public institution

with the highest percentage of population trust (very high: 41.4 per cent; high: 29.8 per cent), followed by the army in second place (very high: 17.8 per cent; high: 44 per cent). The Parliament (very high: 1.9 per cent; high: 7.6 per cent;) and the government (very high: 2.9 per cent; high: 10.8 per cent) lacked significant public support. That the church achieved first place was surprising, as just one year before the pandemic started, the army held first place in public trust (68.1 per cent), while the church ranked second (55.1 per cent).¹⁸ The second finding of the survey was that the majority of the population perceived, in relation to ‘the attitude of state authorities towards churches during the pandemic’, that ‘the state has restricted the religious freedom of religious confessions’ (47.3 per cent) and only 15.9 per cent of the population considered that ‘the state has collaborated well with churches and communicated very well its decisions’.¹⁹

Church activism and mobilisation towards challenging state authorities over the pandemic was evident in a report published by the RomOC summarising its work throughout the 2020 pandemic year. The church continued to maintain contact with other Orthodox churches and sent a delegation to the funeral of Patriarch Irinej of Serbia, who died after contracting COVID-19 in November. Between March and December 2020, the church reassessed its social work by focusing on purchasing medical equipment for six hospitals in Bucharest and running 492 social programmes across the country. In total, the report stated that the church spent over 38 million euros in its charitable activities.²⁰

Orthodoxy and the 2021 Vaccination Campaign: ‘The Holy Communion Is the Most Authentic Vaccine’

The ambivalence of the RomOC towards the vaccination programmes 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 *Vaccination against COVID-19 in Romania. Free. Voluntary. Secure (Vaccinarea împotriva COVID-19 în România. Gratuită. Voluntară. Sigură)*; however, the hierarchy did not send any pastoral letters to the faithful in support of the vaccination process. The booklet was presented by the church as the most important measure in communicating directly with the faithful, while local clergy were able to exert their authority as they saw fit regarding the most appropriate means of publicising it, such as speaking to the people about it, distributing it to them, or placing it in the church where people could see it.²¹

In February 2021, the Holy Synod made reference to the decision taken by the Patriarchate of Antioch that ‘vaccination was a personal decision’ and claimed that it followed a similar approach to those in all other Orthodox churches.²² In April, Prime Minister Cîțu became impatient with the lack of religious mobilisation towards informing people about the benefits of the vaccine, and demanded that the clergy should speak and engage directly with the rural population. When asked why the church was not doing more to raise awareness of the national vaccination programme, Vasile Bănescu, the spokesmen of the Patriarchate, indicated that the church was already publicising the booklet and that he did not wish to make a

secret that he, personally, was vaccinated, although he reiterated that people should regard his choice as a personal decision.²³

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’.²⁴ He doubted the efficacy of the vaccination programme and claimed that the invention of new vaccines in just under a year was an example of ‘resetting the world’. He pointed out that, just a few weeks earlier, the European Parliament had issued a resolution which, in his opinion, forbade the use of the word ‘mother’. In his own words:

Doesn't it seem astonishing that in March of this year, on the eve of the so-called third wave of the pandemic, when the whole world was waiting for effective measures to fight the Corona virus, the European Parliament was very concerned about, ‘Father’, ‘masculine’, ‘feminine’, etc.? Are these Europe's priorities? What is the connection between the pandemic and this ideology—how sinister, how aggressive?!²⁵

His complaint was against the European Parliament resolution of 11 March 2021, which declared ‘the European Union as an LGBTIQ Freedom Zone’, without, as the bishop wrote, recommending the specific words to be banned. The declaration instead denounced all forms of violence or discrimination against persons on the basis of their sex or sexual orientation.²⁶ The Parliament's declaration in relation to the ‘EU Strategy on children's rights’, which was issued on the same day, used the word ‘mother’ only once, when it pointed out that ‘56,700 mothers could die within six months due to disruption to basic interventions such as routine health service coverage’.²⁷ The use of the word ‘mother’ did not appear on any other statements made by the Parliament. The bishop's pastoral letter was an example of the way in which the pandemic encouraged the spread of disinformation by the church, which tapped into the far-right conspiracy theories.

A similar approach to denouncing health measures which was 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: ‘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’. He added:

The vaccine is not mandatory and especially it is a vaccine that is made in a hurry. That's why there are surprises every day, because people have to be prepared; there are people with certain diseases who, due to the vaccine, give up, some die, some are paralyzed, and we have to be careful. We are not doctors to recommend the vaccine. It would be an overstatement of our knowledge and responsibilities.²⁸

Teodosie's unusual stance in contrast to that of the official church discourse from the Patriarchate made headlines in the mass media. His words not only reflected the authority of one of the most influential hierarchs of the church, but also gave public voice to monastic clergy. The church thus became divided between two sections: one which supported Teodosie's view and found allegiance particularly in monastic circles and rural communities, and one which followed the official discourse of the church and the state. When challenged by reporters regarding the best response, Vasile Bănescu, spokesman of the Patriarchate, rebuked Teodosie and indicated that the vaccine should not be compared with the Holy Communion. The clash between these two visions in the church, one supporting and one condemning the vaccination programme, remained dominant throughout the year and explained the reluctance of the church hierarchy to engage publicly in the vaccination programme.

In February, Teodosie thought that his stance would prevail and challenged the Patriarch's place in the Holy Synod. He sent an official request to the Patriarchate, in which he demanded that his archbishopric should be raised to the rank of metropolitanate. His request capitalised on the dissatisfaction of a number of hierarchs towards the Patriarch's proposal that Holy Communion could be administered to the faithful using their own spoons.²⁹ In the end, the Patriarch's position prevailed: the principle of 'symphonia', or collaboration between the church and state authorities, lay at the core of the church–state relations, and Teodosie's statements did nothing but negatively affect the public image of the church. On 19 April, the Holy Synod issued a statement which refused Teodosie's request to raise his diocese to metropolitanate and encouraged him instead to follow the health measures imposed by the government.

The clash between these two visions in the church continued. In June 2021, Abbot Zenovie from Nechit Monastery in Neamţ 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 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.

People who are happy today to get their vaccine will be very unhappy tomorrow, because they will not even have time to repent of what they have done against God. If the mind does not function at its normal capacity, you are attacking God. After vaccination, after a short time and in combination with the new disease, people's skin will fill with scales, like fish ...

Humans will be filled with scales and blood cancers, which will be transmitted to the entire human body. They will be filled with wounds, from which fluid will flow; this disease will be frightening. The Holy Fathers prophesy to us. My children, people will lose their freedom of thought, they will be inactive. The work of the wicked will endure. People will die after vaccination.³⁰

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 programme. 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!’³¹

The Patriarchate’s official position continued to be consistent with that of the health officials. Bănescu asked the faithful to follow the local authorities rather than conspiracy theories or ‘apocalyptic mixing of vaccination with faith and theology’.³² In July 2021, Archbishop Nifon of Târgoviște had a similar message, claiming that ‘the Christian Church is against ignorance, against superstitions of all kinds’.³³ After the Russian Orthodox Church declared that those who opposed the vaccination programmes were committing a sin,³⁴ and after the Orthodox Church of Greece became publicly involved in supporting the faithful to vaccinate, reaching a vaccination rate of over 50 per cent,³⁵ public pressure became more evident on the Patriarch himself to declare his support for the vaccination programme. On 22 July, when Patriarch Daniel turned 70 and was decorated by President Iohannis in a public ceremony, Bănescu, the spokesman for the Patriarchate, pointed out that the church has many times presented its official position over the last few months. Bănescu stated that ‘the Patriarch is a person like everyone else ... an individual with a personal medical profile ... who consults with his doctors’ and that ‘vaccination is a right, not an obligation’.³⁶

The uncertainty over the Patriarch’s stance towards the vaccine lasted until November 2021, when Romania had one of the highest mortality rates in Europe. At the end of a meeting in the Parliament, the Patriarch was approached in the corridors by journalists and was 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’s and state authorities’ official position that medical records were confidential and that each person should make a decision after discussion with their personal doctor.³⁷

The vague measures and the lack of a coordinated national response by the church were capitalised on by anti-vaccination clergy. Archbishop Teodosie continued his opposition by stating:

How can we be above medical science? For this reason, we keep parishioners with the vaccine of faith and of the liturgy. This is our vaccine. We do not get involved in vaccination propaganda, which is so diverse and controversial. At the national level there is no discussion on how much damage had by those who were vaccinated.³⁸

A mass media investigation in northern Moldova, in Vorniceni, a village of around four thousand people, found that only 4 per cent of the population was vaccinated. When asked why they were not vaccinated, people claimed that they had ‘divine

help’, they did not want to be drugged, and, as one respondent stated, ‘I am not afraid because I believe in God and Jesus Christ. Where there is fear, there is death’.³⁹ In the same region, in Botoşani county, the police were alerted that clergy were ripping the masks off those attending the liturgy, while those who were vaccinated were not allowed to attend the service.⁴⁰

The anti-vaccine position was quickly capitalised on by the far-right party. On 27 October, Diana Iovanovici Şoşoacă, a Romanian MP, produced a Facebook video in which she denounced the health measures, stating: ‘You went to the vaccination centres like lambs to the slaughter. ... We, the lawyers and doctors who have been banned, have shown you the truth’. In 24 hours, the video was watched by over one million people and was shared over 46,000 times. George ‘Gigi’ Becali, the owner of a football team in Bucharest and a controversial politician who regularly made nationalist and religious references, declared in an interview: ‘Why should I get vaccinated? I’ve never been vaccinated in my life. Even if I get treatment for [COVID-19], why should I get vaccinated? To make a genetic change or what?’ One month after it was posted on Facebook, the video attracted over two million views.⁴¹ In November 2021, a clergyman giving a sermon at Sihăstria monastery, one of the most influential monastic centres in the country, followed the same message, stating:

We are constrained, we are chased and manipulated in every way to be vaccinated. ... There have been diseases throughout history. This, I might say, in comparison with other epidemics, with other diseases, is almost nothing. The survival rate for this disease is over 99 per cent.⁴²

Anti-vaccination statements in religious circles coupled with the rise of the far-right movement even led to attempts to influence the faithful towards international politics. On 8 February 2022, Archbishop Teodosie made another controversial statement which seemed to support the far-right discourse and declared that Russian President Vladimir Putin was demonised unfairly in Western Europe as ‘a criminal’ and that his charitable activities in Jerusalem and Mount Athos were too easily forgotten.⁴³ Vasile Bănescu responded that the official position of the Patriarchate was that people should avoid the connection of ‘(ultra) nationalism with patriotism ... [and] religious fidelity’.⁴⁴ A few days later, on 15 February, in what seemed to be a counterbalance of Teodosie’s statement on charity, the Holy Synod publicised its official report on church charitable activities in the previous year. The report highlighted that, despite the pandemic, the church supported 1,114 social projects reaching over 140,000 people. In total, the report stated that the overall costs for its charitable work was over 44 million euros.⁴⁵

Bulgaria: ‘There Have Never Been Epidemics in the Church’

In contrast to Romania’s total population, the 2021 census in Bulgaria showed a total population of 6,838,937.⁴⁶ The Orthodox faithful represented the largest numbers with 59.40 per cent, followed by Sunnis (7.41 per cent), Protestants (0.88 per

cent), the Catholics (0.66 per cent), and Shias (0.32 per cent), while 5.67 per cent declared to have no religious affiliation and 3.7 per cent have no religion. During communist rule, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) was officially recognised as the Patriarchate, even as the country became one of the most secular predominantly Orthodox countries. In 2014, the BOC counted 1,280 priests, 120 monks, 140 nuns, over 3,000 churches and cathedrals, 170 monasteries, and around 3,000 parishes.

After the fall of communism, Bulgaria faced one of the most unusual divisions between the secular and the religious. Article 13 (3) of the 1991 Constitution proclaimed Eastern Orthodox Christianity as ‘the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria’. In 1998, the Constitutional Court stated that

[...] religious institutions, in particular the church, are separate and independent from the state, and the state is secular; the traditional nature of the Eastern Orthodox religion expresses its cultural-historical role and importance for the Bulgarian state, as well as its current significance for state life, reflected mostly in the system of public holidays (all Sundays, New Year, Easter, Christmas).⁴⁷

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 in his third mandate in 2020. His pro-EU conservative populist party, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (*Grazhdani za evropejsko razvitie na Bŭlgariya*, GERB), ruled together with two far-right parties, the IMRO—Bulgarian National Movement (*Balgarsko Natsionalno Dvizhenie*, VMRO) —and the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (*Natsionalen front za spasenie na Bŭlgariya*, NFSB). 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 specialised prosecutor’s office on 9 July 2020, an act which led to widespread demonstrations lasting nearly a year, until 16 April 2021.⁴⁸ In May 2021, Borisov resigned, and two snap elections followed in July and November. Between 12 May and 13 December 2021, Bulgaria was ruled by Stefan Yanev, as the caretaker prime minister. After the November 2021 elections, Kiril Petkov became the prime minister, leader of the pro-EU party We Continue the Change (*Prodalzhavame promyanata*, PP), a political party set up only a few months earlier in September 2021. The unexpected rise of We Continue the Change, which ruled in a party coalition together with the populist There Is Such a People (*Ima takav narod*, ITN), Democratic Bulgaria (*Demokratichna Balgariya*, DB), and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (*Balgarska sotsialisticheska partiya*, BSP), not only demonstrated dissatisfaction with the political elite associated with Borisov’s rule, but also encouraged the rise of new political units which presented themselves as alternatives to the measures instituted by the political establishment. For example, the July snap election was won by an anti-elite, populist party, There Is Such a People, attracting over 24 per cent of the vote.

The 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; and 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.

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 2020.⁴⁹ Metropolitan Gabriel of Lovech claimed that only those who had a weak faith were contaminated: 'In no way has the contagion been transmitted and spread in churches where sacraments are performed! There have never been epidemics in the Church'.⁵⁰ On 10 March 2020, Patriarch Neophyte sent a letter to the faithful in which he encouraged attendance, indicating that churches were open mainly because '[t]he Holy Mysteries cannot be carriers of infection or any disease, but are a medicine for the healing of the soul and health'.⁵¹ The Patriarch recommended that churches should 'use disinfectants and maintain excellent hygiene', while those who were ill should not come to the service.⁵² The service in Saint Alexander Nevski Cathedral in Sofia was broadcast live, with those in attendance maintaining social distancing of at least one metre and a half.⁵³ To demonstrate support for health measures, on 22 March, Patriarch Neophyte celebrated a Sunday liturgy against the pandemic which was broadcast on Bulgarian National Television.⁵⁴ The following day he sent an address to the faithful, endorsing strict adherence to the measures imposed by the state authorities and the imposition of the state of emergency, presenting his support for the work of 'our medics, government and military'.⁵⁵

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'.⁵⁶ On 30 March, Patriarch Neophyte met Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev, Major-General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, head of the national operational headquarters against COVID-19, and Emil Velinov, Director of the Religious Denominations Directorate at the Council of Ministers, to discuss the most appropriate measures to be held during the Easter celebrations. The clergy who had any COVID-19 symptoms were required to inform their superiors. Baptisms and weddings were allowed to take place only with a small number of people, and funerals only with members of the immediate family. At the end of the meeting, the Holy Synod issued a statement which praised 'the government, doctors, nurses and workers, for all other public servants—police, military, transport workers, shopkeepers, all who are at risk in order to preserve daily life as far as possible'.⁵⁷

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 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!’⁵⁸ The message did not lead to a change in the behaviour of the population, as most people continued to stay at home; however, several intellectuals pointed out that the unusual stance of the church in combating the crisis did little to alleviate the pandemic. That the church held an influential role in the debate was evident when Mutafchiyski was photographed kissing an icon while at the same time he appealed to the population to stay at home. Mutafchiyski held a meeting with Patriarch Neophyte and, as part of the protocol, he was offered a present— an icon—which he kissed. His public gesture was an example of being an Orthodox believer rather disobeying hygiene measures; however, the church hierarchy presented the public display of religiosity as an act of close church–state relations. The paradox in the attitude of health officials and church leaders was summarised in an article by Professor Ivaylo Dichev from Kliment Okhridski University of Sofia:

Do you see priests comforting those suffering in hospitals? Do you hear about charities? ... No, they prefer to sing in golden robes. And to repeat boldly that the biggest compromise of the church was not to give willows for Palm Sunday. ... Does incense help against a virus?⁵⁹

In response to criticism of performing services, the church hierarchy claimed to be following ‘God’s providence’. Metropolitan Anthony for Central and Western Europe stated that if church buildings had been shut, it would have been perceived as the church ‘abandon[ing] the faithful in this difficult time ... God’s providence is beyond any logic’.⁶⁰ The discourse of the Orthodox hierarchy contrasted with those from other religious communities, such as the Catholic and the Protestant, which decided to broadcast all their services online.⁶¹

The strict measures imposed by the government were effective in the first wave of the pandemic. 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 Borisov’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, COVID-19 cases started to spike, reaching 3,984 people and 207 deaths. Borisov himself was fined 300 leva for not wearing a protective mask during a religious service at Rila Monastery.⁶² The monastery was not only one of the most important religious sites in the country, but also a pilgrimage centre for the faithful, and was thus perceived as a key place in Bulgarian national consciousness for religious and state authorities.⁶³

The church hierarchy’s support of Borisov, at a time of mass protests engulfing the country, continued. On 15 August 2020, Metropolitan Nikolai of Plovdiv, in a sermon at the end of the liturgy celebrating the ‘Assumption of the Mother of God’, criticised the increasing number of political protestors⁶⁴ against the government

and particularly in what seemed to be religious resistance around prayers organised by a defrocked monk, Archimandrite Dionysius.⁶⁵ Metropolitan Nikolai endorsed Borissov's rule as beneficial to close church–state relations by pointing out that '[i]n the last 10 years, for the first time in many years, we have had a state leadership that has expressed a desire to help the Church'. He reminded the faithful that Article 13 of the Constitution reserved a key role for the BOC and that only adherence to 'God's laws is the medicine that the sick Bulgarian society needs' at the time of the pandemic.⁶⁶ As evident in the previous months, the sermon was an example of choosing religious exceptionalism in the face of the pandemic rather than observing strict health measures, indicating that it was only a matter of time until high clergy were affected by the pandemic. On 18 August, the church announced that Metropolitan Ambrose of Dorostol passed away after being admitted to hospital with coronavirus symptoms.⁶⁷

As mass protests and violence against political authorities started to spread across the country, a number of lower clergies distanced themselves from the church's official position. Hieromonk Hristofor Sabev, one of the first dissidents of the Union of Democratic Forces which aimed to overthrow the communist regime in 1989, condemned the violence and doubted the public risks associated with the pandemic. In an interview, he pointed out that, after two months of public protests at which thousands of people regularly gathered in the capital, there was not a visible sharp increase in infections. When asked if he thought that the pandemic was 'a coronavirus conspiracy', he replied that '[t]he pandemic is something like a rehearsal for [a] global conspiracy' and 'an attempt to see how much people obey'. In his view, the world was changing not due to the pandemic but mainly due to migration and emigration affecting the structure of society. He expressed dissatisfaction with the government and more widely with the fact that top hierarchs were tainted by connections with the pre-1989 communist regime and the lack of a lustration process inside the church.⁶⁸

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 Metropolitan Kyprian of Stara Zagora expressed during a radio broadcast 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 had died the previous week.⁶⁹

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. He started by reminding the faithful that '[a] very great day is approaching—Christmas—and in this pandemic, in this financial and economic crisis, people's trust in God is extremely important'. He pointed out that a state subsidy of 2.5 million levas was assigned to the church for the restoration of worship places.⁷⁰ Patriarch Neophyte proposed that, from

20 to 26 December during the Christmas period, the clergy would go to hospitals and sprinkle the patients with holy water.

Close church–state support in engaging the population was also evident when the first vaccines were approved in the European Union. On 27 December 2020, the vaccination programme was officially launched in Sofia, with the first vaccines being received by one state and one religious official—namely Kostadin Angelov, Minister of Health, and the 75-year-old Bishop Tikhon of Tiberias, vicar of Patriarch Neophyte.⁷¹ 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 statement in support of the vaccination programme was issued by the church. The Holy Synod of the BOC only issued a short 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. In attempting to secure a firmer commitment from the church hierarchy, Borissov announced that 1.62 million leva was allocated for a municipal project to purify water at Rila monastery.⁷²

No other statements were made by the church in relation to the vaccination programme. Bulgarian theologians defended the view that the church should not become publicly involved in the national vaccination programme for the fear of being accused of becoming ‘an instrument of state policy’.⁷³ In February 2021, aiming to communicate directly with the population, a Public Vaccination Council was set up which brought together doctors and public intellectuals working with the Ministry of Health. The council presented itself as a non-political platform and lamented the fact that many doctors across the country regarded the vaccine with scepticism. The first meeting of the council was attended by representatives of all major religious communities in Bulgaria, with one notable exception: the BOC. The council indicated that the Orthodox Church of Greece had issued a statement in support of the vaccination programme, and that it hoped that the BOC would follow suit. The church hierarchy remained largely silent. The only exception was a short statement on Metropolitan Nahum of Ruse’s Facebook account, in which he claimed that there could be no connection between vaccines, sinfulness, and apostasy.⁷⁴ After the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece issued a statement, on 13 January, which declared that ‘vaccination does not mean falling away from the right faith and life in the Church’ and ‘the production of COVID-19 vaccines does not require the use of embryonic cell cultures’,⁷⁵ Metropolitan Nahum published a similar statement aimed at his diocese. On 23 February, he encouraged the faithful to consult with their doctors and get vaccinated, reminding them that the vaccination process was personal. He criticised those who refused to follow advice from the health authorities and who concealed symptoms which endangered other people.⁷⁶

In the months that followed, church–state relations did not lead to any major changes in support of the vaccination programme. Prime Minister Borissov’s four-year term ended on 12 May, 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-19.⁷⁷

Political uncertainty was directly linked to the ways in which people regarded the vaccination programme. In November 2021, in Vidin, a city in northern Bulgaria with around 63,000 people, only 12 per cent were vaccinated. Over the course of two years, over 27,000 people died of COVID-19 in Bulgaria, constituting one of the highest mortality rates in the European Union. The new political parties which emerged after the 2020–2021 protests questioned the use of restrictive measures, with more than 70 per cent of the population against the vaccine.⁷⁸ When the Ministry of Health was finally able to sign a document with the National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria, which officially engaged religious communities in its vaccination campaign, in December 2021, the Orthodox Church was again absent. Instead, the Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church, the United Evangelical churches, and the Chief Mufti's Office agreed to disseminate information among the faithful regarding the benefits of the vaccination programme.⁷⁹

The state authorities organised mass vaccinations centres, which attracted significant numbers; however, the overall resistance and criticism of the government was coupled by shortages of available stock, while, from a political perspective, protestors continued to openly oppose the vaccine, with some even burning their masks in public. At the end of Borissov's term, the national vaccination programme had some degree of population support; however, political infighting and scepticism towards the vaccine remained dominant. In December 2021, Bishop Tikhon, who received the first vaccine in the country, had to defend himself by stating:

I have no doubt that I did the right thing. We didn't know anything about the virus then. It was normal to get it after the vaccine was given. ... One cannot speak of a lack of trust in God, since the science we have is a gift from God. It is ridiculous to think that one who is vaccinated does not have enough faith. ... The church still doesn't talk about vaccines.⁸⁰

The election of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov in December 2021 represented a change in state policy towards the church. For the first time in 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 relations continued until the end of the fourth wave and the lifting of international travel restrictions.⁸¹

Conclusion

Romania and Bulgaria are exceptional cases of vaccination uptakes and death rates in the European Union. Data from John Hopkins University, which monitored COVID-19 cases around the world, show a contrasting picture to that of other EU member states. In 2022, while both countries were somewhat average

in the category ‘Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people’, much lower than Germany and similar to the United Kingdom and Italy (see Figure 2.1), Bulgaria and Romania ranked first in ‘Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people’ (see Figure 2.2) and lower than other EU countries in regard to ‘Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol’ (see Figure 2.3). The link between the lack of vaccination and high mortality rate is evident in all of these graphs.

Orthodox churches are imbedded in the social fabric of Romania and Bulgaria. At the institutional level, Orthodox churches have retained close relations with state authorities. The pandemic showed that institutional links have limits and that conformity to health measures is more a function of religiosity rather than a response to top-down directives from religious and political leaders. In Romania and Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church is considered by local populations to be one of the most trusted institutions. However, the main difference between both countries is in terms of public attendance at religious services. Bulgaria, despite over 70 per cent of the population identifying as Orthodox, is one of the most secular states in Eastern Europe—between 7 per cent⁸² and 9 per cent⁸³ of the population are regular churchgoers—while in Romania, 24 per cent of the population attend services on a weekly basis.⁸⁴

The BOC’s decision to celebrate Easter in 2020, when no other religious communities in the country did so, was encouraged by state authorities due to the low number of faithful attending services regularly. The decision was symbolic and was aimed at gaining political capital at a time when far-right parties shared power

Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people

7-day rolling average. Due to limited testing, the number of confirmed cases is lower than the true number of infections.

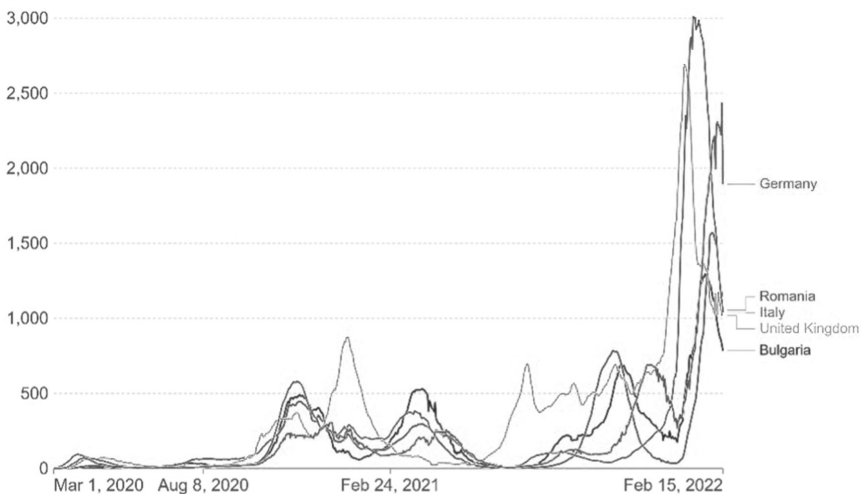


Figure 2.1 Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people.

Source: Our World in Data.

Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people

7-day rolling average. For some countries the number of confirmed deaths is much lower than the true number of deaths. This is because of limited testing and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death.

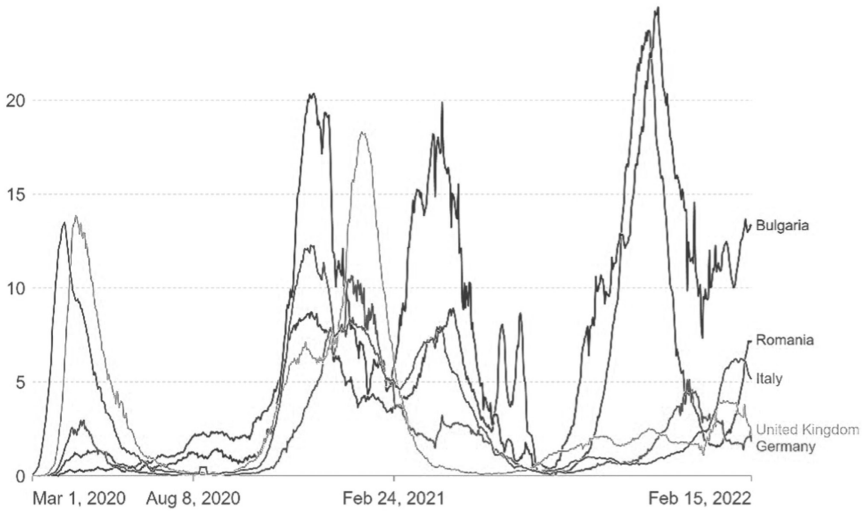


Figure 2.2 Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people.

Source: Our World in Data.

Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol

Total number of people who received all doses prescribed by the initial vaccination protocol, divided by the total population of the country.

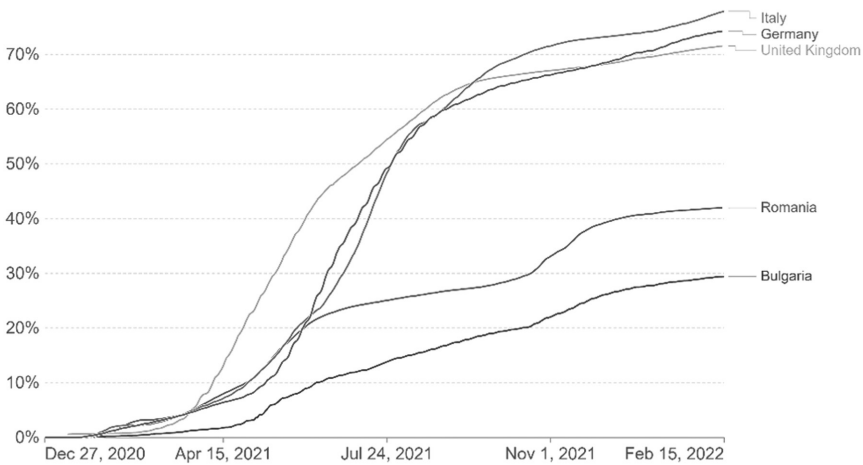


Figure 2.3 Share of people who completed the initial COVID-19 vaccination protocol.

Source: Our World in Data.

in the governing coalition with Borissov's GERB party. By contrast, Romania, ruled by the National Liberal Party, closed all places of worship, in line with other EU member states. However, in the subsequent months, the challenges from the church and the use of religious symbolism by far-right leaders were factors which supported the meteoric rise of AUR, the fourth largest party in the Parliament.

In September 2021, during my research trip to eight monasteries in Romania (five monasteries run by monks—Neamț, Sihăstria, Secu, Bistrița, and Pângărați—and three convents by nuns—Vărătic, Agapia, and Pașărea), I found an official notification posted at each entrance encouraging the faithful to observe social distancing and health measures. However, in all of the monasteries, none of the clergy, monks, or nuns wore protective masks, and social distancing was not observed. At Agapia monastery, the nuns attended the service in the main church rather than in open air alongside the faithful. At Bistrița monastery, anti-vaccine leaflets were placed at the entrance to the church under a detailed text with an overview of the church's history. It is unclear if the leaflets were placed by monks or by visitors; however, they only emphasised the lack of trust in the vaccination programme and health measures. In Romania, at the official level, the church authorities followed governmental instructions, but in practice, informal channels of communication were stronger and more influential. In Bulgaria, a similar practice took place. While the church enjoyed close cooperation with the Borissov government in the first year of the pandemic, it refused to issue a strong statement of support for the national vaccination programme.

In both countries, the church challenged the implementation of health measures from the start. In Romania, the clergy claimed that no matter how many hospitals and how much investment in medical science the state was implementing, any measures had little effect without religiosity. In Bulgaria, the clergy stated that 'there was no pandemic in the church' and that its authority transcended any disease. Those who fell ill were seen as suffering spiritual loss rather than physical illness.

Perhaps most surprising, as a general trend, the church discourse which challenged health measures and doubted the efficacy of the vaccine led to an increase in conspiracy theories and indirectly to the rise of far-right movements. In Romania, a bishop claimed that the pandemic was nothing but the start of resetting the world. In his view, the European Union was detrimental to the church and the faithful due to the alleged banning by the European Parliament of the word 'mother'. A number of monks from monasteries in the region of Moldova even claimed that the pandemic showed the existence of a world government and that the vaccine was a sign of the anti-Christ. Apocalyptic warnings were mentioned in sermons, while a number of lower clergies ripped protective masks off the faithful and banned those who were vaccinated from attending services. In Bulgaria, church and public figures saw the pandemic as a political test of the population. Facebook messages and informal channels of communication which challenged health and state authorities were influential and reached a large segment of the population swiftly.

The lack of transparency in the communication from the Holy Synods of both churches led to the perception that church hierarchs were not supporting the

vaccination programme. Patriarch Daniel of the RomOC confirmed that he was vaccinated only in an impromptu manner, when surrounded by journalists in the corridors of the Romanian Parliament. His words dismissed the act as something that was not supposed to be discussed in public. The church's official position was that the population should decide to be vaccinated only after consultation with personal doctors. In practice, the medical system was regarded as highly corrupt and most people did not consult their doctors. In Bulgaria, when Bishop Tikhon became the second vaccinated person in the country in a televised transmission, his act was presented as his personal choice rather than as a church endorsement of vaccination. Patriarch Neophyte and other members of the hierarchy did not disclose if they were vaccinated. With the exception of Metropolitan Nahum of Ruse, who issued a statement in support of vaccination, with a text which was inspired from a decision of the Orthodox Church of Greece, no other hierarchs became publicly engaged in the vaccination campaign. In Bulgaria, the church even refrained from sending representatives to the Public Vaccination Council, which was set up as a forum to encourage people to be vaccinated. All other major religious confessions in the country attended the council.

When in late autumn and winter 2021 both countries battled the fourth and most lethal wave of COVID-19 in the European Union, the churches remained largely silent. Since the start of the pandemic, the churches provided theological narratives on how to deal with the crisis, ranging from prayers for the difficult times to public processions of relics and blessing the ill with holy water. In both countries, even when top hierarchs died after contracting the coronavirus, the church authorities did not change their discourse and emphasised instead everyone's free will regarding vaccination.

The pandemic also revealed the extent of collaboration between church hierarchies and state authorities. In Romania, the decision to cancel the 2020 Easter celebrations were viewed by some clergy as a non-Orthodox act. President Iohannis, an ethnic German Lutheran, was criticised for not understanding the Orthodox faith. A priest even sent a letter of complaint to the president pointing out that in Bulgaria and Georgia Easter was celebrated publicly. Archbishop Teodosie went further, and when restrictions were lifted, he celebrated a second Easter in Constanța diocese on a date of his choice. He remained an anti-vaccine promoter, and his speeches were followed by far-right politicians. Two years after the start of the pandemic, there was only one step between his anti-vaccine discourse and his claim that Russian President Putin should be perceived in a better light in Europe due to his charitable work in Jerusalem and Mount Athos. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Teodosie retracted his words; however, his comments showed that the churches paid attention to what was happening in other countries rather than following unilateral decisions issued by their own national capitals. At times of national elections, church leaders have repeatedly encouraged the faithful to vote for candidates who supported the church. In Bulgaria, close contacts between the top hierarchs and Borissov's government were perceived with suspicion by the general population. Borissov's conflict with President Radev and the 2020–2021 national protests led to distrust in the vaccine. The mass protests in major cities

endorsed the anti-vaccine movement and the rise of new political parties. When Kiril Petkov became prime minister in December 2021, he attempted to move away from close church–state relations. He criticised the church for not becoming involved in the vaccination campaign and did not issue an invitation to Patriarch Neophyte to attend his inauguration ceremony.

The Orthodox churches in Romania and Bulgaria were an integral part of the social and political response of the pandemic crisis. No health measures could be implemented by the state authorities without the direct involvement of 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. Churches presented themselves as human security providers that transcended medical measures and provided spiritual support, which was more important than national mobilisation on health matters. Despite operating under different church–state models, the response of the Orthodox churches in both countries was the same: cooperation with state authorities in line with the Byzantine principle of ‘*symphonia*’ in providing support to the faithful.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Daniela Kalkandjieva for sharing several web links and providing constructive feedback on the analysis of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The chapter provides an expanded version of Lucian N. Leustean, ‘Orthodoxy and the Covid-19 Pandemic in Romania and Bulgaria: Political Turmoil, Informal Networks, and Religious Scepticism’, *Euxeinos Journal. Governance and Culture in the Black Sea Region*, forthcoming 2024. This chapter does not reflect the position of any person or organisation mentioned in the study. All websites listed were available in May 2022.

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