



REVIEW ARTICLE

Resilience of States versus Conspiracy Theories: A Romanian Approach on Covid-19

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is producing severe effects, with profound societal implications, affecting our daily lives. Thus, we need to learn or remember words such as action commander, lockdown, quarantine etc, which come bundled with the implications generated in the societal plan by the actions described in these words. The purpose of this study is to analyze, using the concept of resilience, how state institutions and citizens in Romania relate to democratic values, separation of powers, vulnerabilities, risks and threats to the security of the citizens and the state, in this complex and unpredictable environment generated by COVID-19, to which are added the fake news that promote conspiracy theories.

Key words: Institutional resilience, pandemic, COVID-19, conspiracy theories, vaccine, clerics, divinity.

Institutional Resilience – An Introduction

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the society was subjected to the fear induced by the virus mortality. But history proves that humanity has a very great capacity to adapt and has overcome any threat to it. The dangers to society, regardless of their nature, have features that make them categorized as unpredictable, a context in which they challenge organizations to understand, adapt and respond to subsequent disasters.

In this context, institutional resilience has become a key concept in the sciences and practices of governance which requires that governance systems to be stable and flexible, to balance ensuring the optimal functioning of organizations.

Achieving resilience that allows an institution to withstand absorbing the shock of danger in complex and cyclical processes, regardless of their nature, as well as diminishing the effects, can be achieved only through a multi-level governance system.

Institutional resilience implies a personalized adaptability, in the sense that an organization changes while maintaining its basic features. Specifically, the organization has the ability to return to a certain order or normality after a crisis.

Therefore, institutional resilience can be defined as the ability of a government organization to return to normal after a danger to society that directly influences its activity as well as the ability to help the population regardless of the severity of the calamity, disaster, crisis or pandemic.

COVID-19: An Analysis from the Perspective of Institutional Resilience

Today, globalization and global labor migration have made pandemics commonplace. The epidemics that spread a few centuries ago, over a longer period of time, are now spreading very rapidly, at a global scale, due to the movement of people. But these “hazards often do not create obvious damage either in a structural sense or in terms of obvious health consequences”, because they have “diffuse consequences”, determined by “defining the limits of the threat through public information”.¹[1]

According to Fang Li, a coronavirus pandemic causes major medical problems for people and economic loss due to the imposition of quarantine measures. Consequently, human society will be affected in the long run due to the manifestation of such a virus because it cause widespread respiratory, gastrointestinal, and central nervous system. Therefore, understanding the virology of coronaviruses and controlling

1 Ben Aguirre, Russell R. Dynes, James Kendra, and Rory Connell, *Institutional Resilience and Disaster Planning for New Hazards: Insights from Hospitals*, in *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management* Vol. 2, No. 2, January 2005, Article 1, p. 4.

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their spread have important implications for global health and economic stability.²[2]

In this context, it should also be noted that, back in 2003, Patrick Lagadec had studied the effects of sudden acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-1), in order to identify how people reacted, concluding that there was a great deal of confusion regarding the seriousness of the threat and the relative effectiveness of public health policies that were put in place in order to control the epidemic, all done under the scrutiny of world-wide mass media coverage.³[3]

Two years later, the possibility of a global pandemic caused by unknown biological agents for which treatment and therapy were not well established in medical practice was of concern to the scientific community as it could have an impact on the population of a whole region or an entire country and would create serious challenges for hospitals.⁴

As history repeats, in 2020, due to the aggressiveness of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its rapid spread, countries around the world have had to impose drastic measures as to quarantine the population in order to limit the increase in the number of disease people. These measures were necessary to prevent the suffocation of health systems, so that, even at full capacity, the treatment of patients can be ensured.⁵ [4]

As patients infected with this virus had severe acute respiratory syndrome and pneumonia, cough and dyspnea, it was named SARS-CoV-2. Like the first coronavirus, which appeared in 2003 in Guangdong, China, on December 30, 2019, in Wuhan, again in China, several patients presented etiological pneumonia similar to that of 2003.⁶ [5]

Since then, COVID-19 has been testing the resilience of states, forced to adapt in order to block the aggressive spread of the virus,⁷[6] with health systems unprepared for such a pandemic, failing to cope with institutional stress, thereby blocking citizens' access to basic medical services.⁸[7]

2 Fang Li, *Structure, Function, and Evolution of Coronavirus Spike Proteins*, in *Annual Review of Virology*, volume 3, number 1, August 25, 2016, p. 238, URL: <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-virology-110615-042301>, accessed on 12.01.2021.

3 Patrick Lagadec, *SARS: How to Manage Globalized Crises? Presented at the NATO/RUSSIA Advanced Research Workshop for Forecasting and Preventing Catastrophes*, University of Aberdeen, 2-6 June 2003. Unpublished manuscript available at the DRC Special Collection, p. 3 *apud* Ben Aguirre et al., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

4 Ben Aguirre et al., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

5 Sally M. Macgill, *Environmental Questions and Human Geography*, in *International Social Science Journal*, volume 38, number 3, 1986, pp. 357-358.

6 Jeannette Guarnier, *Three Emerging Coronaviruses in Two Decades The Story of SARS, MERS, and Now COVID-19*, in *American Journal of Clinical Pathology*, volume 153, number 4, 2020, p. 420, URL: , accessed on 12.01.2021.

7 Godswill Unekwuajo Musa, *COVID-19: The Global Pandemic and Cities' Resilience*, published la April 2, 2020, URL:<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/COVID-19-global-pandemic-cities-resilience-godswill-unekwuajo-musa/>, accessed on 10.01.2021.

8 Marie-Paule Kiény, David B Evans, Gerard Schmetts and

States around the world have reacted differently, although most epidemiologists have advocated protective health strategies as well as complementary isolation strategies, hand washing with soap as often as possible, use of disinfectants, social distancing, the closure of schools or non-essential segments of the economy and drastic travel restrictions.⁹[8]

COVID-19: Resilience versus Conspiracy

There will always be theories that find conspiracies in everything that happens. Whether they are true or not, they manage to convince some people. From how advertising subliminally controls our behavior to the aliens at Roswell, to the secret organizations that rule the world to the theories of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, can these theories be true?

The conspiracy theory begins with the French cleric Abbé Barruel which wrote an essay on the rise of the Jacobins, seen as the main cause of the French Revolution. Behind the Jacobins Abbé Barruel saw a conspiracy of three secret societies: the Order of the Templars, the Order of the Freemasons and the Illuminati (founded in 1776 by the Bavarian jurist Adam Weishaupt, a secret union whose members studied rationalist and humanist philosophy in order to reach "enlightenment").

Nowadays, as the COVID-19 continues to make casualties and lockdown our lives, conspiracy theories and myths about the virus seem to multiply worse than mushrooms after the rain. From social media posts to all sorts of bomb statements, misinformation threatening people's lives, conspiracy theories have emerging, including those according to which the SARS-CoV-2 virus is a bio-weapon used in the imposition of the socialist political system or that nano-vaccines will be introduced into the virus, through which people can be tracked and controlled.

Supposedly, a plan to implement people with chips is supported by people who are part of a so-called deep state, or by strong political leaders, like Angela Merkel and economics, like Bill Gates, for personal financial gain. According to other conspiracy theories, especially adopted by religious people, vaccination against the SARS-COV-2 virus must be refused because the vaccine is a symbol of Satan and causes infertility or autism.

Among the most hilarious fake news in India, but which caused great suffering to the people, were those according to which, for the cure of COVID-19, one had to drink bleach and eat cow dung, which was spread on social networks.

Also, nearly 800 people died because they consumed

Sowmya Kadandale, *Health-system resilience: reflections on the Ebola crisis in western Africa*, in *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, December 1, 2014, volume 92, number 12, p. 850.

9 Howard Markel, Alexandra M Stern, J Alexander Navarro, Joseph R Michalsen, Arnold S Monto, Cleto DiGiovanni, *Nonpharmaceutical influenza mitigation strategies, US communities, 1918-1920 pandemic*, in *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Volume 12, Number 12 - December 2006, URL: https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/12/12/06-0506_article, accessed on 28.12.2020.

high-purity alcohol to “disinfect their bodies” and nearly 6000 ingested methanol for the same purpose. Other false information about food and drink that was to be consumed includes “eating garlic, wearing warm socks and spreading goose fat on one’s chest”.¹⁰[9]

Conservative Christians also expressed distrust in modern medicine rejecting the vaccine against the virus in the same way they have rejected other vaccines such as those against diseases that seriously affect children such as measles, rubella or polio.

An example in this respect is Tony Spell, pastor of the Tabernacle of Life Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA. He was one of those who “defied” the measures taken by the authorities in the pandemic context and declared that both he and his parishioners are “anti-mask, anti-social distancing and anti-vaccine” as the danger of the virus being marketed as a vaccine has been exaggerated.¹¹[10]

Thus, conspiracy theories have been spread, according to which COVID-19 was triggered by Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, because the vaccine used to fight the virus will contain nanochips, through which it can track and control people,¹² the virus being “a bio-weapon funded by Bill Gates to further vaccine sales”¹³.

An example of this is a message that went viral, in which an elderly person, while participating in a protest organized in London, held in his hands a sign: “Arrest Bill Gates for crimes against humanity”.¹⁴[11]

By all means, the narrative on COVID-19 vaccines is adapted to certain subcultures, being used to trigger the deepest human emotions, such as: “children will be removed if their parents refuse to give them a COVID-19 vaccine, or that children will be taken from their families if they have symptoms of coronavirus”.¹⁵[12]

Furthermore, two Pfizer employees warned the European Medicines Agency not to issue a marketing authorization for the vaccine against COVID-19 because it “causes infertility in women”.¹⁶[13]

10 John Silk, *Spread of coronavirus fake news causes hundreds of deaths*, in Deutsche Welle, 11.08.2020, URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-misinformation/a-54529310>, accessed on 07.01.2021.

11 David Sloan, *American evangelicals and the resistance to COVID vaccines*, in Deutsche Welle, 16.12.2020, URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/american-evangelicals-and-the-resistance-to-COVID-vaccines/a-55957915>, accessed on 07.01.2021

12 Ibidem.

13 John Silk, art. cit.

14 Marianna Spring and Mike Wendling, *How COVID-19 myths are merging with the QAnon conspiracy theory*, in BBC News - BBC Anti-disinformation unit, published: 2 September 2020, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-53997203>, accessed on 15.01.2021.

15 Ariel Bogle and Jane Lee, *Children feature in COVID-19 and QAnon conspiracies, but these just most recent examples of a 'very old, powerful fear'*, in ABC Science, posted: 31 October 2020, URL: , accessed on 15.01.2021.

16 Caitlin Dickson, *QAnon believers spread false claims about COVID-19 vaccine touted by Trump*, in yahoo!news, December 15,

Also, conspiracy theories propagated in the pandemic context include those that the COVID-19 vaccine “causes autism” or “coronavirus is a cover for ... child sex trafficking and nobody wants to report about it”.¹⁷ [14]

People came out to protest against quarantine measures, social distancing, to save children, against vaccination, believing that the COVID-19 pandemic was “planned by governments or shadowy forces.”¹⁸

Case study - The perception of Romanian Citizens towards the COVID-19 Vaccine

The influence of the COVID-19 was also reflected on the Romanian citizens, who reacted differently against the background of fears about the virus or the decisions of the authorized institutions in managing the population protection measures. Some Romanians understood to respect the decisions issued by the government authorities but other part of society refuses to accept the reality regarding the danger of the virus.

Conspiracy theories regarding the non-existence of the COVID-19 were also appropriated by Romanians, from ordinary citizens to political, religious or opinion leaders, which were propagated through media relays with a large audience. The predisposition of Romanians to adopt such theories is given by the fact that, in general, “Romanians do not believe in diseases they do not see”, which is why the proportion of so-called “health optimists” in Romania is 70% compared to 50% world average.¹⁹[15]

According to them, the SARS-CoV-2 virus was created in a laboratory, in order to establish a “new world order” and support the interest of the rich people of the planet to “get rid of the elderly, poor and migrants”.²⁰[16]

Also, Romania has not been bypassed by anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, among the propagandists being both profane and religious people, stating that supra-state entities want to hide the truth about the vaccine and that the truth can only spread in secret, just as Christianity spread during the persecution of the first centuries of our era.

2020, URL: <https://news.yahoo.com/q-anon-believers-spread-false-claims-about-COVID-vaccine-touted-by-trump-161151862.html>, accessed on 15.01.2021.

17 Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, Joshua B. Grubbs, *Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans' Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic*, in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, first published: 26 July 2020, Volume 59, Issue 3, September 2020.

18 Marianna Spring and Mike Wendling, *op. cit.*

19 Sabina Fati, *Who are the deniers: opinion leaders who do not believe that the virus exists*, Radio Free Europe Romania, July 12, 2020, URL: <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/cine-aunt-nega%C8%9Bioni%C8%99tiii-lideri-de-opine-care-nu-cred-c%C4%83-virusul-exist%C4%83/30721833.html>, accessed on 12.01.2021.

20 *Top fake news-uri si conspiratii despre COVID-19*, 08.05.2020, Deutsche Welle, URL: <https://www.dw.com/ro/top-fake-news-uri-si-conspiratii-despre-COVID-19-ziarecom/a-53373459>, accessed on 15.01.2021.

A material that spreads anti-vaccine opinions against the SARS-CoV-2 virus is called “The Truth about the New COVID-19 RNA Vaccine Confessed by Scientists and God-Feared Spiritualists,” which can be found on several religious websites, including “Orthodox INFO”. The article was posted on January 18, 2021 and it had been viewed 84,337 times, until January 20, 2021. The article mixes anti-vaccine opinions with Christian-Orthodox landmarks to substantiate the anti-vaccine attitude, ensuring the necessary grip on the target audience: “The new RNA Messenger vaccine is God’s play (...) The ones who are so afraid of disease and death are those who are not afraid of God.”²¹[17]

According to the conspiracy theories adopted by Romanians, vaccination will take place because a “chip” must be implanted to destroy the traditional family institution and the “gene responsible for faith in God”.²²

It should be mentioned that, in this dispute against vaccination, doctors were also involved, an example being Adrian Cacovean, whose statements appear in the mentioned article: “Vaccination will start on the same day, December 27, throughout Europe. So, there will be no time to change mind after seeing the effects in the leading countries! In reality, the great experimental genetic manipulation presented as vaccination is beginning.”

The article also mentions Paisie Aghioritul prophecy, which had been made about 30 years ago: “Here, now, a disease has appeared for which they have found a vaccine that will be mandatory and if someone refuse it, he or her will be locked”.²³

In fact, the phrase recorded in the book of Paisie Aghioritul describes state-of-the-art technologies, which he demonizes: “Things are moving forward in a programmed way. In America, dogs walk around being sealed with a transmitter in order to know where each dog is. Unmarked and stray dogs are killed with laser beams. After that, they will start killing people. They sealed tons of fish and watched them from the satellite. Now a disease has appeared again, for which they have found a vaccine that will be mandatory and if someone refuse it, he or her will be locked. Later, the ones who will not be sealed with the number 666 will not be able to sell or buy, or to borrow, to be appointed to a position etc. It tells me that the Antichrist with this system wants to catch everyone. It will thus be monitored by an economic system that will control the world economy and only those who will receive the 666 stamp will be able to access trade”.²⁴[18]

Although Paisie Aghioritul did not speak in the book about the

21 *Adevărul despre noul Vaccin ARN COVID-19 mărturisit de oameni de știință și duhovnici cu frică de Dumnezeu*, Orthodox INFO, posted on January 18, 2021, First Edition / January 2021, p. 1, URL: <https://ortodoxinfo.ro/2021/01/18/pdf-brosura-adevarul-despre-noul-vaccin-arn-descarcati-si-distribuiti-masiv/>, accessed on 20.01.2021.

22 *Top fake news-uri si conspiratii despre COVID-19*, art. cit.

23 *Adevărul despre noul Vaccin ARN...*, art. cit, p. 2.

24 *Cuviosul Paisie Aghioritul, Cuvinte duhovnicești – II – Trezire Duhovnicească*, București: Editura Evanghelistos, 2003, pp. 195-196.

SARS-CoV-2 virus, his book being printed in 2000, the authors of the article quote his theory that chips will be implanted in people.

The article also records the statements of Metropolitan Ambrose of Kalavryta, about the false COVID-19 and the implantation of chips under the pretext of administering a vaccine against the virus: “The whole story of the coronavirus is nothing but the plan of demonic forces aiming to lead human society to receive the seal of the Antichrist, the chip number 666, which will be implanted in our bodies under the pretext of the coronavirus vaccine”.²⁵

Among the Romanian clergymen quoted in the article is Iustin Pârvu, the former abbot of Petru Vodă Monastery, who died in 2013, his statements being taken out of context in order to support conspiracy theories: “If the mother leaves the child to be vaccinated, it’s like giving him to death... they are aware that they no longer have any fearsome opponent and fight for the extermination of the population, in order that the few who will remain to worship them.”

In an article related to the one mentioned above, entitled “We live in the last days, the New World Order has come” messages like: “Let’s wake up to reality and reject with force and courage all these crimes against our souls and bodies. Return to God with repentance as soon as possible because time is short to understand what is happening and to have the strength to overcome all these trials that have gripped the whole world. We have many testimonies of people who were killed in hospitals with treatments like Plaquenil, Esmeron and Kaletra... We also have testimonies and videos with people who died or were recently paralyzed, in Romania and abroad, due to the vaccine against COVID-19”.²⁶

As can be seen, the conspiracy theories were mixed with the words of some respected Orthodox clergy, so as to provide the argumentative force necessary to propagate messages that would be mastered by Romanians, without questioning the anti-vaccine attitude.

In such a context, it should be noted that, in May 2020, just about 40% of Romanians were willing to be vaccinated and 33% said they would not be vaccinated in any form. Equally worrying is the fact that “half of Romanians believe that the state has hidden important information” about COVID-19 and that the state and the press have had an agreement to truncate, distort or limit information” about it.²⁷[19]

Conclusions

Mankind is undergoing great trials of COVID-19 as it was not prepared for a lockdown which have effects both socially (social distancing, isolation, closure of schools, parks, places of worship etc) and economically (especially for the tourism,

25 *Adevărul despre noul Vaccin ARN*, op cit, p. 3.

26 *Adevărul despre noul Vaccin ARN*, op cit, p. 5.

27 *State of Emergency Report - the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of Romanians - opinion poll*, Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy, May 2020, URL: <https://ires.ro/articol/397/bilan-ul-starii-de-urgen%C8%9B%C4%83-in-romania>, accessed on 15.01.2021.

transportation or oil industries, which have lost tens and hundreds of billions of dollars).

The social disturbances generated by COVID-19 affected social relations, individual resilience reaching a critical level, which could be observed through violent discursive or physical outbursts produced during various public events.

Also, COVID-19 tested the limits of all institutions because some citizens did not comply with the measures imposed by the authorities to limit the spread of the virus. The healthcare system was the most affected because it was not prepared to deal with so many infected people, there were not enough protective masks for everyone in the first phase, there were no tests for rapid identification of the virus and there were/are not enough ventilators in hospitals.

In this context, the fear of the unknown (such as the procedure for making vaccines), made some people, more mentally affected by COVID-19, to adopt the conspiracy theories. According to these theories, the virus is created in the laboratory and released specifically for later sale of vaccines by multinational corporations controlled by powerful people with the intention to implement human control technology using 5G telecommunications antennas, nanochips introduced into the human body through COVID-19 vaccines.

Unfortunately, some voices of Christian congregations have also rejected vehemently and publicly the measures imposed by the authorities to limit the spread of the virus, having significant effect on people as faith plays a key role in individual resilience.

The conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic were also adopted by Romanians, regardless of their social position or degree of education. Moreover, by conveying the opinions of some notorious Orthodoxy clerics, it aims to reach the deepest affections of Romanians, which are more easily to be manipulated by addressing religious feelings. As a result, there are Romanians who refuse to submit to the measures imposed by the authorities and reject the vaccination, even if their lives are endangered.

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