
Romania: fourth wave rips through the country. International aid insufficient

After a brief glimpse of sunshine lasting a few days, dark clouds of suffering caused by the COVID-19 pandemic sweep across Romania. International aid and the restrictions imposed by national authorities in response to the health crisis, killing one Romanian every five minutes, are insufficient. Vaccination and testing rates are declining, with new infections and deaths rising daily. **One free bed.** Only one bed was available yesterday in Romania's ICU wards. That bed is a sign of hope for the patient who must have taken it by now, and for family members awaiting their safe return home. It nevertheless symbolises the failure of the Romanian state and of its healthcare system, because, more often than not, that free bed will result in one more death. *Sadly, very few COVID patients survive weeks in intensive care and leave the hospital alive.* For the majority, intensive care is a prelude to eternal life. There are too many people infected, and they arrive at the hospital late, when they are seriously ill. There is a shortage of medical staff, and they are worn out. However, they are hardworking, as recalled by Msgr **Ioan Robu**, Archbishop Emeritus of Bucharest, admitted for respiratory rehabilitation after recovering from Covid: "I witnessed for myself that our country's hospitals have a precious resource of people with a big heart, offering their medical services continuously, in a spirit of dedication and joy." **International aid to Romania** - medicines, oxygen concentrators, monoclonal antibodies, ventilators and the transfer of patients abroad - offered by Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, Denmark and Hungary, through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, has been timely, but it's just a temporary solution. World Health Organisation delegate Heather Papowitz has recently travelled to Bucharest to offer support to Romanian authorities. Unfortunately, according to experts, Romania was unprepared for the fourth wave of the pandemic. And despite international assistance, the country is far from overcoming the health crisis. *Despite a small decline over the past weekend, there has been a sharp rise in the number of new cases of Covid infection and deaths:* over 6 thousand new cases per day and almost 500 deaths. Romanian newspaper 'Libertatea' calculated that every week, the equivalent of a small village in Romania, around 3 000 people, die. Local authorities in Iași, a city in the north-east of the country, reported that the number of deaths in October was the highest since the First World War. **The fall of the government and the uncertain political landscape** are exacerbating the crisis in the country. In an open letter, NGOs called on Romanian President Klaus Iohannis to de-politicise health protection decisions and appoint experts to manage the health crisis. Romanian authorities have recently extended the partial lockdown, restricting night-time traffic and imposing a mandatory Green Pass for access in certain locations. Following a two-week break imposed by infection rates, only vaccinated teachers could return to classrooms this week, with lessons continuing online in red tier locations. However, this measure is proving ineffective, experts say. In a statement posted on social networks, **Răzvan Cherecheș**, health policy professor at Babeș Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, argues that in-person teaching "can only be resumed with compulsory vaccination" for teaching staff, "weekly testing of staff and pupils, proper ventilation of school premises, the correct use of masks and a two-meter minimum distance during school activities." **With a derailed vaccination campaign** and 45% of the population immunised against the coronavirus, Romania is bound to face soaring numbers of cases and deaths. After a high of 150,000 vaccinations on 27 October, the number of vaccines administered is dropping with each passing day, and new infections will result from the opening of schools. The fourth wave is not over, experts say. On the contrary, "be prepared, because it will start all over again", warns epidemiologist **Octavian Jurma**.

Cristina Grigore from Bucharest