



The deadly fate of Romanian politics 8 min read

By Ionut Chiruta · Posted November 22, 2021 · In COVID-19, Eastern Europe, Opinion, Politics



When the country's fate during COVID-19 depends on the election of a party leader, the people cannot but suffer.

The paltriness of the human condition is rarely more genuinely and simply put than in Greek tragedies. One such example is Euripides' **Medea**, who at one point judiciously ponders, "It's human; we all put self-interest first." In all likelihood, this kind of assertion should not be equated with the deeds of politicians, lest those at the helm of governments during crises. However, this is sadly exactly the case of the former

(currently acting) Prime Minister of Romania, **Florin Catu**. His actions while seeking the chairmanship of the National Liberal Party (**PNL**) dissociated the gravity of the threat posed by COVID-19 from the political interests of his party apparatus. Even in the face of present and incoming adversity, the self-interests of Romanian politicians preceded those of the general population.

At a time when almost all EU countries were **reopening** as a result of successful vaccination campaigns, Romania in October recorded an average of 14,000 **new** infections and hundreds of deaths per day. With hospitals again **overburdened** and with a decrepit health system still hemorrhaging after repeated deadly **fires**, Romania's political elite has been staring at the number of deaths and suffering caused by COVID-19 with a cynicism that defies common sense. Their nihilism is the product of the monetary calculations and internal squabbling resulting from the lucrative financial prospects of the EU-backed Recovery **Fund**. As it turned out, however, the prospect of money often obscures the thinking of some politicians during crises.

Since May, Florin Catu's government has played down anti-COVID measures in the hopes of increasing his political notoriety, and with it, the chances to become the leader of the National Liberal Party (PNL). During the summer, Catu **announced** with great fanfare how successful Romania was during the pandemic. Nothing could be further from the truth.

From the point of view of the PNL, the political theatre of its internal turmoil between Catu and ex-**leader** Ludovic Orban – the two factions between PNL – heavily covered by an ever-unreliable Romanian media, is worthwhile. At the end of the day, all bad press is good press, especially in Romania; and especially when all the skirmishes and cheap theatrics assist the acquisition of more power and even more money for a party and its business cronies. And what better chance than the European Commission's Recovery **Plan**. This scheme granted Romania approximately 80 billion euros to **develop** its aging infrastructure, out of which 31.2 billion comes with almost no strings **attached**, non-refundable.

How convenient is it then for a mainstream party with deep political clientelism? How tempting are the prospects of so many lucrative businesses? As the political stage of Romania bears a resemblance to a Greek tragedy, the apple of discord (i.e. the Recovery Fund) divided the two factions from the PNL (Orban and Catu), as both promised that the public contracts from the Recovery plan would be handed over to the firms of those who supported the winner. Therefore, one ought to lose, as each faction and network have their own financial interests and cannot possibly work together. As the three fates continue to spin the thread of time, it tells the audience that Catu's side **won** in the end, to the detriment of the former leader Ludovic Orban. But then again, at what cost, during the age of COVID-19?

Let us briefly go through all of PNL's endeavors and its lack of such, so we better understand the consequences that made Romania have the EU's **greatest** COVID-19 surge and be one of the two countries from Eastern Europe with the lowest vaccination **rate**.

The delay of judicial reforms

One of the main tasks assumed by the Catu government and its coalition was to reform the ever-problematic judiciary system that was **assaulted** in 2017-2019 by the Social Democratic Party (PSD). After gaining the Justice portfolio, the coalition's junior partner, the Save Romania Union (USR), **assumed** this burdensome task. For months, the Minister of Justice, Stelian Ion (USR), proposed **several** reforms to the judiciary system, namely **dismantling** the Special Section that investigated prosecutors and judges, and naming, through exam, the heads of the prosecution offices (DIICOT and DNA). All of these measures were **endorsed** by the Venice Commission, which had so far criticized the politicization of the judiciary. However, President Klaus Iohannis **disagreed** with the sort of reforms proposed by USR, an anti-system party, which somehow bypassed **his** powers, namely, to name justices and prosecutors for the DIICOT and DNA that are somewhat sympathetic with the political class. But most importantly, these reforms were damaging for the PNL's cronies. Strong and independent judiciary institutions would pose a risk for these clientelist networks, as these democratic institutions would verify how the 31 non-refundable billions would be spent on infrastructure projects. In an ideal world for the PNL cronies, if President Iohannis were to name sympathetic judges and prosecutors as the heads of judiciary institutions, these institutions would not interfere with how public development contracts paid by the Recovery Fund are won and by whom.

In Romania, the government, it seems, does not decide on the implementation of national projects. That is in the hands of the local mayors and their networks of companies that capitalize on public money. Without their support, the leader of a party cannot do much. Since many have questionable relations with businesspeople or are themselves veiled businesspeople, the reforms proposed by USR – when Romania was managing the vaccination campaign quite successfully – were viewed as a threat. Risking the status-quo of these networks who already yearned for the lucrative prospects of the Recovery Plan was something inconceivable. In no time, the focus of the PNL went from focusing on the pandemic towards negotiating the projects for the Recovery Plan with the local barons. The new policy prioritization was not well received by the USR. At this most crucial point, the coalition chose to spend more time **bickering** about the reform packages and less on conducting a successful vaccination campaign. Meanwhile, as the country was being kept immobile by the internal turmoil of a party, the purveyors of conspiracy **theories**, started gaining **ground**.

The rise of conspiracy narratives and the fall of the vaccination rates

With one eye focusing on the closure of the judicial reforms and one eye lustfully directed towards the incoming Recovery Fund, one would argue that the PNL did not have enough time to manage the pandemic and the vaccination campaign. In fact, they did worse, indirectly **promoting** the spread of conspiracy narratives related to the vaccines. The PNL did not publicly oppose the **narratives** promoted by extremist **parties** like the Alliance for the Union of Romania (AUR) or other **public** figures. Instead, as has been the case for thirty years, the political battle in Romania has always been about the control of the judiciary, regardless of how many and how much harm afflicts Romanian society. The pandemic made no difference.

Returning to the present, as the political forces were battling for the control of the judiciary, Facebook feeds (i.e., Romania's main **news** outlet), coupled with the decreasing standards of the Romanian press, generated fertile ground for mainstreaming conspiracy **narratives**, that to this day prevent people from getting vaccinated; or from complying with the anti-COVID measures. Add to this cocktail the **viewpoints** of some **influential** members from the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) who encouraged people **not** to get vaccinated or not to get involved in the process of vaccination, and one has a situation that is likely to implode in the long run. That implosion conveniently **occurred** after the National Council of PNL reunited on September 26 to elect Florin Catu as the new boss of the party, with the blessing of President Iohannis.

Before the Congress, coincidently, the number of new infections was low, even though the healthcare system was beginning to show signs of **overburdening**. In fact, many regional hospitals and healthcare experts **decried** the handling of the pandemic and vaccination program before the PNL Congress. Even so, the PNL went on to organize a 5,000-person National Congress, where independent media **observed** that no safety measures were followed. Like mushrooms after rain, the promoters of conspiracy narratives suddenly began flooding the Facebook feeds with the **questions**: "Why weddings, baptisms, and other religious events cannot take place with more than 50 people, but PNL can organize a National Congress with 5000 people? What do they know that we do not know?"

The cynical nature of the Romanian political class when facing thousands of infections and deaths in October 2021 is worthy of a Greek tragedy. One can only picture PM Catu uttering the lines from Euripides' Medea: "Yes, I can endure guilt, however horrible; The laughter of my enemies I will not endure." How does the audience, that is, the Romanian public, react when they comprehend the gravity of Catu's cynicism and political machinations? Time will tell, and, in the meantime, the deaths will soar.

Featured image: Mosaic depicting theatrical masks of tragedy and comedy by Carole Raddato/Speravir / Wikimedia Commons

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