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Pietro Lombardi
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Romania's Deadly Measles Outbreak Spotlights Widespread Rejection of Vaccines

Plummeting vaccination rates leave poor country at the forefront of an escalating European trend; 'There is a risk in anything you do'

Ioan Nechita Gheorghe, 41 years old, says he now favors vaccination after his 6-year-old son was diagnosed with measles.

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By [Pietro Lombardi](#) | Photos by [Roxi Pop](#) for *The Wall Street Journal*
Sept. 5, 2018 5:30 a.m. ET

BUCHAREST, Romania—Ioan Nechita Gheorghe sat with his 6-year-old son in a hospital in the city of Iasi in northeast Romania this summer as the boy received treatment for measles.

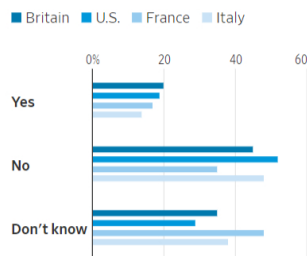
Mr. Gheorghe, 41 years old, hadn't had any of his nine children vaccinated. "We heard that other children became ill or were left paralyzed after being vaccinated."

Romania is fighting a deadly measles outbreak that has seen more than 15,000 people infected with the disease and that has claimed 59 lives since one of Europe's most lethal measles outbreaks in decades started in 2016.

That has thrown a spotlight on plummeting vaccination rates in the poor country, which has emerged as the leading edge of an escalating antivaccine trend that has plagued Europe in recent years.

More than 41,000 people were infected with measles in the first half of this year in the wider European region, compared with roughly 24,000 for all of 2017, according to the World Health Organization. By contrast, the U.S. saw about 100 cases during the same period this year.

Do some vaccines cause autism in healthy children?



Source: Ipsos Mori online survey of 29,133 people conducted Sept. 28 - Oct. 19, 2017; margin of error: +/- 1 percentage point

The hospital where the boy was being treated has seen about 400 cases during the outbreak, putting such a burden on the facility that it has dedicated an entire ward to measles patients.

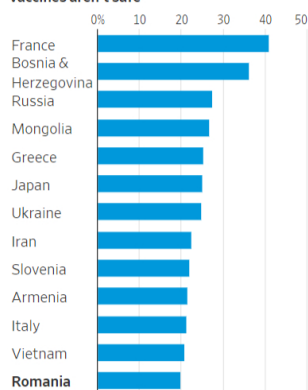
Mistrust of authorities, a vocal antivaccine movement, poverty, irregular supply of vaccines and obstacles to delivering them to Romania's Roma and other marginalized communities has exacerbated disease risks.

"The situation around the country is dramatic," Health Minister Sorina Pintea said.

Skepticism about vaccine safety runs high in the European region, according to a 2016 survey of 67 countries by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Seven of the 10 countries with strongest skepticism about

and tropical medicine. Seven of the 10 countries with strongest skepticism about vaccination safety were in this region.

Percentage of respondents who think vaccines aren't safe



Source: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine survey of 65,819 people conducted Sept.-Dec. 2015

In August, Italy's Senate, where antiestablishment parties have a majority, voted to suspend for a year a requirement that parents provide proof of vaccinations to enroll their children in preschools. This summer, Deputy Premier Matteo Salvini blasted a law the previous government passed that raised the number of mandatory vaccines to 10 from four, calling them "absolutely useless and in many cases dangerous."

In Poland, an antivaccination movement recently gathered enough signatures to force a parliamentary debate on a proposal to make vaccines voluntary.

In Ukraine, a political firestorm in 2008 over allegations that a teenager's death was linked to a measles vaccine pushed the government to destroy millions of vaccines. Vaccination rates plummeted to 42% in 2016 from 97% in

2007. Ukraine has had nearly 30,000 cases of measles this year, including 13 deaths, while polio and diphtheria have returned. The government is now working closely with the United Nations to improve vaccination rates, including by educating parents and medical workers.

In Romania, the antivaccine movement coalesced about a decade ago when the government introduced the HPV vaccine. Local celebrities, religious groups and bloggers pushing a debunked theory that vaccines cause autism egged it on.



Maria Ioan and her children pose for a family portrait in Colonia Bistritei, Buhusi, Romania. The share of 1-year-olds in the country who received the first dose of measles vaccine fell to 86% in 2017, according to World Health Organization figures, among the lowest in Europe.

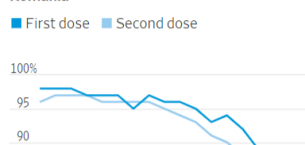
The antivax movement also gained strength from Romanians' mistrust of authorities. Ovidiu Covaciu, coordinator of a pro-vaccine group, points to scandals involving diluted disinfectant sold to hospitals and the authorities' response to a deadly nightclub fire.

In recent years, low stocks of vaccines, which were poorly distributed around the country, also hurt. In particular, it compounded the difficulties of delivering vaccines to some itinerant or closed communities.

"If vaccine is not available once, it's difficult to bring people back, in particular those with difficult access," said Miljana Grbic, the WHO's Romania representative.

The share of 1-year-olds in Romania who received the first dose of measles vaccine fell to 86% in 2017, according to WHO figures, among the lowest in Europe. It was 94% in 2012. Only 75% received the second dose in 2017, the WHO estimates, while in some regions the coverage was just 50%. Health officials recommend 95% coverage to prevent outbreaks.

Estimated measles vaccine coverage in Romania



The government has launched door-to-door information and vaccination campaigns, has lowered the age at which it recommends the first dose and is encouraging parents to not skip the second doses. Community nurses and social workers are reaching out to rural and marginalized communities.

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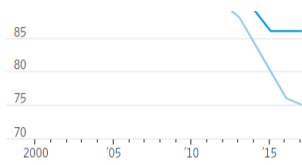
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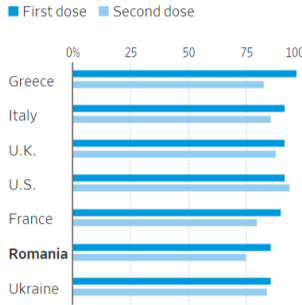
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Source: World Health Organization

Estimated measles vaccine coverage, 2017



Source: World Health Organization

The government is also supporting a bill presented in 2017 that would require counseling with medical professionals for parents who refuse to vaccinate their children. Vaccination isn't currently mandatory in Romania.

That bill, however, is stalled in Parliament. Meanwhile, the government campaigns haven't persuaded Ramona Buzan, a former schoolteacher, to vaccinate her 6-year-old daughter. She doesn't believe measles are deadly and argues that the recent deaths were caused by other health conditions or the victims' poor health.

"There is a risk in anything you do. If you vaccinate, there's a risk. If you don't vaccinate, there's another risk," she said. Ms. Buzan plans to home-school her daughter if vaccinations become mandatory to enroll in school.

A few months ago, after watching an unvaccinated 3-year-old die from measles complications, Mihnea Hurmuzache, the medical director of the hospital in Iasi, told the parents, "You will carry this burden with you for the rest of your life." They decided to vaccinate their other child.

"Parents must understand that when they decide whether to vaccinate their children or not, they have the power of life or death over them," he said.

Mr. Gheorge, whose son was feeling better after a few days of treatment, said he planned to have the rest of his family vaccinated, adding that he would spread the word to his fellow parents.

"We need to help each other," he said. "I will tell them that the boy had measles and that they must vaccinate their children, because it's important."



Mihnea Hurmuzache, the medical director of the Hospital for Infectious Diseases in Iasi, says parents 'have the power of life and death over' their children when deciding whether to vaccinate.



A girl checks a clothesline in Colonia Bistritei, Buhusi, Romania. Some families with small children have rejected vaccination, despite the government's information campaign.

—James Marson in Moscow and Drew Hinshaw in Warsaw contributed to this article.

Write to Pietro Lombardi at Pietro.Lombardi@dowjones.com

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