

The “VIP Vaccination Scandal”

The Facts

On February 19th, Horacio Verbitsky, a journalist close to the government, stated that on February 18th he had contacted the (now former) Minister of Health Ginés González García who facilitated him a dose of the Sputnik V vaccine. This revelation, done on a radio segment where Verbitsky is a regular columnist, led to the disclosure of a clandestine vaccination center run from the offices of the Ministry of Health itself. It was revealed that Minister González García set aside a minimum of 3000 doses of Sputnik V to be offered to a series of government officials, politicians, businessmen, as well as their family and friends, without taking into account the official vaccination schedule which prioritizes only certain, vulnerable segments of the population.

As an immediate reaction to this, President Alberto Fernández demanded the resignation of González García, who was replaced as Minister of Health by his Secretary of Health Access, Carla Vizzotti. President Alberto Fernández characterized the actions of the former minister as “unforgivable” and claimed that he learned about the clandestine vaccinations “through newspapers”. The matter quickly turned judicial, as the prosecutor Eduardo Taiano filed a lawsuit against former Minister González García, which led to police raids in the Ministry of Health building, as well as in the Posadas Hospitals where some of the clandestine vaccinations were carried out.

What began as a case of health policy corruption quickly spread into the political arena, tarnishing the public image of the Fernández administration, which had emphasized equality as one of the main values on which the government would rest. Even after Ginés González left his position and was replaced, public response to these events was generally negative.

What public opinion says:

- According to the latest surveys, 33.1% of respondents believe that there is no vaccination plan and that the government is currently improvising.
- 27.8% of respondents believe that there is an undersupply of vaccines and that the government is using them for people close to the government.
- 55.8% of respondents disagree that Carla Vizzotti is a good replacement as Minister of Health.
- This is in part because of the suspicions surrounding her in relation to the clandestine vaccinations; 43.8% of respondents believe she was aware of it, while 40% believe she was not aware.
- Of this latter 40%, the majority believe that this indicates she is incapable of leading the Ministry of Health.
- Regarding the political scandal that detonated after the Verbitsky revelations, 71% of respondents believe every official who received the Sputnik V vaccine through clandestine means should resign their position.
- 57.9% of respondents believe Verbitsky’s comments were part of an operation to destabilize either the former Minister of Health or the President himself, while only 18.3% believe the journalist revealed this information out of ignorance that it was illegal.
- It should be noted that there is a correlation between who respondents voted on the 2019 election and these last survey results, with most respondents who voted for Mauricio Macri believing it was a political strategy to destabilize Alberto Fernández, while most respondents who voted for Alberto Fernández believing it was a honest mistake by Verbitsky.

The government's response

President Alberto Fernández's initial comments about how the actions carried out by the former Minister of Health were unforgivable would soon become contradictory. During his meeting with Mexican President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Alberto Fernández said the opposition was "clowning around" by trying to file lawsuits against those who administered the vaccines, as there is no article in the Penal Code detailing that as a crime. Contradictions would only worsen after Santiago Cafiero, Chief of Staff, would categorize the "VIP Vaccinations" controversy as an invention by journalists, and denied there existing a different list of vaccinated individuals other than the one released by the government. The new Minister of Health, Carla Vizzotti, first denied the existence of a VIP Vaccination campaign, then declared it was an isolated incident and that she was unaware of its existence, which was met with skepticism by the general public.

Adding the suspicions surrounding Carla Vizzotti and the true intentions behind Horacio Verbitsky's comments to this feedback loop of poor and contradictory communication, the government strategy was an almost purely defensive one.

Media coverage

Most newspapers in the country had the VIP Vaccination as their main story from February 20th up until today. Newspapers which are aligned with the government, however, would attempt to minimize the involvement of the President and shed a positive light on the subsequent actions he took, namely replacing the Minister of Health. Similarly, online news sources have been placing the news story and its developments as highlighted since February 19th, in a similar fashion to TV news stations, including those ideologically closer to the government.

Conclusions

The current state of the government is one of deterioration. This scandal transcended the health sphere where it began and turned into a confidence crisis for the Fernández administration, even among its voter base. Within the governing coalition, it resulted in internal divisions regarding the appropriate way to deal with this issue. This will, in turn, lead to consequences in the President's decision making capabilities and margins of action.

The press, in particular the opposition press, has found in this controversy an ideal subject with which to attack the government, while also using their agenda setting power to its fullest extent.

The government has shown a poor reaction capability since the crisis started. The episode dealt an impactful blow to its credibility and officials took too much time to properly react. The official response was late and lacking, its communication strategy was self-contradicting, and since the start of this controversy, the agenda has been set almost exclusively by the opposition press. Instead of issuing an official apology and conduct a formal investigation, it antagonized journalists and judges.

This scandal is evidence of the failure of the ruling coalition's self-perception as a fighter against inequality. Public demonstrations are to be expected, where people will express their unhappiness with the government, and potentially with the rest of the political elite.