



ROMANIAN ARMY IN SUPPORT OF LOCAL AND CENTRAL AUTHORITIES FOR MANAGING THE HEALTH CRISIS CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The contemporary society is facing, during this period, a phenomenon unprecedented in the last hundred years (since the Spanish flu from 1918-1921), extremely complex, difficult to manage and with global expansion – the current pandemic of atypical pneumonia. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, in which human mobility is constantly growing, Romania has in its turn become overwhelmed by this plague. The identified dangers, corroborated with the virulence and high contagiousness of the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, imposed, at the level of the Romanian state, an inter-institutional and interdepartmental approach to the management of the problem generated by this pandemic. The Romanian Army as a component part of the National Emergency Management System was called upon to support the management of the special emergency situation generated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Coronavirus; pandemic; sanitary crisis control measures; Romanian army.

The appearance and evolution of the health crisis generated by the infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus in Romania

Coronaviruses (CoVs) are viruses belonging to the order Nidovirales, the family Coronaviridae, the subfamily Orthocoronavirinae, which infect humans and a wide variety of animals (birds and mammals). The disease is characterized by predominantly respiratory symptoms: fever, dry cough, dyspnea of varying severity and may progress to bilateral interstitial pneumonia, respiratory failure or acute respiratory distress (ARDS) which is the leading cause of death.

In December 2019, the first people infected with the SARS-CoV-2 virus appeared in Wuhan, Wuhan Province, China, from where it spread rapidly in most Chinese provinces and most countries in the world, causing a pandemic.

The appearance of this virus in Romania was due to the transit of people, initially only cases of import being confirmed. The official data showed that the main source of contamination for Romania was the entry into the country of Romanian citizens who came from Italy, or who had contact with a person from this country.

On February 26, 2020, the Romanian state officials announced the first confirmed case of coronavirus in Romania. It was a 20-year-old man from Gorj County, who had come in contact with an

Italian citizen diagnosed with this disease and who had visited Romania between February 18-22. Two months later since the onset of new coronavirus infections, the number of confirmed cases had exceeded 10,000.

The first death was reported on March 22, 2020, almost a month after the first case was detected. It was a 67-year-old man from Craiova, confirmed with COVID-19 on March 18. Two more deaths were confirmed on the same day.

From the beginning of the crisis until now, the epidemiological situation in Romania has registered an ascending evolution, and on October 26, 2020 the number of people infected with the new coronavirus COVID 19 reached 212,492, of which 151,811 patients cured, and 3% (6,470) of the infected persons died.

The high infection rate, recorded in recent months, which in many localities has exceeded the threshold of 3 ‰ worries the Romanian authorities, because there is an increased risk of infection for vulnerable people (with risk factors for severe forms of COVID-19, such as the elderly) and for health workers, especially in primary medicine, requiring targeted public health action.

Measures taken at the level of the Romanian state for the management of the health crisis generated by the COVID-19 infection

The appearance of the new coronavirus in China and its extremely rapid spread globally, determined the Romanian state officials to take

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measures in all socio-economic fields, with gradual implementation in order to limit the contamination of the population with this virus.

Analyzed from the perspective of the evolution of the health crisis situation, generated by the infection with the new Coronavirus in Romania, the measures ordered by the Romanian state authorities can be framed in three distinct stages, namely:

a) Stage I – first emergency measures, corresponding to the appearance of the first cases of infection and the onset of the health crisis;

b) Stage II – measures ordered in the state of emergency - corresponding to the alarming increase of cases of infection and exacerbation of the health crisis;

c) Stage III – measures ordered in the state of alert-corresponding to a decrease in cases of infection with the new Coronavirus and control of the health crisis.

Corresponding to the first stage, on January 22, 2020, the Romanian government announced several preventive measures, including the designation of six hospitals where patients would be hospitalized and would be screened for the new coronavirus 2019-nCoV. It was also ordered to install thermal scanners in all airports, to detect passengers whose body temperature exceeds 38°C. An inter-ministerial committee was set up to monitor and manage potential new coronavirus infections, consisting of specialists, under the coordination of the Ministers of Health, Foreign Affairs, Home Affairs and Transport, Infrastructure and Communications.

After confirming the first case of SARS-CoV-2 infection, on February 26, 2020, the Minister of Health issued the Order for the establishment of the quarantine measure for persons in an international public health emergency caused by COVID-19 infection and the establishment of measures to prevent and limit the effects of the epidemic.

The evolution, on an ascending trend of the health crisis in Romania, forced the Romanian state authorities to order the prohibition, starting with March 8, 2020, of public or private events, in open or closed spaces, with a number of participants greater than 100 people. In the set of preventive measures, to limit the spread of infection of the population with the new Coronavirus, the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations

decided to suspend the educational process in schools in preschool, middle school, high school, post-secondary and vocational education, between March 11-22 2020, with the possibility of extending this measure depending on the situation. At the same time, road passenger transport was suspended for all journeys to and from Italy (from 10 March) and rail transport to and from Italy (from 12 March). For food units and public and private providers of passenger transport, the obligation to frequently disinfect the surfaces, to avoid crowding in commercial spaces, and to frequently disinfect the passenger compartment in the means of transport was established. For staff in public and private institutions, where possible, the possibility was created to carry out their duties at home.

Despite all these preventive measures, it was not possible to control the COVID-19 epidemic, thus, from the beginning of the health crisis until March 15, 2020, there was a massive increase in the number of people infected with SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in Romania which determined the establishment of a new set of measures corresponding to the second stage. In this context, the President of Romania, Mr. Klaus Werner Iohannis, signed on March 16, 2020, the decree on the establishment of the state of emergency on the territory of Romania for 30 days, and on April 14, 2020 was signed the decree to extend the state emergency for another 30 days.

With the declaration of the state of emergency, the measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and to achieve the management of the consequences were tightened and targeted all areas of socio-economic life (public order, economic, health, labor and social protection, justice, foreign affairs, other measures).

For the integrated coordination of medical and civil protection response measures to the emergency situation generated by COVID-19, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was designated, through the Department for Emergency Situations, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and other institutions involved in accordance with the provisions of the Government Decision no. 557/2016 regarding the management of risk types.

Within the measures aimed at the public order, Decree no. 195 of March 16, 2020, issued by the President of Romania, Mr. Klaus-Werner Iohannis Bucharest, provided that "the Ministry of National Defence supports, upon request, the



Ministry of Internal Affairs in order to ensure security and protection of certain objectives/ areas, the transportation of troops, materiel and equipment in order to accomplish specific missions, epidemiological triage, medical assistance and other missions according to the evolution of the situation". The same normative act mentioned the fact that, "Institutions within the National System of Public Order and National Security supplements, when needed, the force and equipment for intervention, included in plans, according to the evolution of the situation".

The implementation of the measures put in place during the state of emergency has had the consequence of keeping the epidemic under control and decreasing the number of cases of COVID-19 disease. As a result of this fact, the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis promulgated, on Friday, May 15, 2020, Law no. 55 of May 15, 2020 on some measures to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The state of alert was declared as a necessity for the continued provision of adequate protection against SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus disease, but also the creation at the same time of the framework premises for the staged return, without major syncope, to the situation of normality, including by relaxing the measures taken in the context of the establishment and extension by the President of Romania of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory¹.

The measures comprised in Law no. 55 of May 15, 2020, corresponding to the *third stage*, were applied through Romanian Government Decisions, at the proposal of the respective ministries or CNSSU (National Committee for Special Emergency Situations)². They were related to the relaxation of interdictions instituted during the state of emergency by resuming socio-economic activities in conditions close to normality.

Relaxation failed to bring an improvement of the sanitary situation in the country and a series of factors favouring crowds of people, such as the re-opening of hotels and restaurants, as well as the local elections in September 2020, led to an accentuation of the sanitary crisis, taking the country into the second wave of infection.

The restrictive measures are bound to be kept and reinforced, adapted to the epidemiological context of the country and the region, in order to

preserve the citizens' state of health at an adequate level as well as to keep the sanitary crisis under control.

In this context, the Romanian Army is going to have to remain at a high level of alert which might provide it an adequate and timely reaction, but at the same time it is going to need to adapt and increase its response capabilities to the realities in the field.

The role and importance of the Romanian Army structures in managing the COVID-19 crisis

The outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic and the establishment of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory, had effects regarding some of the missions of the Romanian army. The support of the central and local public authorities in emergency situations became, during this period, the center of gravity of the Romanian Army missions. However, the security aspects were not neglected, in this way, the Romanian Army remained permanently ready to defend itself against any threat and to prevent the transformation of the current health crisis into a security crisis.

An analysis of the missions executed by the Romanian Army during the health crisis generated by the infection with the new Coronavirus reveals the fact that they targeted the following fields: public order, sanitation, humanitarian assistance.

It is good to know that some of these missions, especially the one of ensuring public order, are not specific to the army, they represent new challenges for the Romanian military. Having a pronounced novelty character, the accomplishment of the missions at tactical level also generated certain dysfunctions. These refer especially to the interoperability of the media from the endowment of the Romanian army with those used by police and gendarmes. The joint effort of the staff of the two ministries meant that all the identified disruptions were resolved in a timely manner, so that as of March 25, 2020, about 10,000 soldiers along with hundreds of technical means were engaged in public order missions.

One of the missions performed by the Romanian Army soldiers, in the field of public order, was to patrol the streets of the Capital and all the major urban agglomerations in the country. The presence of the military in the public order patrols was very



well received by the citizens, creating a sense of security among them and thus confirming the statistics on the trust of Romanians in institutions, which ranks the Romanian army in first place.

Another mission in the field of public order, fulfilled by the Romanian army, was to ensure the flow of traffic at the state border crossing points in the western, southern and eastern areas of the country. The main border points where the military acted are: Siret (Suceava), Sculeni (Iași), Albița (Vaslui), Vama Veche and Ostrov (Constanța), Giurgiu (Giurgiu), Bechet and Calafat (Dolj), Iron Gates 1 (Mehedinti), Stamora Moravița, Jimbolia and Cenad (Timiș), Nădlac 1, Nădlac 2 and Vărșand (Arad), Petea and Halmeu (Satu Mare).

The taking over and ensuring the guarding by the Romanian Army soldiers of a number of 84 objectives, under the responsibility of the Romanian Gendarmerie, located in Bucharest and in other 28 counties, represents the task that corresponds most with the basic training of the military. About this mission it can be said that it has the longest period of development, being maintained both during the state of emergency and during the state of alert.

The involvement, in the sanitary field, of the Romanian army, for the management of the sanitary crisis generated by the infection with the new Coronavirus must be analyzed on several levels.

First of all, we must mention that the military hospitals subordinated to the Ministry of National Defence have been included in the national health network for the treatment of patients infected with SARS CoV-2. Also, in order to supplement the hospital care capacities, the Romanian army installed three military campaign hospitals in the localities of Bucharest, Constanța and Timișoara.

An important aspect that should not be neglected is the fact that all the infrastructure necessary for the installation of field hospitals was made by the military. In this sense, the significant contribution of the engineers from the 96th Engineer Battalion "Bucharest Fortress" and the 136th Engineer Battalion "Apulum" can be noticed. Soldiers with vast national and international experience arranged in record time the platforms on which the hospital modules were to be installed. At the same time, the engineers created the communication routes inside the hospitals, necessary to ensure the sanitary flow, but also the drainage and rainwater collection works.

Another aspect of the support of the Romanian state authorities, offered by the military, in the sanitary field, refers to the takeover, during the state of emergency, of the management of several county emergency hospitals by military doctors. The appointment of military doctors to lead hospital units was a last resort for managing the health crisis in localities severely affected by SARS CoV-2 infection. At the same time, the soldiers from the CBRN Defense structures (E.g.: 202 CBRN Defense Battalion (Disaster Intervention) "General Gheorghe Teleman"), carried out missions for decontamination and disinfection of roads in localities severely affected by the epidemic.

In the same context, the aircraft belonging to the Romanian Air Force, configured for medical evacuation missions, carried out, at the request of the Department for Emergency Situations, several emergency humanitarian missions for the transfer of patients in serious condition, positively confirmed SARS-CoV-2, in hospitals specifically designed to treat COVID-19 infection.

The mention, even if it simply a review of the main missions fulfilled by the Romanian army soldiers in this difficult period, brings to the fore a fundamental institution of the Romanian state, in the service of the people, always ready to act for the preservation of values and national interests.

Conclusions

The Romanian Army is the main institution through which the instrument of military power of the Romanian state is operationalized. However, beyond the basic function of national and collective defence within the North Atlantic Alliance, the Romanian army also fulfills support functions, in case of various civil crises and emergencies.

The intervention of the Romanian Army's military in the process of managing the health crisis involved action in unique, complex and demanding situations, but the high adaptability and high professionalism of the military, made all missions entrusted meet the required standards.

Without diminishing the importance of other forces and branches, the intervention of the army in the management of the health crisis highlighted the significant contribution of certain branches and military specialties, which must be taken into account by military decision makers so as to be modernized and developed them.



Here I refer primarily to the branch of medical service, which through military doctors, doctors with rich operational experience, managed to implement effective measures to control outbreaks of COVID-19 initially gone out of control (E.g.: Suceava County Emergency Hospital).

Secondly, the soldiers from the CBRN Defence weapon have demonstrated their value and efficiency in the disinfection actions of the localities severely affected by the SARS CoV infection. Also, the specialists from the Scientific Research Center for CBRN Defense and Ecology made the first Romanian production isolate, which is currently widely used in health interventions.

The health crisis that Romania is facing these days has generated, in certain situations and in a segment of the population (elderly people, without relatives or living in isolated areas) also a humanitarian crisis. In this situation, the soldiers from the civil-military cooperation structures highlighted not only their high professionalism, but especially their high human virtues, among which we can list: empathy, the spirit of self-help, compassion, etc.

Last but not least, military engineers played an important role in this crisis. As General Constantin N. Hârjeu mentioned as "useful for peace and indispensable in war", the soldiers belonging to the engineer branch proved their usefulness, but

especially the professionalism and dedication with which they acted to build the infrastructure necessary to install three field military hospitals.

NOTES:

1 *Legea nr. 55 din 15 mai 2020 privind unele măsuri pentru prevenirea și combaterea efectelor pandemiei de COVID-19*, <https://www.presidency.ro/presedinte/decrete-si-acte-oficiale/>, accessed 22.10.2020.

2 *Ibidem*.

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*** *Decretul nr. 195, din 16 martie 2020*.

*** *Decretul nr. 240, din 14 aprilie 2020*.

*** *Ordonanța de urgență nr. 21, din 15 aprilie 2004 (actualizat)*.

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