

# Measures taken by Romania to protect the elderly during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract:

*This paper was written as an synthesis of how Romania has handled its elder population during the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures taken by the authorities can be classified as measures of preventing the spread and measures of eradicating the virus. The measures of preventing the spread of the virus have been taken during the state of emergency and the state of alert, from 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 until today. The measures of eradicating the coronavirus have started to be taken as soon as the vaccines have entered the country. This paper extracts the provisions regarding the elderly from the normative documents emitted by the romanian authorites and compiles them in order to see their evolution, how they were adapted to the elderlies and what modifications occured after they were applied and their effectiveness was analyzed.*

**Key words:** elderly, measures, emergency, alert, vaccination.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic started in Wuhan, China, in a seafood and poultry market in December 2019. The virus began to spread quickly in every country. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020, The World Health Organisation declared it a „public health emergency of national concern”.<sup>1</sup>

By the 26<sup>th</sup> of February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 infection is confirmed in Romania. An italian citizen that entered Romania came in contact with several people and most likely was infected before departing from Italy.<sup>2</sup>

The World Health Organisation also stated that COVID-19 is often more severe in people who are older than 60 years or who have health conditions like lung or heart disease, diabetes or conditions that affect their immune system.<sup>3</sup>

In Romania, the population of 60 years old and overrepresented 18.5% in 2019. From a total of 19.4 million people, the elderlies count aproximately 3.6 million people.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Derrick Bryson Taylor, A Timeline of the Coronavirus Pandemic, March 17, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/article/coronavirus-timeline.html>;

<sup>2</sup> George Costita, Primul caz de coronavirus în România, February 26 2020, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/primul-caz-de-coronavirus-in-romania-1266806>;

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organisation, High risk groups as defined by the World Health Organisation, <https://www.who.int/westernpacific/emergencies/covid-19/information/high-risk-groups>, March 25 2020;

<sup>4</sup> Dan Străuț, Popul Vârstelor Populația României, tot mai redusă și mai îmbătrânită, a scăzut la 19,4 milioane, August 29 2019, <https://www.revista-patronator.ro/topul-varstelor-populatia-romaniei-este-tot-mai-redu-si-mai-imbattranita-totalul-a-scazut-la-194-milioane>

## 1. The state of emergency

### 1.1 The presidential Decree number 195/2020 regarding the institution of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory

Following the spread of the Covid-19 virus in more than 150 countries, 160.000 infected people and over 5.800 dead, on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Romania entered in a state of emergency.

This was done by the Presidential decree number 195/2020<sup>5</sup> regarding the institution of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory. According to the Romanian Constitution, the president can issue a presidential decree for entering the state of emergency.

This was the first step in a series of measures designed to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. The state of emergency allowed the authorities to elaborate and take swift action to counter the spread of the coronavirus. From a legal standpoint, the state of emergency has restrained several rights such as the free circulation, the right to privacy, family and private life, the inviolability of the home, the right to learning, the liberty of meetings, private property and economical freedom.<sup>6</sup>

From a measure standpoint, the presidential decree has 2 separate annexes. The first one contains a set of measures regarding the functioning of the institutions and economy, with immediate applicability. Some of these measures reorganize the institutions in order to respond better to the pandemic crisis. Others suspend certain activities that could cause people to gather in certain places such as schools, the issuance of documents by public authorities and offer the possibility to be realized online. Regarding the economy and workforce, the decree adopted some measures that protect the employees and institute the possibility to work from home.<sup>7</sup>

The second annex contains measures that are applied gradually, and they regard isolation and quarantine of people coming from risk zones, limiting circulation, temporarily closing public places such as restaurants, hotels, clubs, adding COVID-19 patients to the list of emergency cases. This decree marks the beginning of the measures taken by Romania to prevent the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. So far, there are no differentiations between age categories and the provisions of the decree apply in the same way for everyone.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.2 Military Ordinances

Following the Presidential Decree number 195/2020 regarding the institution of the state of emergency on the Romanian territory, a total of 12 military ordinances were issued throughout the state of emergency. People could go outside of their homes carrying a declaration with a set of limited reasons for their departure. The state of emergency ended May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

Some of these ordinances contain provisions that differentiate the elderlies as a vulnerable category of people over 65 years old which require additional measures of protection.

The Military Ordinance no. 2/March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2020, stated that the authorities have the obligation to identify and monitor the evidence of people over 65 years old which have no people to

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<sup>5</sup> Decret nr. 195 din 16 martie 2020 privind instituirea stării de urgență pe teritoriul României  
<http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/223831>

<sup>6</sup> Article 93 from the Constitution of Romania, 2003: The President of Romania can institute, according to the law, the state of siege or emergency across the whole country or in some administrative areas and solicitate the Parliament the acceptance of this measure in a term of maximum 5 days.

<sup>7</sup> Anexa 1 din Decretul nr. 195 din 16 martie 2020 privind instituirea stării de urgență pe teritoriul României  
<http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/223831>

<sup>8</sup> Anexa 2 din Decretul nr. 195 din 16 martie 2020 privind instituirea stării de urgență pe teritoriul României  
<http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/223831>

support them and to ensure they are helped with their outdoor daily activities that could expose them to the coronavirus. The evidence of the elderly people who do not have a support in their daily activities are updated and reported weekly to the regional centers of coordination and leading of the intervention. The committees for emergency situations identify ways to help and support this category of elderly people.<sup>9</sup>

The Military Ordinance no. 4/29<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 states that people over 65 years old are allowed to travel outside their home between 11:00 and 13:00. This measure was designed to allow the elderly to buy their groceries and engage in other outdoor activities at a time of day which did not overlap with the presence of the working people. This rule also has some exceptions. The elderly can circulate outside of the 11:00 – 13:00 interval for medical reasons, such as cancer treatment, dialysis, using their own or specialized means of transportation. Another exception is for taking the pets for a walk in the proximity of the home during the 20:00 – 21:00 interval.

To help the elderly even more, this military ordinance states that economic operators must organize their working schedule in a way that ensures and facilitates the access of people over 65 years old, limiting, on the other hand, the access of people below this age in the stores, in the 11:00 – 13:00 interval.<sup>10</sup>

Even though many sectors of the economy and administration were suspended during the state of emergency, the military ordinances expressly forbid the stopping or suspending of the activities of social services such as care centers for the elderly. Also, the relatives of those people have the option to ask that they are transferred at home if the living conditions are fit for them. This measure was designed to assure continuity to the social services that provide care to the elderly and give the people, that worry they might get infected, the option to place them in a more isolated environment, such as the residence of their relatives.<sup>11</sup>

After these measures were taken, they were revised and the Military Ordinance no. 10/27<sup>th</sup> of April 2020 changed the 11:00 – 13:00 interval for leaving the home. Without regard to any interval, the elderly could travel for medical, professional reasons, for agricultural activities and selling agricultural food products. The new intervals were 07:00 – 11:00 and 19:00 – 22:00 and specified a new set of reasons: shopping for basic goods, taking care of other people or leaving home for physical exercises and taking the pets for a walk.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3 Projects regarding the elderly

In April 2020, during the state of emergency, a project was elaborated by the director of the „Matei Balș” Institute of Infectious Diseases, Prof. Adrian Streinu-Cercel that was essentially a strategy to fight the spreading of COVID-19. This project was meant to isolate people, especially the elderly, for a period of 3 months in order to prevent them from getting infected with the coronavirus. The categories of age were more diversified in this project rather than the laws adopted until that moment, which differentiated people below and above 65 years old. The population was split into four risk categories: people over 65 years old, between 40 and 65 years old, below 40 years old and those suffering from chronic diseases.

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<sup>9</sup> ORDONANȚĂ MILITARĂ nr. 2 din 21 martie 2020 privind măsuri de prevenire a răspândirii COVID-19, Art. 8, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224284>;

<sup>10</sup> ORDONANȚĂ MILITARĂ nr. 4 din 29 martie 2020 privind măsuri de prevenire a răspândirii COVID-19, Art. 1, 2, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224467>;

<sup>11</sup> ORDONANȚĂ MILITARĂ nr. 8 din 9 aprilie 2020 privind măsuri de prevenire a răspândirii COVID-19, Art. 9, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224762>

<sup>12</sup> ORDONANȚĂ MILITARĂ nr. 10 din 27 aprilie 2020 privind măsuri de prevenire a răspândirii COVID-19, Art. 1, 2, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/225047>

In order to limit new cases of COVID-19, the working schedules will have to be separated according to age groups, the way to workplaces and public transports were intended to be disinfected and in the rest of the time people will have to stay isolated.

The immediate measures intended were separated per age category. People over 65 years old were intended to be isolated at home or relocated somewhere else, while helped and support by their relatives and authorities, monitored by the police and other local authorities. People between 40 and 65 years old that worked from the office and not from home had to be supported with the transportation and decontamination of those means of transportation. They should start the working schedule at 7:30 AM. People below 40 years of age should begin working at 9:30 AM.

Along with this set of measures, rapid testing was intended to be made in highly populated areas and to the people that entered the country. Also, the Government would have to discount the citizens costs for water, electricity, transportation, food and sanitation products.

The period of isolation would have to be around 8-10 weeks and was intended to stop the pandemic and prevent people from getting sick. This project never took off, meeting heavy public backlash. It was criticised for being too restrictive and some of the measures were almost impossible to be put in practice. The efforts for implementing this were too large and after the isolation period, the virus could still spread from outside the country, like it happened in the first place. Regarding the older people, it was considered that the isolation was too long and not beneficial.<sup>13</sup>

Other programmes were proposed and successfully implemented by the authorities. Law no. 146/2020 stated that free protection masks should be offered to people with pension up to 1.000 RON. The number of masks is 30 per month and the authorities had the obligation to make lists with those persons and the Ministry of Health is the one responsible to offer the masks to the people.<sup>14</sup>

Local institutions, such as the Bucharest Center for Seniors have offered and packages of food and sanitation products to elderly people with low income, that live in Bucharest.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. The alert state

On May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Government issued the emergency ordinance no. 68/2020 which states that the National Committee for Emergency Situations has the authority to declare the state of alert at national or local level.

Following the state of emergency, Romania entered the state of alert on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020. According to Decision no. 394/May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the state of alert can be instituted for 30 days, and prolonged after, for 30 days more.<sup>16</sup>

During the state of alert, the measures of protection against the pandemic are established by the Decisions of the National Committee for Emergency Situations. Starting from May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, people could go outside without declarations unlike in the previous state of emergency.

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<sup>13</sup> Programul "VACANȚA MARE" de prevenire a îmbolnăvirilor cu SARS-CoV-2/COVID 19, 20.04.2020, <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/planul-lui-streinu-cercel-pentru-perioada-de-dupa-starea-de-urgenta-batranii-sa-fie-izolati-inca-3-luni-de-zile-document-19085159>

<sup>14</sup> LEGE nr. 146 din 23 iulie 2020 privind acordarea de măști pentru protecția cetățenilor români de virusul COVID-19, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/228357>

<sup>15</sup> „Coșul solidarității”, 30.04.2020, <http://cs-mb.ro/cosul-solidaritatii>

<sup>16</sup> ORDONANȚĂ DE URGENȚĂ nr. 68 din 14 mai 2020 pentru modificarea și completarea unor acte normative cu incidență în domeniul managementului situațiilor de urgență și al protecției civile, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/225585>

However, leaving the hometown required a declaration with a limited number of reasons. A measure that persisted from the state of emergency is the ensured continuity of the activity of the elderly care centers with requirements of isolation for the personnel.<sup>17</sup>

Starting from the fall of 2020, the Decisions of the National Committee for Emergency Situations, circulation was forbidden between 23:00 to 05:00 and later changed between 22:00 to 05:00. People could travel during that interval with a declaration that contains a set of limited exceptions such as going to work, urgent medical assistance, purchase of drugs, according assistance to children, elderlies or sick people.<sup>18</sup>

Another measure established in this regard was the continuous weekly testing of the personnel of the elderlies caring centers.<sup>19</sup>

So far, the measures that have been adopted were designed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus, without means to stop the pandemic. There have been numerous measures meant to protect the elderlies, the authorities have set them apart, as a vulnerable category. Starting from the beginning of 2021, vaccine lots have arrived to Romania. From then on, the measures of prevention have been doubled with measures of eradicating the virus with the help of vaccines.

### **3. The COVID-19 vaccination strategy**

On November 27 th 2020, the Government, together with the involved institutions has adopted the National Vaccination Strategy. This strategy establishes the vision, principles and how to administer the COVID-19 vaccines in Romania. It is based on the analysis of the spread of the virus and the severe and death cases both at national and european levels. Romania has taken the obligation to ensure the access to vaccination in safe and effective conditions.

In Romania, the vaccination will be implemented in accordance to the mechanism established by the European Commission, according to the existing laws and medical protocols. The vaccination will be free and voluntarily, taking the vulnerable groups, such as the elderlies, into consideration.

One of the key elements of the romanian vaccination strategy are the stages of vaccination. There are 3 separate stages, each containing certain categories of people. This classification was based on several factors: ethics and social equity, epidemiological criteria (growth of the number of cases in a certain region, rates of infection), medical criteria (risks of infection, transmission, severe evolution and death), essential activities that assure the functioning of critical infrastructure.

The first stage of vaccination included medical personnel and auxiliaries, such as nurses, paramedics, medical students. The reasons were that these categories are the most susceptible to infection, because they encounter and treat patients and they are the first that need to become immune.

The second stage includes several categories such as people over 65 years, people with chronic illnesses, regardless of age, workers in domains that are essential for the functioning of the

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<sup>17</sup> HOTĂRÂRE nr. 24 din 14 mai 2020 privind aprobarea instituirii stării de alertă la nivel național și a măsurilor de prevenire și control al infecțiilor, în contextul situației epidemiologice generate de virusul SARS-CoV-2, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/225602>

<sup>18</sup> HOTĂRÂRE nr. 52 din 05.11.2020 privind stabilirea unor măsuri suplimentare necesar a fi aplicate pentru prevenirea și combaterea efectelor pandemiei de COVID-19, <https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/hotarare-nr-52-din-05-11-2020-a-cnsu>

<sup>19</sup> Anexa la HCNSU nr. 8 din 2021 privind Măsuri de prevenire și control a infecțiilor propuse a se aplica pe durata stării de alertă, <https://stirioficiale.ro/hotarari/hotarare-nr-8-din-10-02-2021-a-cnsu>

state, economy, personnel of the religious cults. This category was designed to include people that have a higher risk of getting infected or having a severe form of the disease.

The third stage includes the rest of the population, which does not fulfil the conditions for one of the two first stages.

By dividing the population through these 3 stages, Romania has proven it is fully aware of the vulnerability of people over 65 years and is willing to protect them with priority.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

With the efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic ongoing, Romania is handling the situation of people over 65 with care. Although, some objections can be made. Even though the World Health Organisation has classified people over 60 as a vulnerable category, in Romania, special measures were taken for people over 65 years old. These measures were taken during the state of emergency, the ongoing state of alert and the vaccination strategy. In Romania, the retirement ages are 63 for women and 65 for men. Most likely, this was the reason why the measures of restriction were taken for the people over 65 and not just 60 years old.

By May 9th, 2021, the following numbers of total cases of COVID-19 were registered in Romania: 1.066.111 people were confirmed, 1.013.066 people were healed, 28.966 deceased. There have been 2.366.510 (12.19% of the total population) people that have been vaccinated with both doses, 5.995.792 administered doses in total and 1.262.772 were administered a single dose.

The number of infections that occurred in people over 60 is 309.760, 29% of the total number of cases.<sup>21</sup> This shows that, even though a significant number of elderlies were infected, the situation did not get out of control. Still, the percent of deaths is 2.7, while the global percent is 2.<sup>22</sup> During the pandemic, Romania had a more cautious attitude, rather than a proactive one. The state could have done more testing to identify and isolate infected people, could have communicate the benefits and strategy of vaccination in a better way.

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<sup>20</sup> STRATEGIE din 27 noiembrie 2020 de vaccinare împotriva COVID-19 în România, <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/234095>

<sup>21</sup> Official data for the number of COVID-19 cases, <https://datelazi.ro/>

<sup>22</sup> Mortality Analyses, Coronavirus Resource Center, Johns Hopkins University & Medicine <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>

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