

# Doctors or soldiers? Romanian healthcare professionals on the front line

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**Dispatched to the “front line” in the battle against the coronavirus pandemic without personal protective equipment, Romanian healthcare professionals have paid dearly for such inadequacy: Romania has one of the highest rates of infection among medical staff across Europe. The state and hospitals alike had an obligation to provide staff with the means to protect themselves. But although many of Romania’s doctors and nurses are outraged at having been so fundamentally exposed, few of them dare to lodge a complaint.**

During a pandemic, what is the very worst that could happen to a healthcare system? Answer: the entire medical and nursing staff become infected and are no longer able to heal the rest of the ailing population. When the coronavirus pandemic cut a swathe through Europe, Romania experienced that scenario first-hand, especially in Suceava County in the north-east of the country. The nightmare situation suddenly became more real due to the chronic shortage of medical staff: Romanian doctors and nurses had been leaving the country in their thousands since Romania’s accession to the European Union in 2007 to treat patients in Italian, French, German or British hospitals, which provide better conditions than their own healthcare system.

To gain a better grasp of the current situation, it is important to recall the initial peak in coronavirus infections, in spring 2020. According to an analysis conducted by the Solidaritatea Sanitară (Health Solidarity) trade union federation on 7 April 2020, of the 4 417 Covid-19 cases confirmed nationally, 1 087 related to healthcare workers. According to their calculations based on the growth in cases over a two-week period, this accounted for a 0.54 per cent infection rate among medical staff, with a twenty-fold higher infection rate than in other sectors of society. At that rate – applying the mathematical model that calculates the maximum risk faced if no action is taken – the federation warned that all healthcare staff in Romania could potentially become infected in just 27 days.

Spring and summer have been and gone, and the situation has now stabilised, but Romania still has one of Europe’s highest infection rates among its medical staff, not to mention the ensuing life-threatening consequences. “One of our colleagues died today in Slatina; last week, a colleague died in Sighișoara, and another died in Timișoara...” laments Leonard Bărăscu, President of the Sanitas Trade Union Federation, during a meeting in Bucharest with Romeo Sandu, the organisation’s Vice-President. “Now the situation has improved: in principle, we have enough equipment. But we have insufficient human resources. The workers are exhausted, but we have no one to replace them. And besides that, tiredness and stress increase the likelihood of mistakes being made.”

*At that rate, all healthcare staff in Romania could potentially become infected in just 27 days.*

↓ In Iași, ambulances bring people infected with Covid-19 to the city's hospitals.  
Photo: ©Belga

### Who's to blame?

In the light of these considerations and the fact that healthcare professionals, like other citizens, have a family and social life outside of the working environment, there is now a joint institutional and individual responsibility for their infection. However, in the early days of the pandemic, this responsibility lay wholly at the door of the institution concerned. "In the beginning, the staff had no protection whatsoever," Romeo Sandu points out. "Everything was handled in a lax manner."

In September 2020, Statista published a statistical study, compiled by researcher Justina Sava, on the number of infected employees in the Romanian healthcare system by region and the volume of expenditure on protective equipment per employee and per region. According to her analyses, "The number of employees [...] testing positive is inversely proportional to the volume of expenditure on protective equipment."

Sava also found that "Suceava County has recorded 832 infected employees for 3.1 lei [0.66 euros] of expenditure on equipment per employee, while Vâlcea County spent 76.79 lei per employee and identified only 25 infected healthcare workers." This is not the only factor to be considered, but the direct correlation here is undeniable.

Employers are responsible for protecting their employees in the performance of their duties. Romeo Sandu notes that "Doctors and nurses can lodge complaints against the hospital management if they do not receive the protective equipment needed to carry out their work in complete safety. And we would assist them in their legal proceedings; we could provide them with legal support, but no one has approached us with any such request." They have received no requests from medical staff nor indeed from any family member of medical staff who have died after contracting the virus at work. It is worth noting at this point that a law recognising the worth of medical



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personnel, which was the subject of a Sanitas campaign, was adopted in June 2020. It awards to the families of deceased personnel a monthly benefit of 2 500 lei (approximately 500 euros). Does this compensation in any way dampen the determination of these families to take legal action against the state? “No, but it does help,” Sandu believes. “It would not appease my anger, but it would be something at least.”

### Calling in the military

But how do you explain the decision of those healthcare workers infected at work not to pursue legal redress against their employer — the management at their hospital and the state — which has failed to protect them and put their lives in danger? “They would rather carry on in the job and help the patients than pursue a legal battle against the state,” says Sandu, suggesting that they might, as an alternative, take sick leave, resign and/or move across to the private sector. In early April, a spate of resignations were reported at Câmpina Municipal Hospital, Iași Maternity Hospital, Mioveni City Hospital, Orăștie Municipal Hospital, Timișoara Clinical Hospital, Brașov’s Hospital for Neurology and Arad County Clinical Hospital, to name a few. “The doctors and nurses have given up. They are resigned to their situation; they believe they were fighting a losing battle in their legal action. Some of those who had walked out, such as those at

Orăștie Municipal Hospital, came back to work a couple of days later. They did not return under duress; they simply realised that there was no one to look after the patients. They recalled the oath they had taken.”

Their return may not have been under duress, but there was at least a collective pressure to come back. Or they came back because they no longer had any say in the matter. In Suceava, the country’s largest coronavirus hotspot where, in early April, the County Hospital stood at the epidemic’s epicentre and recorded 200 positive cases among its medical staff, the hospital was placed under military command by order of the government. Military doctors were dispatched to the scene and took over command of operations. This meant regaining order over a situation which had spiralled out of control and preventing “desertion” among the medical staff. “With Suceava County Hospital under military control, healthcare professionals had no option but to go to work. The state could have taken them to court if they refused to follow orders, just like a soldier refusing to go to war,” Sandu explains.

According to anthropologist Radu Umbrăș, “This doctor/soldier association is problematic. Soldiers are recruited on the basis of a contract which expressly lays down penalties for desertion. Medical staff are employed under a different type of contract, namely a service contract. Perhaps the pandemic will force the government to insert a penalty clause in healthcare workers’ employment contracts, if there is a connection with matters of national safety.” As these clauses have not been introduced for the time being, doctors and nurses continue to be regarded on paper like any other worker; on the ground, however, that is clearly no longer the case.

### Cowardice or a lack of solidarity?

“Yes, we were like soldiers,” agrees Anica Coriciuc, a nurse at Suceava County Hospital where she also contracted the virus. She recalls the critics who blamed the medical staff for the desperate situation inside the hospital. “There were problems in the hospital management; that was why we were becoming ill, not because we were more foolish than anyone else.” Sanitas President Leonard Bărăscu echoes the anger of personnel deployed on the ground without protection when he exclaims, “Okay, so healthcare staff were dispatched to the front line like soldiers, but what weapons did they have?”

In April, the widespread outrage, the spate of resignations and the criminal proceedings initiated by a group of doctors at Bucharest’s Sfântul Ioan Hospital against the hospital’s management for failure to provide protective equipment offered a glimpse of the prospective deluge of litigation. Six months later, this anger seems to have subsided.

The city of Suceava provides the best illustration of tempers having “cooled”. Manuela Șestac is a neurosurgeon and trade union representative at the County Hospital. Criminal proceedings were to be brought against the hospital’s management for its failure to protect the medical staff. “Everyone wanted to press charges, but when we held the union meeting to vote on pursuing a legal action, the quorum was not reached. Out of 124 members, only 36 voted in favour of initiating criminal proceedings.” When asked to explain that shortfall, he replies: “I think it boils down to cowardice. There was also manipulation involved: someone spread the rumour that those who voted in favour of bringing the action would be summoned to the Prosecutor’s Office, which was entirely untrue because the ballot is conducted in secret and is an internal measure carried out by the trade union. However, the manipulation seemed to have had the desired effect and overpowered any feelings of solidarity.”

In spite of the outcome of the ballot, a criminal investigation was eventually launched against the hospital’s management,

↳ Soldiers set up tents for a mobile military hospital in Otopeni, near Bucharest, on 20 March 2020.  
Photo: ©Belga



not due to any collective action on the part of the healthcare workers, but as a result of a decision by the Suceava Public Prosecutor's Office following the enforced militarisation of the hospital by government decree. The investigation focuses on the four members of the management team, as well as General Manager Vasile Rîmbu. It will be essential to establish the management's responsibilities and to determine, once and for all, whether or not protective equipment was available in hospital stocks. "Confusion reigns: some are saying that there was a supply of protective equipment, while others deny its existence; no one knows the truth," explains Romică Balan, nurse and director of the Suceava branch of Sanitas. Like most of his colleagues, he contracted the coronavirus. "He [Mr Rîmbu] didn't want to cause panic in the population," Balan explains. "Any attempt to overequip the staff would have created panic: that was the message, the instruction from on high, in the early months of the pandemic at Suceava Hospital." An instruction from where, specifically, "on high"? From the hospital management? From the local government? From the national government? He doesn't know. We can well imagine that these proceedings will seek to place the blame at the feet of a few individuals in office rather than point the finger at the system as a whole.

### Shaking up the system

This ongoing criminal investigation has probably relieved the anger felt by Suceava's healthcare professionals, but it will not have assuaged everyone's fury, not least that of Anatol Burlacioc, a 45-year-old doctor of plastic surgery working at Suceava County Hospital for the past 13 years. Having contracted the virus and subsequently become ill in mid-March, he went back to work on 15 April immediately following his recovery. He instituted legal proceedings on his own behalf along with a few dozen other doctors and nurses, although these individuals one by one withdrew from the prosecution. "They were afraid of upsetting Suceava's bigwigs," explains Burlacioc. Now he stands alone in his legal action. He is currently preparing the case with the help of a law firm and will be filing his complaint shortly with the city's court.

His case is an employment law dispute brought against the hospital management by which he is seeking classification of his infection as an accident at work. "I became ill while I was working and believe that the hospital management is responsible for this." The general manager, Vasile Rîmbu, is – in his view – personally responsible, but he cannot lodge a complaint against an individual, only against an office, in this

case the hospital. By these proceedings, he hopes to bring to light the hierarchical culture created at Suceava County Hospital around Rîmbu, who has held sway for the past 11 years: "Everyone is scared of him and of the system operating behind this person. You see, hospitals aren't independent bodies; the Ministry of Health imposes the organisational structures and the method of management," he explains. These proceedings might, in particular, serve as a precedent, paving the way for further litigation by medical workers. They may well have taken an oath at the start of their career, but the safeguarding of their rights and their protection still provide the best guarantee that they will carry out their duties in the most sustainable and effective manner possible. ●

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*Military doctors were dispatched to the scene and took over command of operations.*