



## **Weekly Briefing**

### **Romania social briefing:**

### **Driving COVID restrictions and pressure during Easter celebration**

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## **Driving COVID restrictions and pressure during Easter celebration**

*Romania enters the second month of the state of emergency, while the peak of the of the pandemic is expected at the end of April, following the celebration of the Orthodox Easter. There are concerns related to the fact that Romania has one of the highest percentage of infections among healthcare professionals in Europe, and fears of a Covid-19 outbreak after Easter, which could overwhelm the medical systems. This is why the Minister of Interior agreed a protocol with the Romanian Orthodox Church regarding Easter celebration. The pressure of the poverty risk remains high. Despite restrictions related to COVID-19, over 2,000 seasonal workers left Romania in the last week heading for jobs in agriculture in Germany.*

Romania has recorded over 7,200 of COVID-19 infection cases since the start of the outbreak, out of which almost 1,000 among the medical staff. More than 1,200 patients have recovered, but there were 400 fatalities. During this period, there were 9 military ordinances for regulating the situation.

The fear of the authorities is that the number of infected persons might surpass 20,000 if social distancing measures are not respected. At present, in Romania, the number of cases is increasing, there are still new outbreaks, even if they are small, but the most concerning are the outbreaks in the medical support teams. Medical staff from different counties or clinics were relocated to the counties or to the hospitals that have acute lack of medical staff. However, the evolution shows that the situation is not yet under full control, and an outbreak could grow exponentially anytime.

The most affected city is Suceava, situated in north-eastern Romania, where the outbreak was initially out of control. The hospital in the city become the biggest Covid-19 hotspot in Romania after several patients brought the virus to the hospital. The situation degenerated in a large number of infected patients, doctors and nurses. It was the first hospital in Romania where military management was imposed after the resignation of the initial leaders.

Military management was the solution for other hospitals as a result of expanding the number of coronavirus cases, especially among the medical personnel, such as those in the cities of Deva and Focsani. The main reasons for these infections were generated by the lack of equipment and of the implementation of the universal protection measures. It seems that about 70% of health care workers did not get sick by treating patients with COVID, but they were

working in other hospitals, where, theoretically, they did not interact with patients infected with COVID. Romania has one of the highest percentage in Europe of infections among healthcare professionals, which not treated critical patients. According to specialists, this situation shows a lack of procedures and prevention in hospitals. At present, the figure of 16% of the total number of cases of infection with Covid-19 among the medical personnel is quite high. However, if Suceava and other two, three places were removed from this equation, the situation would not be worrying, according to specialists. It is expected that Romania will send to Italy 11 doctors and six nurses to help treat the COVID-19 patients in the Milan area. In addition, Romania was included in the World Health Organization Solidarity Trial, with the aim of testing the safety and effectiveness of four different drugs or drug combinations against Covid-19.

While the Romanian health care system can deal with the number of Covid-19 cases that are currently diagnosed, the following two weeks are going to be difficult due to the Easter celebration which takes place in the third week of April, on the Orthodox rite. The authorities estimate that the peak of the pandemic in Romania is expected between April 22 and April 26, or the beginning of May, depending on responsibility in respecting social distancing measures, especially that most of Romania's population, respectively 86.5%, is Orthodox, therefore celebrating Easter in this period. Although the increase in the number of people affected by the epidemic has not been as fast as in other countries, the danger is not overcome yet. President Iohannis said that “without these isolation measures, we would have been confronted with an explosion in the number of cases, impossible to manage by our healthcare system”, and this risk is still a reality for Romania at present. Similar to other East European countries in which the Orthodox church is still influential, and trust in most civil servants is low, there are fears that a considerable number of people might ignore the instructions provided by the governments. In Romania and throughout the region, the highest Orthodox clergy say that Easter will be held behind closed doors, but postings on social media and articles in the local press show that some churches are increasingly inviting the world to celebrate Easter in churches, according to journalists.

In order to allow people to enjoy the holiday and avoid crowds, the Minister of Interior agreed a protocol with the Romanian Orthodox Church, which included some exceptions from the restrictions for combatting the COVID-19 outbreak, allowing believers to come to church to take the blessed bread and Holy Fire. Initially, the agreement was seen as a relaxation of the severe measures against the epidemic, therefore it was followed by harsh criticism. As a result, some terms of the agreement were changed. Thus, the church services will be conducted without

parishioners, while Holy Passover and Holy Light will be distributed to the population upon request. People are not allowed to go to the Easter service, either in churches or outside them. President Iohannis also advised population to stay at home, for avoiding a surge in the number of diseases and deaths.

Therefore, while some of the European countries are preparing for gradually relaxing anti-COVID restrictions, Romania's President announced the extension of the state of emergency for another month, in which population movement is limited only to shopping and going to work, while all public events are banned. The isolation continues to be a viable option for Romania as an estimation of UK scientists shows that only between 8.9% and 17% of people with Covid-19 infection symptoms are confirmed and reported, due to the low number of tests that are carried out. A possible relaxation of restrictions could be considered in May, if the number of illnesses and deaths will decrease. Romanians could resume their activities without restrictions towards the middle of July, according to some Romanian specialists, if the activities and contacts will be reduced during the 4-5 days around Easter.

However, some countries in Europe need the seasonal workers in agriculture coming from Romania and Bulgaria. At the beginning of April, Germany announced that it was easing the conditions for entry into the country of seasonal workers in agriculture. The decision was made under pressure from German farmers who warned that if they do not allow foreign workers to come to the country, there will be a smaller amount of fruit and vegetables on the market and, consequently, prices will explode. Almost 2,000 Romanian left the country having Germany as a destination last week, despite the restriction related to COVID-19. Until now, about 300,000 foreign workers, mainly Romanians and Poles, work in the German agriculture every year. Now, due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, their number will be up to 80,000 in April and May, according to the BBC. Spain is in a similar situation, needing workforce for their crops. The country was also supplied by the cheap labour force coming from Eastern Europe. While Germany reached an agreement for foreign seasonal workers under strict conditions, the Spanish government is working to find solutions that allow the coming of work force from outside the country. No discussions on this topic were signalled so far in Romania's media.

However, poverty is expected to increase, as 15% of adult employees are at risk of poverty and will be financially vulnerable when they move away from economic activity, according to a World Bank report. The incomes of the poorest will continue to be supported by social assistance programs. Under the circumstances in which Romania's main trade partners – Germany and Italy – will face a long slowdown in the economy, 18% of Romanian citizens

aged 20-64 living in the EU and their families in Romania will be negatively impacted. Romania has made progress in reducing the risk of poverty for the people who have a job, but it remained the EU country with the highest poverty risk for the employed persons (15.3%) in 2018, while the EU average is 9.5%, according to the Eurostat data released at the beginning of 2020. The measures for avoiding such a situation are, at the moment, for the short term and rest mainly in the hands of non-governmental organisations, such as World Vision Romania, which provided food vouchers for children in rural areas, the organisation Save Children, while other companies are donating for supporting the socially vulnerable groups, among which the elderly in several communities.