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**Special edition: Responding to
the coronavirus pandemic**

Responding to the coronavirus pandemic in Romania

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Tiberiu Firinel Ungureanu is Director General of National Administration of Penitentiaries in Romania. He took up post in December 2019 and has had a long career working in prisons.

There are 45 prisons in Romania, holding over 21000 people¹. The imprisonment rate is 112 people per 100,000 of the population. This is a rate lower than England and Wales and is around the average for Europe as a whole. There has been a significant and sustained reduction in the prison population in recent decades. At the turn of the century, the Romanian prison population was close to 50,000.

The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) has welcomed the reduction in the prison population and the recent investment in prison reform². The CPT, nevertheless, also highlighted poor conditions and overcrowding in some prisons and particularly highlighted concerns about the treatment of prisoners and the need to develop dynamic security through better staff-prisoner interactions. Further, the CPT called for greater investment in rehabilitative opportunities and for the prison health services to be integrated within the Ministry of Health.

The coronavirus pandemic had a greater impact in Romania in a second wave starting in September 2020³, with a much higher level of infection and fatality than the relatively modest first wave in April-May 2020. By the end of November 2020, Romania had recorded over 10,000 fatalities.

This interview was conducted in November 2020.

ID: What is your organisational aim, vision or statement of purpose in normal times? What was your aim during the coronavirus emergency?

TU: The primary goal of the National Administration of Penitentiaries is to prevent reoffending. We aim to help people to develop a

positive attitude towards the rule of law, social cohabitation and work, with a view to successful re-entry into society.

The history of prisons in Romania goes back to the 14th century. The buildings that are currently used for most prisons have an obsolete architecture. There is a mismatch between the detention conditions provided in the prisons and the international standards. The infrastructure of the prison administration system is morally and technically worn out. A large number of the prisons are 19th-century architecture mirroring the correctional philosophy of those times including a large number of rooms, insufficient toilets and sanitary facilities. In the post-communist period, three modern prisons have been built: Bucharest-Rahova Prison, Giurgiu Prison and Arad Prison. Currently, two new 1,000-bed prisons are planned to be built and the existing ones are to be modernised and expanded.

From an organisational point of view, under normal conditions, the institutional efforts are directed towards improving the quality of life in detention by making investments in the physical infrastructure; developing activity including access to a wide range of educational programmes, and; increasing the opportunity for prisoners to spend time outside of their rooms. Of course, all these steps have corresponded to the standards promoted by the Council of Europe experts, based on the recommendations made by the members of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) and the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights.

Since the outbreak of coronavirus at the national and international level, the prison system has acted to protect the lives and health of both the persons serving custodial sentences, or other sanctions, and the prison officers who help perform the mission this institution has in the State.

1. <https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/romania>

2. CPT (2019) Report to the Romanian Government on the visit to Romania carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 7 to 19 February 2018 available at <https://rm.coe.int/16809390a6> accessed on 27 November 2020.

3. <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/romania?country=~ROU>

ID: Have you previously had to manage outbreaks of infectious diseases? What has been the nature and scale of this?

TU: In recent years, the epidemiological events have been reduced due to the implementation of screening projects within the custodial population.

Since 2004, within the funding agreements with the Global Fund and the World Bank, the Unit for Implementing Tuberculosis Control Projects in Prisons, has implemented the National Tuberculosis Control Plan, which has included health education, administrative measures and engineering measures for controlling and preventing the tuberculosis infection. For example 1,019 staff members were trained as trainers delivering health education. Between September 2004 and September 2012, a total number of 64,035 prisoners were trained in tuberculosis topics while another 17,040 detainees were trained between September 2012 and September 2014.

In the same context, the inter-institutional relations have improved with prisons integrated within the National Tuberculosis Health Programme and working closely with specialist pneumologists in the public health network. Regulatory laws have been implemented, and non-governmental organisations together with the Ministry of Health are involved in supporting the fight against tuberculosis infection within the prison environment. For example, from August 2018 to the end of 2019, the National Administrations of Penitentiaries and Marius Nasta Institute of Pneumophthiology for the E-DETECT TB Project, delivered projects at Bucharest — Jilava Prison, Ploie ti — Târg orul Nou Female Prison, Bucharest — Rahova Prison, M rgineni Penitentiary, aimed at diagnosing pulmonary tuberculosis among the vulnerable populations.

Currently, there are two on-going projects on screening infectious diseases, namely TB in collaboration with Marius Nasta Institute of Pneumophthiology and Hepatitis C, in collaboration with the Romanian Infectious Diseases Society.

ID: How prepared were you for the coronavirus outbreak? Did you have contingency plans in place?

TU: Since the first cases in the European states and Romania, in February 2020, plans for the prison system

have been developed in order to ensure that everyday activities are performed safely. Subsequently, in light of the evolution of the national cases, the measures have been updated. These have are also in accordance with the decrees of the President of Romania on establishing and extending the state of emergency at the country level, including restrictions on normal activities, and we have taken account of medical specialists' recommendations.

ID: When did you start to consider that this may be a significant issue for you? How did you feel at that time?

TU: The pandemic has led to dramatic and rapid changes in order to prevent the spread of this new virus within detention places. The complexity of the newly-emerged situation was grasped by all the managers from the outset. The measures adopted at national level were implemented responsibly and have had positive results in protecting the people who live and work in prisons. The professionalism of those working in the prison system has been impressive.

ID: Where there any forecasts of potential impact in prisons? What was the situation you thought you would be facing?

TU: People in prisons are much more vulnerable to the spread of the new coronavirus, as compared to the general population because they mix with wider groups such as family and relatives, legal representatives, appearances in courts or public health facilities. Furthermore, prisons are crowded with people in close proximity to one another, so that infection can quickly spread. This is why prison health is considered to be part of the public health system. The response to coronavirus in prisons and other detention places is particularly challenging⁴.

Depending on the coronavirus situation in each country, the risk of bringing infection into prisons or other detention places may vary. In areas with local virus circulation, the risk of introducing the virus into the detention places can be associated with the prison staff or newly admitted prisoners, who have lived in affected countries or areas or have been in contact with people coming back from affected countries or areas.

ID: What action did you take in order to manage the risk of infection spreading?

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4. http://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0019/434026/Preparedness-prevention-and-control-of-COVID-19-in-prisons.pdf?ua=1

TU: Before establishing the state of emergency in Romania, a plan of measures for preventing the spread of coronavirus among the prison staff and prisoners was implemented. The plan consisted of general preventive measures, intervention measures specific to the prisoners extradited from areas at epidemiological risk, as well as crisis response measures.

At the system level, some prison units have been assigned to implement the quarantine measure for lodging and medical monitoring of incarcerated people extradited to Romania by other states.

In order to protect the health of people in prison, measures have been introduced for limiting contact with possible sources of infection including suspending some activities performed by the inmates outside the detention place.

On March 16th, 2020, the President of Romania established, by decree, a 30-day state of emergency in Romania, which was subsequently extended for the same period. According to the provisions of the decrees, the right to receive visits, including intimate visits; the right to receive goods inside the prison visit wing, and; permission to leave the prison on temporary release were put on hold. In order to maintain inmates' connection with the family members, the right to online communications was extended through greater use of video calls. In the same context, the daily limits of the right to make telephone calls using the fixed facilities inside the prison were increased during the state of emergency.

In the aftermath of the emergency state, since May this year, the prison system has resumed the activities suspended by using safety measures, such as allowing visits by family members only with a physical separation device between them and wearing personal protective equipment. Also, granting intimate visits and the permission to leave the prison were conditioned by a 14-day quarantine on return.

There was no new early release measures introduced by the Romanian state to reduce the prison population.

ID: What was the reaction of prisoners to these measures? Did you face resistance, or increased distress?

TU: Inmates were informed of these restrictive measures by the staff. The communication focussed on the risks this epidemic poses to the population and the

prison environment. As a result, inmates understood and accepted the restrictions in a positive way. They also responded well to the efforts to maintain connection with their families by phone and video call.

ID: What was the reaction of staff to these measures?

TU: The prison staff understood the need for the measures to prevent and limit the spread of the new coronavirus. Our own instructions have complimented the orders/instructions of the Minister of Health and the National Committee for Special Emergency Situations on using protective equipment. Training was provided on rationalising and making use of protective equipment and information videos were produced on hygiene and sanitary measures.

The staff understood the necessity and showed capacity in adjusting to the global pandemic.

ID: How were prisoners families impacted by the measures put in place?

TU: The significance of preventing the spread of the new coronavirus was understood by inmates' families, who also appreciated the use of the internet video communication system during the state of emergency. Since resuming the visiting programme, inmates' families have complied with the requirements to wear personal protection equipment, such as respiratory protection masks and gloves.

ID: How did you try to mitigate the impact of the measures put in place? Did you develop any new processes or use new technology?

TU: The biggest challenge was to restrict inmates' physical contact with family members and those close to them, during the 60-day state of emergency in Romania. Yet, as previously presented, the importance of protecting health and that of those close to them by reducing physical contact has been understood and appreciated by everyone. A significant factor in maintaining a climate of order and discipline in the prison during this time has been the extension of access to video calls via the internet.

ID: What was the impact of coronavirus within the prison system? How did it compare to the forecasts?

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TU: There have been sporadic cases of infection among the staff, but this has not had a major impact on activities.

The first confirmed cases of coronavirus among the custodial population have appeared since the end of September, simultaneously with the exponential increase in the cases in the community. This has been a real challenge for all the staff involved in the fight against coronavirus.

ID: How did you start to plan to move on from the initial response and start the process of recovery?

TU: The strategy adopted by the prison system since the outbreak of the pandemic has been to implement strict measures for preventing the spread of the virus in the prison environment. These measures have been effective. As a result, the prison system has not had to elaborate or implement a recovery programme.

ID: Have you had to maintain any restrictions or adaptations in order to manage the risk on an ongoing basis? How long do you judge that such restrictions will have to be in place?

TU: The restrictive measures been continuously adapted and updated in the light of the situation. It is necessary to apply protective restrictions until the number of new cases of coronavirus infection is reduced and the national institutions consider that people can return to performing their work under normal conditions, with no medical threats.

ID: What have you learned from this pandemic? What would you do differently if there further outbreaks?

TU: Such a pandemic is a challenge to any institution, especially one that is responsible for the lives and health of tens of thousands of people. Despite all this, the reaction of the prison system specialists in Romanian has been professional and has ensured the continued operation of the prison system with minimal risks to the health of the incarcerated persons. The response is certainly a solid basis to be followed in the

similar situations where rapid changes are needed in order to protect health.

ID: Is there anything you have learned from this that you believe will shape how you operate in the future?

TU: This period has shown us that the existing plans and measures for limiting and preventing outbreaks of infectious diseases have given a firm basis for specific guidelines to respond to coronavirus.

In this respect, new methodologies that can be useful in any epidemiological events include: establishing, delimiting and correctly using epidemiological routes; drawing up the working procedures and protocols specific for medical activities; establishing the means long-term collaboration with the public health institutions in the public health network (county public health directorates, hospitals in the public health network, profile testing laboratories, etc.).

ID: What are you most proud of in the response to the pandemic?

TU: The effort made by all the staff of the National Administration of Penitentiaries within prisons needs to be appreciated. They have responded effectively to a significant health risk. In fact, there were no coronavirus cases among the inmates for about 7 months.

The World Health Organisation has stated that past pandemics featured 'waves of activity spread over the months', and even in countries with effective pandemic control strategies through extensive testing, tracking and lock-down quarantine (such as South Korea) have experienced peaks and groups of confirmed cases. In this context, there is likely to be an ever changing threat. In Romania, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of confirmed coronavirus cases, from about 1,000 per day (06.09.2020) to over 10,000 per day (06.11.2020).

Despite the strict measures for preventing and limiting the new coronavirus, this context of a dramatic increase in community transmission has also had a negative impact on the population incarcerated by the Romanian prison system including recent outbreaks of infection, of various sizes, in particular prisons.