New Challenges for Police During the Pandemic and Specific Actions to Counteract Them in Romania

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Abstract

Measures designed to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV2 included a series of actions that contributed to the amplification of social tensions - traffic restrictions, limitation of income sources, adjacent economic shortages, return to the country of a large number of Romanian citizens, and the number of fines for violating the restrictions provided by the military ordinances - some of which affected the activity of the police. Therefore, police had to face new threats and to ensure the respect of a wide range of limitations in regard to people's conduct and public order. This article will analyse the specific challenges faced by the police in the period following the spread of Covid-19, mainly during the lockdown installed in Romania, challenges directly related to the measures adopted, the changes in the daily routine and the necessary actions to limit and eliminate the pandemic's negative effects. More specific, the article analyses the group conflicts that have risen during lockdown and aggressive conduct towards Police determined by the enforcement of rules meant to limit the pandemic in different areas of the country. The paper pays a large amount of attention to the ways in which the Romanian Police approached these cases, their implication and elaborates a set of necessary measures police needs to implement in order to properly manage them.

Keywords: *police, pandemic, authority, social conflicts*

The Pandemic in Romania

In 2020, the world faced a new kind of threat that none of us was prepared for. The SARS-CoV2 outbreak has affected societies around the world, at all levels. All norms were seriously challenged, social order was threatened, with sanitary and economic deficiencies threatening us indefinitely. On February 26, 2020, it was established that the virus had reached Romania when a man from Gorj County was confirmed positive with COVID-19. On March 16, 2020, a state of emergency was declared at the national level, which allowed the government to take new measures to protect and ensure the safety of citizens. During the state of emergency, the following measures were taken: gatherings of more than 100 people were banned, travel was re-

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stricted, citizens had to fill out a form to account for all their outside activities, restaurants, and beauty salons were closed, all artistic, scientific, and religious, sports, gambling and entertainment events were suspended. Groups larger than six people were no longer allowed to walk together, and students began taking classes online. As time went on, more and more restrictions were imposed. All persons confirmed to have the disease were admitted to hospitals and were not allowed to stay at home, even if they had no symptoms. People who entered the country had to remain in inpatient quarantine for 14 days before they could travel to their final destination. The state of emergency was extended until May 15, when it was placed in a state of alert. During the state of alert, some of the restrictions were lifted while others were imposed, with rules applied differently across the country depending on the rate of coronavirus infection in each town or village. Local police departments had to expand their responsibilities to reduce the spread of the effects of the pandemic. Their authority was questioned because people felt unsafe and did not know if the measures taken by authorities to contain the COVID -19 outbreak were appropriate or in their best interest. Many people did not believe the virus existed or that the disease was serious and therefore felt that the actions taken by lawmakers and law enforcement were inappropriate and violated their rights. Although in the beginning the fear of the unknown made people respect the enforced rules, after a while people began to resist, disobey, and question the necessity of such norms. Individuals perceived the authorities as incoherent because of the fact that the measures taken were frequently changed and the information transmitted was contradictory, as scientists discovered new aspects about the disease all the time, leaving room for conspiracy theories.

Return of the expats

In 2019, statistics from European Commission showed that Romania had the highest emigration rate from any European Union country. When the pandemic started, many of the emigrants wanted to return home because they lost their jobs abroad and were afraid of not seeing their loved ones. The estimates say that in 2020, about 1.3 million people came back from abroad. When they arrived in Romania, they had no jobs, no means to support their families, and no qualifications to get jobs that would earn them as much as if they worked in the countries they had

emigrated to. In a time of uncertainty, they were left without support and without knowing when they could return to live the life they were used to. Another situation was the one in which some individuals who went abroad used to commit crimes in order to support themselves there. With the lockdown imposed in many states, the opportunities for crime decreased, especially petty theft, in which most of them were involved. Having lost the opportunity to earn money, they decided to return to Romania and once they arrived here, the problem of supporting themselves remained and frustration and despair began to accumulate. Moreover, in the period around Orthodox Easter people began to resist even more the norms imposed, as they felt that their identity was under attack and that the authorities did not take into account their beliefs. Romanian Constitutional Court decided at some point that the military ordinances and consequently, the fines issued to those that did not comply with the regulations, have an unconstitutional character. Therefore, for a few days after this decision was taken, police officers were left with no means of coercion. Moreover, the public began to perceive law enforcement as dishonest and against the wellbeing of the population. Another fact that led to confrontations between the police and the members of the community was the media portrayal of the sanctioning role of the police during the pandemic. Constantly, people were reminded about the number of fines issued and videos of police officers being aggressive towards individuals that did not obey the laws were displayed when such situations had happened. Given all these circumstances, it came to a point when groups of people displayed aggressive behaviour towards the police and their intervention triggered extensive debates in the media and online environment, questioning both their legitimacy and effectiveness. In the light of these events, we conducted a research, which analysed the conflicts between the police and the citizens that happened during the pandemic in order to identify ways in which we can increase the police's efficiency and authority, in the benefit of public safety. The research focused on the group conflicts that happened in Săcele, Brașov County, in the city of Hunedoara, Hunedoara County and in Rahova neighbourhood, from the capital city of Romania, Bucharest, conflicts in which police had to intervene in force. During this research, we analysed relevant literature to the subject and previous reports done by the Research and Crime Prevention Institute from within the General Inspectorate of Romanian Police, and we

conducted a series of interviews with the police officers involved in these specific missions and with the ones that coordinated the interventions.

Social Conflict Theories

According to Karl Marx and his social conflict theory, the society is an arena of inequalities, which generates conflicts and social development. Societies are usually structured in such way that it supports some members of the upper class at the expense of the others, and characteristics such as race, class and age are related to social inequality (Hayes, 2020). Lewis A. Coser defines social conflict as "a battle between values and claims of status, power and resources, in which the opponent's purpose is to neutralise, debunk or to eliminate the rivals". Coser analyses the roles that social conflicts have in the social changes that emerge in a society, stating that each social system has elements of social tension and potential conflict, which anticipates future social changes (Coser, 1957). Georg Simmel sees conflict as an integrative social force: the social reality includes capacities that promote social order, but that also promote social conflicts. Conflict could be either a unifying factor, determining people to fight together against a common enemy, either a dividing force (Simmel, 1904). Robert K. Merton believed that not everybody is able to obtain success by legitimate means. Even though social expectations are the same for everyone, the battle to achieve them begins at different starting points. Merton stated that there is a strong link between unemployment and deviancy, because the legal methods to obtain money are not accessible to some individuals, so they start to commit crimes in order to meet the social expectations (Merton, 1938). Moreover, Albert Cohen stated that the disadvantages determine frustration in individuals and lack of trust in their own social status, therefore they resort to committing crimes in order to earn the respect of other members of the society (Cohen, 1955). Robert Agnew commented on the strain theory of delinquency as explained by Merton and Cohen and came up with an alternative theory, in which not the discrepancy between means and expectations causes delinquency, but the initial set and context in which adolescents grow up. Therefore, an individual might "walk away from an aversive situation" by using any means to avoid pain and frustration, even though this specific situation does not affect one's goals, but because it is perceived as (Agnew, 1985).

Contesting Authority - Hunedoara Case

The first case analysed was the one from the city of Hunedoara. On April 18, 2020, while patrolling the neighbourhood and checking if there were any violations of the rules imposed during the state of emergency, the police officers found a drunk man who did not have the mandatory form and who could not explain the reasons why he was on the street. After this incident, the man's friends, relatives and neighbours attacked law enforcement officers with rocks and a variety of blunt objects. Some of the first responders were injured and two of the police cars were damaged. This particular attack on the police was not premeditated and was based on the social tensions caused by the pandemic and the social discourse about the number of fines issued and the large amounts of money people were being fined at a time when resources for survival were scarce.

Ignoring authority - Săcele Case

The next case we looked at was the one from Săcele, Brașov County. On April 19, 2020, members of one family verbally assaulted the children of another family, all based on pre-existing tension and alcohol consumption. Police officers and members of the gendarmerie arrived at the scene very quickly and when they attempted to break up the conflict, they were completely ignored. No violence was aimed at the first responders, but the conflict between the two sides continued as if nothing had happened. Although the police officers fired several warning shots, the citizens involved in the conflict continued to fight. At one point, one of the men involved in the conflict hit a member of the other family with a car, at full speed, even though armed forces were present. According to first responders to the case, alcohol consumption increased the severity of the conflict, but such altercations were common in the area. Police officers believed that social tensions also escalated because of the restrictions imposed during the state of emergency, as opportunities for members of this community to earn money decreased. Many of the community members lived in extreme poverty and used illegal means to make a living. This neighbourhood was located in a very poor area of the city and had no sewage system, no running water, and no public lightning system.

The people who lived there had low levels of education, were unemployed, had children at an early age, and therefore conflicts were recurrent in the community. This event was widely reported in the media and journalists emphasised that the police were not able to intervene and establish public order in such situations. Although the parts involved in the conflict were not aggressive towards the police at any moment, they completely ignored their orders.

Challenging Authority - Rahova Case

Also on April 19, 2020, another incident occurred in Bucharest, unrelated to the previous one from Braşov County. At around 8:45 pm, the police received a call on the emergency line about an altercation happening in the street between numerous people. Thirty-seven individuals involved were escorted to the police station to give statements. Although it initially appeared to be a spontaneous conflict in an area where such conflicts are common, officers soon learned that the confrontation was planned. After the intervention, the police officers investigating the conflict found out that prior to the conflict, the leader of one of the groups had made a live video on Facebook bragging about a party he had organised with his friends at his home, which was against the regulations. At a certain point in his live video, he stated that no authority could stop him and that he would attack the police officers if they tried to break up the party. When they arrived at the scene, groups of people were waiting for them, equipped with rocks, bricks, shovels, chairs and anything else they could get their hands on. Some of the police officers were hit and required medical attention. Although the police officers fired warning shots, the crowd continued to attack them until officers arrived from Special Forces Unit. The officers stated that it was the first time in their careers that a conflict occurred for the sole reason of confronting the police. Some of the participants involved in the conflict came to Romania after living abroad because of the pandemic. Without the proper means to support themselves, they wanted to make themselves look powerful in the eyes of the rest of the community by disobeying the orders of the authorities.

Causes of Conflict

In regard to the violent behaviour of the individuals involved in the conflict, the socio-economical and lack of culture and education are the first set of factors which conducted to the triggering of the conflicts. Poverty, marginalisation, alcohol consumption that increased during the days before the Orthodox Easter, formed an accumulation of factors that generated antisocial and violent behaviours. Old conflicts have emerged when, because of the pandemic, many of the individuals (especially the ones involved in the Rahova case) were forced to return home from abroad, and on the base of social strains generated by the restrictive measures, violent behaviours emerged. Police officers believed that the main causes of these conflicts were previous misunderstandings between the parts involved and alcohol consumption. They also mentioned low levels of education, unemployment, lack of public lightning systems, marginalisation of these communities and lack of legal consequences for the members of the community that were previously involved in different types of offences as factors that contributed to the escalation of the conflicts. Police training and citizen`s contact with the police were severely affected by the pandemic. Temporary reassignments, lack of resting days, shortage of personnel and lack of personal protective equipment also played a role in the occurrence of these events. The acute phases of the conflicts have played out in the presence of a low number of police officers, before the Special Forces Unit's arrival because of the rapid way in which they unfolded, without pre-existent clues. Even though in the Rahova case the conflict was announced on the instigator's Facebook page, the magnitude of the incident could not have been predicted. In regard to the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants, the persons involved were mostly male, some of which had criminal records, either for theft or for violent acts. Women and children rather have a triggering role in the conflicts, or they exert, through screams and threats, pressure on the police and on the members of the gendarmerie during their interventions. The police, as an institution that exerts social control, imposes compliance with the law and sanctions the individuals that break it, but also an institution that is constantly in contact with the citizens usually surrounding sensible events, is one of the lowest ranked institutions when looking at opinion polls that measure trust in public institutions. Citizens developed more adversity against the police during the state of emergency and the pandemic, period in which the sanctions for breaking the military ordinances were far greater than the usual fines, because they saw the police as the main force of the state to enforce these rules, which they were not sure that they were

in their best interest. Even though at the beginning of the pandemic law enforcement officers were perceived as guardians and protectors of the well-being of the society, as time went by and people started to feel economic and social distress (unemployment, not knowing what will happen next, contradictory or fake news), they lost their trust and began to question every action of the police.

An expert group set up within the General Inspectorate of Romanian Police closely monitored the comments left on the Romanian Police official Facebook page and posts that were submitted on social media which reflected the change of perspective, from total support to blaming the law enforcement for almost anything. The hostile messages increased in number and in intensity, some of them even suggesting violent actions against the police. These messages reached a peak near the Easter holidays and were generated by the public debates surrounding the religious ceremony and people being allowed to participate to it. Most of the conflicts between the citizens and the police officers, including the ones that we analysed in this research, happened in the same period. Therefore, there was a connection between the conflicts and the religious beliefs of the population.

Improving Policing

In the future, many profound systemic changes should be made, some of which depend on more than just the police. These communities should be given adequate support regarding education and essential services to develop and become part of society. Educating the public regarding legislation is also the responsibility of the Romanian Police. The Research and Crime Prevention Institute, through its Prevention department, organises activities in schools and among the general population, informing participants about the legal provisions regarding different types of crimes, the consequences of illegal behaviours and how they can avoid becoming victims. Although this is a good start, unfortunately there are very few police officers assigned to these units who have to educate a large number of people. Therefore, partnerships with other private or public entities and the media are essential in order to be able to deliver the message. The police relationship with the community is very important and relevant to the people's compliance, especially in those situations where any norm can be challenged. Understanding

the rules imposed, feeling that the police are a partner in ensuring the safety of the community and not emphasising the regulatory role of the police can lead to an improvement in police-community relations. Although much of the news during the pandemic focused only on the number of fines issued and on the mistakes made by law enforcement, some significant improvements have been made. The number of press conferences organised by the police increased and citizens were constantly informed about the actions taken. Communication was standardised so that people could easily follow the development of regulations and the evolution of the pandemic. Each institution, which played an important role during the COVID-19 outbreak, transmitted their message through a representative in a common press conference. Finally, during our research we had found that for the people involved in the conflicts, this type of behaviour was not a novelty. The majority of them had already had some form of contact with the police. Considering that some of them were involved in different types of crimes and that the consequences were minimal, we could conclude that the severity of the punishment should be increased in some cases to prevent future violations of socially accepted norms and laws. Law enforcement are often accused of inefficiency and corruption because of the low frequency of pre-trial detention and the insignificant sanctions applied to those who commit violent crimes, people not understanding fully the limited responsibilities that law enforcement has. Another aspect that should be better regulated is the use of firearms during a police intervention. The superiors are often investigating police officers for long periods, after they decide to use their gun in an intervention. Until everything is settled, some police officers might have their wages cut. Law enforcement agents are also afraid that the people that they decide to use force against might be able, through their system of acquaintances in the political area, to affect their career, which sometimes also leads them to perceive their own authority as diminished.

Conclusion

These conflicts had some common characteristics: a low level of education, the general behaviour of the people involved, social exclusion, poverty, lack of essential services. In addition, all these events took place around the Orthodox Easter, when some of them used to have big parties and consume large

amounts of alcohol. The uncertainty and social discourse about the pandemic also had some influence on the development of these conflicts. The case from Săcele, Brașov County, was the conflict least determined by the pandemic. In this case, the participants had numerous previous conflicts and the community from which they came felt that they should resolve their conflicts themselves without the intervention of specialised authorities, relying more on traditional forms of justice. Although these three group conflicts seemed to have some common characteristics, they had different motivations that led to the initiation of these conflicts. They were in some ways linked to the pandemic, in the sense that the outbreak of COVID-19 contributed to the accumulation of social tensions.

These three conflicts, and other of a smaller magnitude that happened around the same period, are rather exceptions and will not lead to a generalisation of such behaviours against the police. The intent or the instigation to violence against police were rarely expressed and frequently condemned by the other members of the society in the online environment, therefore the conflicts decreased in the following period in number and in intensity. A low level of trust can manifest through not wanting to help law enforcement in certain situations (not agreeing to testify, not wanting to report certain crimes etc.), but to increase acts of violence against the police requires a state of lack of legitimisation unattainable under normal democratic conditions.

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