ADAPTATION AND GENEROSITY

IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

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ATLANTA – In the face of unprecedented challenges, the citizens of Bucharest, Romania continue to demonstrate strength in confronting the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 1994, the City of Atlanta has enjoyed a Sister City partnership with the Romanian capital, which began after a delegation from Atlanta traveled to Romania to meet with Bucharest Mayor Crin Halaicu. At the time, the Director of International Relations, Calin Cristescu, described the new ties between the two cities as "the most important step abroad Bucharest ever made" in the five years since the country overthrew its Communist regime. For more than 25 years, the two cities have enjoyed a productive partnership, collaborating on best practice exchanges in areas such as urban development, student exchanges, and cultural events.

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life as we knew it, city officials in Bucharest took immediate steps to adjust to an uncertain environment. Early in the pandemic, a positive COVID-19 case in City Hall sent employees home, forcing them to adapt to remote work before the Romanian government declared a state of emergency on March 16, 2020. Like many countries around the world, Romania experienced a shortage of personal protective equipment at the beginning of the pandemic. Demonstrating the power of diplomacy, Bucharest officials utilized the city's international relationships to secure essential equipment from Sister Cities such as Beijing. Additionally, Romania received generous donations from private citizens and its vibrant Turkish community. After securing critical equipment, city officials were able to focus on other pressing tasks.

When much was still unknown about COVID-19 and scientists rushed to study the novel virus, Bucharest stressed the importance of information dissemination. "From the beginning, the Mayor's Office asked us to translate various articles from journals," Mirela Minca, Executive Director for Foreign Relations and Protocol, explained, which led to the office's decision to publish daily press briefings aggregating the most important COVID-19 articles, headlines, and pressing news from around the world. The office chose to focus on translating and communicating new developments from seven primary countries: Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, China, and Israel.

Additionally, employees set to work on creating official English and French-language versions of the city's website. This task was already initiated several years ago and placed on hold, Ms. Minca explains, but the pandemic reignited its urgency. Spurred by the momentum of these digitalization projects, employees also began creating a more user-friendly version of the existing Bucharest website. These changes, Ms. Minca described, "will make everyone's lives easier" because Bucharest residents will be able to access and request information from the city more easily.

When describing what surprised her about her city's response to the pandemic, Ms. Minca expressed gratitude for the donations made by private citizens and delight at the generosity she witnessed from young people who volunteered to assist senior citizens in performing everyday tasks such as grocery shopping. Ms. Minca stated that while their actions were ultimately "the humane thing to do," their "response was overwhelming."