

Stressors in Romanian elite football refereeing– a comparison between 2009 and 2020

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Published online: January 31, 2023

(Accepted for publication January 15, 2023)

DOI:10.7752/jpes.2023.01023

Abstract:

Football refereeing is known to be a stressful job. Researchers have therefore attempted to identify the sources of stress for referees that affect their performances during matches. The aim of this study is to identify the stressors for Romanian elite referees and whether there have been any changes from 2009 to 2020. The present study uses guided in-depth interviews with five Romanian top league referees (N= 5). Two rounds of interviews were conducted: the first round of interviews was conducted face to face in 2009 and the second round of interviews was conducted online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The potential stressors have been identified and analyzed. The main stressors for referees are the *Romanian Referee Committee* and *Referee Observers*, since they will impact an official's career. The Romanian Referee Committee decides on appointments and promotions, whereas observers evaluate a referee's performance using a marking system. A low assessment means that a referee will receive no appointments in the near future. The last stressor inside the game is *peer conflicts*. Referees feel that the competition between them is unfair and that this affects group relationships. Referees in Romania are still regarded as *amateurs*. Thus, most of them have full-time jobs. Family and work responsibilities are sometimes in conflict with the demands of refereeing. The *mass media* is also considered an important stressor for referees because it creates a negative image about refereeing with the general public. In 2009, *club managers* were significantly involved in Romanian refereeing, influencing referees' careers, whereas in 2020, they were no longer identified as a stressor for referees. This also applies to the *image of refereeing*. In 2009, Romanian refereeing was perceived as corrupt, while in 2020, it regained its credibility due to the referees' performances. Lastly, Romanian referees do not perceive *abuse (physical and verbal)* as a stressor in their career. Abuse may sometimes occur off the pitch during their free time. In conclusion, stress factors in Romanian elite football refereeing have slightly changed in recent decades. Football organizations should be increasingly aware of refereeing and its importance in the development of the game and focus on offering psychological support for referees. National refereeing committees should focus more on referees' psychological needs and support their officials in order to achieve the best performances on the pitch.

Key Words: refereeing, stress, football, Romania

Introduction

Football, or soccer as it is known in the USA, is one of the most popular sports in the world. According to Rainea (2005, p. 6), one of the most famous Romanian referees, football is not “only what you see on the pitch, the fight between two teams for victory, but it is also a passion, a sophisticated machine that brings together energies, people, money and a great deal of diplomacy”.

The game has changed and become more demanding from a physical and psychological perspective for both players and referees. At the same time, some things have never changed because all the fans ever think about is their favorite player scoring goals and seeing great matches, while the referees are only remembered for their mistakes. There are several examples, such as English referee, Graham Poll, who showed three yellow cards to the same player before sending him off in a World Cup game. Or the Swedish official, Martin Hansson, who missed a handball by Henry, resulting in France qualifying for the World Cup 2010 in South Africa. In other words, nobody remembers a referee who officiates in ten games without making a mistake, but they will remember a referee who makes a wrong decision.

Romanian refereeing has a long tradition in football, with important figures participating in the most important finals, such as: Nicolae Rainea, Ioan Igna, Ion Crăciunescu, Ovidiu Hațegan and Istvan Kovacs. On the other hand, several corruption scandals (the first one was in 1981 and the last one was in 2011) affected the Romanian refereeing's image and credibility.

The first important name in Romanian refereeing was Nicolae Rainea, who remained at the highest level between 1974 and 1983. He was part of the referee team who participated three times in the World Cup from 1974 until 1982. In 1978, he officiated in the UEFA Cup final and the UEFA Super Cup. The peak of his career was in 1980 when he refereed the final of EURO '80. Moreover, Rainea also refereed the UEFA Champions League final in 1983. Contrary to its international success, Romanian refereeing faced a huge corruption scandal

and more than 28 referees were excluded in 1981. One of the excluded referees was also a FIFA referee, Otto Anderco, considered at that time the second-best referee after Rainea.

Nicolae Rainea was immediately followed by Ioan Igna, who was selected for the Olympic Games '84, World Cup '86 and Euro '88. He also refereed the UEFA Cup Final in 1987. In 1995, Ion Crăciunescu took charge of the UEFA Champions League Final but was never selected for World Cup or Euro tournaments.

Over the next 20 years, Romanian refereeing became controversial and lost its credibility. Most of the international referees (on the FIFA list) had relatives on the Romanian Referee Committee. Romanian refereeing was impacted by two further corruption scandals. In 2009, Gheorghe Constantin and Marcel Lică – Referee Committee President and Vice-President – along with four referees, were arrested for corruption and banned from refereeing. This also happened to Vasile Avram, Referee Committee President, two years later, when he was arrested for corruption and banned from refereeing. In 2014, the Romanian FA took the important decision of appointing the first foreigner, Kyros Vassaras, as Referee Committee President. The former Greek referee has changed the image of Romanian refereeing, restoring its credibility and image. Being a member of the UEFA Referee Committee, Vassaras has helped Romanian referees to achieve their potential and gain important results internationally, being selected for the World Cup, Euro tournaments or being appointed for UEFA finals. In 2016, Romanian refereeing returned to the main stage when Ovidiu Hategan officiated in both the Euro and the Olympic Games. He was also selected alongside Istvan Kovacs for EURO 2020, the first final tournament involving two Romanian referees. In 2022, Istvan Kovacs took charge of the UEFA Conference Cup Final and also participated in the World Cup in Qatar. Finally, after 36 years, Romania had a World Cup referee.

A football referee's career is much the same in most countries. The difference is in the time frame and skills needed to reach the highest level. It is harder to reach the highest level in one of the big five European football nations than in any other football nation. Moreover, refereeing might be considered a more demanding job in some countries from a psychological perspective, compared to other countries.

Research Framework

My own football refereeing career started in 2002 and my promotion to the elite level of Romanian refereeing (Liga 1) took place in 2017. Thus, I have not had to deal with any red tape regarding working closely with elite referees. Being part of the Romanian elite referees' group, I have come to know the group and establish both a professional and a personal relationship with the other referees. Moreover, being a football referee helped me to get closer to the studied phenomenon and basically become part of it, although this could arguably create challenges in terms of objectivity.

The aim of this study is to identify the stress factors in elite refereeing in Romania and to uncover if there were any changes between 2009 and 2020. The main contribution of this study is a comparison of the stress factors revealed by five Romanian top league referees over a period of more than ten years and to outline any changes in terms of psychological challenges that referees have to face nowadays in Romanian refereeing. One of the limitations of this study is that it only considers referees, not assistant referees, even though they might experience the same stressors. Another limitation is that it only analyses the stressors of male Romanian referees.

Research Method

Interviews were the chosen research method for this study because referees need to be able to clearly describe their careers based on their experience. The elite group of Romanian referees comprises 26 referees. Five of them were chosen using criterion sampling and were informed beforehand about the purpose of the study. They received detailed information about the study and how the interviews would be used. The referees were guaranteed anonymity and pseudonyms were used in order to protect their identity. In 2009, it may have been the case that the referees' responses to critical questions might have caused them to respond in a "politically correct" manner because they may have been concerned that an honest response could affect them if anyone important were to find out. However, in 2009, I was only a Third League referee, and had hardly any relationship at all with the interviewed referees, whereas by 2020, I was an elite referee. In the second round of interviews, I felt that the answers were more direct and that the interviewees were not afraid to give straight answers to critical questions. This could be attributable to two reasons: firstly, we are part of an elite group and we face the same stressors and, secondly, the participants in this study are experienced referees with a certain status and are ready to talk openly about the "dark" side of elite refereeing.

Previous studies about stress factors in football refereeing chose quantitative methods such as questionnaires, using the Ontario Soccer Officials Survey (OSOS), proposed by Taylor & Daniel, as a starting point. This study chose a qualitative method in order to gain a deeper understanding of the stress factors that might affect referees' performances.

This study adopted an in-depth and guided approach to the interviews. All the questions were theme based with a special focus on the referees' personal experience at the highest level in Romanian football. Bearing in mind that the Romanian FA has never focused on the stress factors that could affect a referee's performances, all the interviewed referees were asked the same questions. The first round of interviews was face to face in February 2009, in Antalya (Turkey) during the Romanian Elite Referees winter course, while the second round of interviews was conducted online in December 2020 (via Zoom) due to the COVID-19 situation. All the

interviews were conducted in Romanian and each referee was asked the same questions and in the same order in both interviews in order to reveal the changes in terms of stress factors. Content analysis was used and the interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded.

Theoretical Framework

The number of football studies has increased considerably in the recent years, the same is with refereeing as part of football which has been subject to scientific scrutiny lately. Pina et al. (2018) had an integrative review about football refereeing which revealed that there were 267 articles divided into the following key themes: technical performance (90), physical performance (74), organization (42), psychology (27), physiology (20). In the same study, the authors revealed that only six out of 27 studies were about stress factors. The rest of them were about motivation, commitment, anxiety or other psychological aspects.

Buckworth & Dishman (2002) defined stress as “an imbalance in psychological systems that activate psychological and behavioral responses to restore balance”. Based on previous studies, Kruger et al. noted that stress experienced by referees could significantly impact their mental health, attention, focus, concentration, effort, arousal, performance, satisfaction with their profession and intention to quit officiating.

Schnyder & Hossner (2016) analyzed elite football referees in Europe from a psychological perspective in order to uncover their main concerns. A number of studies have debated the sources of stress of top-level referees in their countries. Wolfson & Neave (2007) studied English football referees and their main concerns regarding pressure and stress. Voight (2009) focused on sources of stress and coping strategies of US soccer officials, while Gencay (2009) studied the level of stress reported by Turkish referees. Kruger et al. (2012) analyzed the main stress factors of refereeing and how they influenced the performance of South African officials. Sorriano et al. (2018) revealed that stress factors outside the match are more significant and affect referees’ performances more than stress factors inside the match. Mathers & Brodie revealed that an elite referee’s performance would increase and their stress level would decrease if they were to receive specialized support, as was the case with a Scottish FIFA referee in their study.

A clear distinction should also be made between the studies. The studies that included participants from all levels identified the following sources of stress: interpersonal conflict, fear of physical harm, time pressure, peer conflicts, role-culture conflict and fear of failure, whereas the studies that focused on top-level referees had other factors as primary sources of stress, such as: human limitations during the game (wrong decisions), pressure (different types), amateur status of referees or personal state of mind.

Romanian refereeing has been studied by Crăciun & Monea (2009), who tried to uncover the stress factors of refereeing (10) and by Antonie (2022), who created a career development model, starting from referee school to inclusion on the FIFA list and studied the professionalization path of referees.

In this study, eight potential stressors were taken into consideration during interviews based on previous studies: *Romanian Referee Committee*, *observers* (as referee coach and assessment), *peer conflicts*, *amateur status of refereeing* (work and family conflicts), *mass media*, *club owners and managers*, *the image of refereeing* and *abuse* (verbal and physical).

Discussion and Results

1. Romanian Referee Committee

The Referee Committee was considered to be one of the main stressors for Romanian elite referees. The referees’ careers depend on the Referee Committee, which is responsible for appointments and promotions.

Let’s not waste time talking too much about it. In refereeing, the only things that matter are appointments and promotions. Moreover, everything in refereeing is subjective. (Referee 1)

The referees perceived the Referee Committee members as being more interested in securing their position than fighting for the referees’ interests. In 2009, the situation was even more obvious.

The committee members are more concerned about their relatives who are refereeing in the First and Second League, rather than developing Romanian refereeing. (Referee 3)

The situation is pretty similar now, although there are no longer any Referee Committee members who have relatives as referees.

The Referee Committee members are happy with their position, being appointed as referee observers in the top league. They are not interested in promoting the referees’ interest in front of the stakeholders (clubs, Football Association or Professional league) because they are afraid that they might be removed and lose their privileges. So, it’s better for them to remain silent. (Referee 5)

Moreover, there was a tension between Kyros Vassaras, the Chairman, and Alexandru Deaconu, the Vice-Chairman, which also affected the referees when the interviews were taking place. Meanwhile, Alexandru Deaconu was removed from the Referee Committee.

There’s no connection between the Referee Committee and the referees. We need a person who can go in front of the committee members and defend us. Moreover, the tension inside the Referee Committee is not good for Romanian refereeing. I think it would be really beneficial for us if we got a phone call from Kyros (Vassaras) after each match. He could give us his opinion and then we would know what to expect. (Referee 4)

At the same time, all the referees recognized Kyros Vassaras' teaching skills and the fact that he helped Romanian referees to reach the highest level of refereeing. On the other hand, he has been criticized about certain managerial decisions.

There's a huge difference in terms of preparation. Kyros is an amazing teacher and has educational skills that he can share with the others, and we are really grateful for this. Everybody was really happy with the Referee Committee three years ago, whereas if you ask referees now, most of them don't want Kyros to be chairman anymore. I have no idea what happened, but it's clear he made some managerial mistakes. (Referee 5)

2. Referee Observers

Referee observers are members of the Referee Committee and former referees. They are appointed to matches to evaluate the referees' performances. They are supposed to have an educational role in refereeing, guiding and helping referees to develop their skills. Unfortunately, most of them have no teaching skills and are not really interested in developing the referees' abilities.

2.1. Observers as referees' coach

Observers have been reported as being the second source of stress for referees, during both rounds of interviews. In 2009, the referees stated that the observers did not support the referees' job.

Each game has four referees and one observer, who should be the fifth member of the referee team. However, this doesn't always happen and it's a major issue. They think that we make mistakes on purpose. The current observers have forgotten that they were once referees and made mistakes like us. That's the biggest problem in Romanian refereeing. They forgot that they used to be referees and now they are observers. There's no referee on earth who doesn't make mistakes, but in Romania, it depends on what game went wrong, which people or club president were involved and, most importantly, who was there to defend you. (Referee 3)

Moreover, the observers were influenced by the club and could not be objective in their work.

In Romania, some observers have ulterior motives. When an observer says something, the referee can sense his hostility in the voice. The observer says: 'if I give you an eight, I will have problems with X team, while if I give you a six, then Y team will be unhappy.' He [the observer] is supposed to go to the match and provide an accurate report about the referee's team performance, including all positive and negative aspects. Unfortunately, in Romania, more than 70% of observers don't know how to interact with referees and help us in our future development. Observers never come and congratulate us and make us feel that our work is appreciated, even if we had a less than good game. (Referee 4)

In 2020, all referees had the same views about the observers and their qualities.

The observer gives you the mark and leaves or, if something controversial happened, he phones you to tell you about his decision the next day. There are only two or three observers who have something interesting to say and who want to develop the referees' performances in the future, who are also international observers. One observer told me: 'I give marks depending on the referee. If I know that he has support from different sides (political, Referee Committee or Federation), I will give him a good mark. Otherwise, I don't care.' Moreover, now we're only talking about decisions. Nobody is interested in management or other aspects of refereeing that are important. In any case, it's ridiculous to notice that an observer talked on the phone the whole match or received messages about a controversial decision from another observer and not to tell us his opinion as a referee expert. (Referee 3)

In 2009, the referees hardly recognized that their refereeing style had been influenced by observers, whereas in 2020, all of them agreed that their refereeing style had been influenced by the observers' personality and requirements in the past.

I was adapting my refereeing style depending on the observer when I started my career. If I said anything else, I would be lying. I used to think X or Y likes to be stricter or to communicate well with the players, but there came a moment when I realized that it was wrong to referee just to please an observer, not referee for myself. I went my own way and I reached this level. (Referee 2)

And another referee added:

When I was a young referee and I was depending on the observer's assessment, I didn't think it was negative. But now, when I look back, I realize it was not beneficial and each referee should have his own style no matter who is observing. (Referee 2)

In conclusion, all interviewed referees are not interested anymore in observers' assessments due to their experience and status. On the other hand, it is clear that young referees try to adapt their style to please the observers, which is a mistake and a source of stress. As it was previously mentioned, pressure from the clubs was replaced by pressure from the Referee Committee.

2.2 Observers' assessments

After a game, the observer is responsible for assessing the referee's performance. Depending on the assessment, the referee might officiate next week, or not.

The observer's assessment is subjective as the Referee Committee's opinion about a referee is subjective. Nothing in refereeing is objective. Only the assessment matters, nothing else. (Referee 1)

All top Romanian league games are broadcast live on TV. Thus, everything is based on TV images and not on other aspects such as management or refereeing style.

These days TV is the judge and jury. Everyone is afraid. The observer is more interested to save face in front of the Referee Committee and doesn't really care about the referee. Everyone is interested in controversial decisions: whether or not it was a penalty. But refereeing is more complex. The Referee Committee is also resuming refereeing via video clips from our games concerning penalty situations, or yellow or red card situations. There is virtually no discussion about the most essential aspects of refereeing, such as player management, positioning, etc. (Referee 5)

The consequence of a poor assessment for referees is that they will receive no appointments in the near future which, in turn, is a source of stress for them.

The assessments are a nightmare for referees because the Referee Committee takes some drastic decisions against us, for example, not appointing us for long periods if we make a mistake. (Referee 4)

3. Peer conflicts

Peer conflicts is one of the sensitive subjects in refereeing. In 2009, it was even more sensitive because some referees from the top league had fathers on the Referee Committee or observers at the highest level. One of the referees still had the courage to mention that peer conflicts was a stress factor in refereeing.

The elite referees' group is not formed by the best referees from Romania. All the problems will be solved and the envy between referees will disappear when the FIFA list is created based on meritocracy. The FIFA list should consist of the best referees who have the best fitness, have the best knowledge of the Laws of the Game, and a great social life (inside and outside the family). But when you hear different things about your colleagues, you wonder why these kinds of people are promoted to the international level. (Referee 4)

In 2020, the regulations clearly stated that referees cannot have relatives working as observers at the same level. Moreover, all referees now state that there was no opportunity for friendship between referees.

There was never any friendship between referees. There are 25 referees in Liga 1 and there are groups of three to five referees who are friends. It's natural. (Referee 5)

This tension between referees is also caused by the Referee Committee, which appoints referees who do not have matches as TV spotters (they make technical reports about other colleagues).

TV spotters are an additional source of stress for us. (Referee 4)

Unfortunately, referees recently reported that peer conflicts are a source of stress for them. They do not feel comfortable about criticizing the decisions of other colleagues or the fact that they might be the subject of criticism from others themselves. Furthermore, the match appointments are subject to peer conflicts.

There are situations when one colleague didn't give a clear penalty but he still gets an appointment on the next match day, whereas I performed well but I had to stay at home. We feel that the Referee Committee really scrutinizes some of the referees (watches the performance closely in the smallest details), even though some of us are appointed immediately although they make an obvious mistake and receive a low mark from the observer. This favoritism creates tensions between referees. (Referee 4)

4. Amateur status of refereeing

Referees still have amateur status in Romanian football. Consequently, they have to have other jobs apart from refereeing. An important source of stress is prioritizing between refereeing, family and work.

4.1. Job pressure

The demands of the job sometimes put referees in a difficult position in order to balance such demands with refereeing.

We have to travel long distances for matches and we can't always travel by air. In terms of a job, you have to find one in which people understand your passion for refereeing, or run your own business. Thus, we're always in a hurry after matches, driving all night long to get home or go to work, which can create a lot of stress. (Referee 2)

4.2. Family support

In 2020, Referee 2 described the difficulties he had to face in order to be a top-level referee:

There's also the other side of the coin. Nobody knows what it's like to spend every night in a car driving, the fact that you probably missed most family events, that you don't see your children growing up and, most of the time, my wife has had to be both a mother and a father. We are so passionate and it's almost impossible to divide your time between family, refereeing and work. (Referee 2)

During both rounds of the interviews, the referees highlighted the importance of family and that family support is important in order to perform well. In 2020, all five referees stated that refereeing is their job and that they focus exclusively on it.

5. Mass media

By far the most stressful factor outside of the game is the mass media. This was revealed during both rounds of the interviews.

Policemen, garbage collectors and football referees are perceived as negative jobs by people all over the world, but it's only referees who are constantly under the media spotlights. (Referee 1)

And another referee added:

The media plays an important role because it's not objective; each journalist has an affinity towards a club, or a team leader. Moreover, talk shows are clearly driven by certain subjects and certain trends. (Referee 4)

Although Romanian refereeing has had a positive image in recent years and regained its credibility, the media is still blamed by referees for creating a negative image of the job of officiating.

The sport talk shows are the biggest problem, because they only present the negative aspects of refereeing. (Referee 2)

And he was supported by another referee who considered that the Romanian Referee Committee should have better way of communicating.

It's really important to communicate well with the mass media otherwise it will always find subjects with which to criticize you. The mass media is unhappy about the Referee Committee's lack of communication. The Referee Committee should have a spokesperson. A former referee would be the perfect choice. After each match day, they could explain the most controversial situations and the decisions of the Referee Committee regarding such situations. (Referee 1)

6. Club managers and owners

Before the corruption scandals from 2009, the referees were happy to be suspended for two to three matches, even if they were innocent, because other colleagues were excluded from refereeing after one game. An example of this is Ionică Serea, who was excluded from refereeing after a match in which the owner of FC Vaslui complained that his team had deserved two penalties. The club owner was a former FIFA referee, Adrian Porumboiu, who was very influential in Romanian refereeing, although he was also the owner of the club.

I had to get over difficult situations when I hadn't refereed a match for three or four months due to the clubs' influence over the Referee Committee ... There were situations when members of the Referee Committee told me that I'd made the right decisions on the pitch during the games, but that I had to be suspended... (Referee 1)

Another referee recognized that there were situations in which club managers had attempted to bribe referees, a fact which was proved some months later when the first corruption scandal emerged.

The mentality of a team manager is as follows: if he offers you something and you refuse, he doesn't regard you as an honest person but thinks you have received more from the opponents. (Referee 4)

In 2009, Referee 1 directly referred to the influence of clubs over refereeing. In 2020, the same referee said:

In my opinion, the pressure from club managers decreased dramatically and was replaced by pressure from the Referee Committee. (Referee 1)

And he was supported by Referee 2:

Club managers had a huge influence on refereeing 10 or 12 years ago, meaning the Referee Committee could not do its best for referees as long as it was not 100% independent. On the other hand, I don't remember there being any major scandals in Romanian refereeing in the last four or five years. Moreover, the clubs can no longer step on referees' necks. (Referee 2)

In conclusion, club managers were powerful in the past and, before 2010, could influence a referee's career through their decisions. At the moment, club managers lost their direct influence over refereeing and can put pressure on refereeing only through the media (TV shows). They still try to create a negative image of refereeing, criticizing referees' decisions whenever possible during the TV shows on which they are invited as permanent guests.

7. The image of refereeing

In winter 2009, when the first round of interviews took place, the image of Romanian refereeing had been highly affected by the numerous media scandals about refereeing. Refereeing as an institution lost its credibility in the eyes of the public – a fact which was soon demonstrated by the exclusion of Referee Committee members due to corruption.

The "glorious" past of former referees is the main issue and people no longer accept human error. It's hard to accept that people think that referees are thieves. Thieves are people who steal from pockets. On the other hand, a funny thing is that referees are the only thieves in the world who are stealing (make an obvious mistake during a match) and leaving the "crime" scene (the stadium) escorted by the police. I think we need some time to regain our credibility. (Referee 4)

More than ten years later, the same person stated:

Refereeing has regained its credibility and nobody can tell that someone has lately given a brown envelope to X or Y referee. (Referee 4)

In 2014, the Romanian FA appointed Kyros Vassaras, a UEFA Referee Committee member, as Chairman of the Romanian Referee Committee. It was a crucial moment for Romanian refereeing because it was the start of a

new era in which referees regained their credibility. All five referees stated in various ways that Romanian refereeing now has a positive image.

8. Abuse

Previous studies on the stress of elite referees revealed that they are not concerned about abuse. The same applies to Romanian elite referees although one referee found it disturbing that some people might criticize his performances, as happened in the interview in 2020.

There are times when uneducated people tell you different things in order to denigrate you, no matter where you are, even in a restaurant having the dinner with the family or friends. That's life – it's the price we have to pay for our job. (Referee 2)

Moreover, there are situations when performance on the pitch might also affect other family members:

There were situations when the classmates of the child of a referee told him: 'Your dad is corrupt. He gave a ridiculous penalty in the last match.' Just imagine the psychological effect on the child. It would undoubtedly influence his education and development. (Referee 4)

The remaining referees did not mention potential physical or verbal abuse as a source of stress for them. Physical and verbal abuse are more common in refereeing on lower levels, especially in grassroots football.

Conclusions

Romanian referees not only have to face stressors inside the game but also stressors outside the game. Table 1 presents a comparison between 2009 and 2020 from the referees' perspective.

Stressors inside the game		2009	2020
Romanian Referee Committee		x	x
Referee observers			
	As referees' coach	x	x
	Assessments	x	x
Peer conflicts		x	x
Stressors outside the game			
Amateur status of refereeing			
	Job	x	x
	Family	x	x
Mass media		x	x
Club managers and owners		x	
The image of refereeing		x	
Abuse			
	Verbal		
	Physical		

Table 1. Stressors for Romanian elite referees

Stressors inside the game are the same and nothing has changed. *The Referee Committee* is the most significant stress factor because it has the greatest influence on a referee's career as long as it is in charge of appointments and promotions. The referees consider that *the observers* do not have teaching skills and are more interested in looking after their own interests than taking the referees' side in debatable situations. Moreover, the *observers' assessments* negatively affect referees and it is considered that the assessments are subjective and not always objective, affecting future appointments. There will always be *peer conflicts* as long as referees feel that there is not an honest competition between them and that the observers and the Referee Committee protect certain referees.

On the other hand, stressors outside the game suffered changes that helped referees. The *amateur status of refereeing* is still present as a stress factor as long as football referees have full-time jobs and it is hard to find an employer who understands their passion for football. At the same time, refereeing is also very time consuming. Thus, there are many situations in which referees are not part of important family occasions. The *mass media*, via TV shows and newspapers, looks for mistakes by referees and sometimes creates artificial scandals in order to put pressure on refereeing. In 2009, *club owners and managers* and the *image of refereeing* affected referees as stressors, while in 2020 these sources of stress had disappeared. Club interference in refereeing disappeared, which helped referees to perform better and, as a consequence, Romanian refereeing regained its credibility through the referees' performances both domestically and internationally. Although

previous studies have identified *physical and verbal abuse* as a stressor for referees, this does not apply to Romanian elite referees, as it was proved during the interviews.

In conclusion, there has been a slight change in stress factors between 2009 and 2020 in elite refereeing in Romania. Game stressors inside the game are the same and there has been no change. Unfortunately, those people (members of the Referee Committee and observers) who are supposed to support referees' work are the main source of stress for them. The only notable changes during the interviews are stressors outside of the game. Romanian refereeing has regained its credibility and has a positive image due to referees' performance on the pitch in recent years. In terms of study reliability, being part of the group of Romanian elite referees gave me the chance to experience myself the stress of the Romanian top league and gave me a better understanding of Romanian football refereeing and the stress factors that affect referees' performances.

The Romanian Referee Committee should be aware of its impact on referees' mental well-being and take more care of the psychological aspects of refereeing which have a direct impact over referees' performances on the pitch and how their decisions influence referees' mental health and the competition between referees so that they will no longer feel that some referees are treated more favorably than others. At the same time, psychological support for referees from mental coaches would significantly help to prevent the impact of stress regarding their performances. Further studies should focus on potential solutions for preventing or eliminating stress for elite referees. Moreover, the implementation of VAR should be studied in depth in order to discover its impact over football refereeing and how its implementation impacts the stress factors in elite football refereeing.

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