



The research laser under construction at the Horia Hulubei institute in Măgurele, Romania.

CORRUPTION ROW EMBROILS TOP ROMANIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE

The centre hosts a powerful scientific laser – but some scientists say that it is being poorly managed.

By Alison Abbott

Romania's largest scientific institute – the site of a world-leading research laser – is being rocked by a series of disputes involving its director. In July, a trade union representing scientists at the Horia Hulubei National Institute for Physics and Nuclear Engineering (IFIN-HH) near Bucharest lodged a corruption complaint against their director, Nicolae-Victor Zamfir, with Romanian public prosecutors. The researchers allege that Zamfir's reappointment as the institute's leader was illegal. They also say that he has mismanaged IFIN-HH and the project to build the laser as part of the European Union's Extreme Light Infrastructure (ELI) initiative, which is putting Romania at risk of being cut off from the venture.

In the complaint, the researchers protest against the extension in February of Zamfir's contract as head of IFIN-HH by Romania's secretary of state for research, Dragoş Ciuparu, for nearly another four years. They say that this is problematic because Zamfir is 68 years old – 3 years over the legal age limit for such an official public position. They also filed a complaint against Ciuparu, accusing him of abuse of office, and allege that Zamfir is complicit

in the abuse.

"Many IFIN-HH scientists don't want Zamfir to lead their institute because they say he is disrupting their science and jeopardizing chances for Romania to be part of ELI," says union representative George Epurescu, a physicist at the National Institute for Laser, Plasma and Radiation Physics near Bucharest. "We don't believe his extension is even legal." The union represents 45 of IFIN-HH's 250 scientists.

Zamfir and Ciuparu deny abuse of office. Zamfir says that the age limits on the

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directorship were brought in only after he was originally appointed in 2004, and that the extension to his contract aligns with laws in existence when he signed a previous contract.

Zamfir also rejects allegations of poor management. "IFIN-HH is at the level of the most prestigious infrastructures in Europe and worldwide," he says.

ELI is an €875-million (US\$1-billion) project that is building three state-of-the-art research

lasers in Eastern Europe. The other two sites, in Hungary and the Czech Republic, will open to researchers worldwide next year. But the Romanian facility, which is called ELI-Nuclear Physics (ELI-NP) and is designed to carry out cutting-edge research in nuclear photonics, has fallen behind schedule because of problems with a key component, the γ -ray source. This will generate an intense and brilliant beam of γ -rays that will allow detailed study of the structure of atomic nuclei.

In 2018, disagreements broke out between Zamfir and EuroGammaS, the consortium building the γ -ray source, over its installation. Zamfir cancelled the contract with EuroGammaS and contracted Lyncean Technologies of Fremont, California, to finish the source, pushing its completion back to 2023. The delay means that Romania has been left out of the ELI's next crucial phase: in May, the two other countries did not include Romania in their application to the European Commission to form a consortium that will add other EU partners to ultimately govern ELI and share its operational costs.

The European Commission says that it is keen to see ELI-NP back on track. "The commission is aware of, and has been closely monitoring, implementation challenges of the ELI-Nuclear Physics project, and is in close contact with all ELI partners to discuss the way forward," a commission spokesperson told *Nature*.

Staff tensions

Some researchers at IFIN-HH say that, more broadly, over the past few months, Zamfir has made personnel and organizational decisions that have created tensions with staff. In May, 95 IFIN-HH scientists signed an open letter calling for his reappointment to be rescinded.

The signatories also complained that, in April, Zamfir dissolved the institute's scientific council, which is elected by the permanent scientific staff. Zamfir says the electorate should have included other staff.

The extension of Zamfir's contract was the final straw, says Livius Trache, a former scientific director at IFIN-HH. In May, Trache wrote to IFIN-HH's scientific collaborators in other countries, saying: "We have a war between management and researchers at the institute." The letter criticizes Zamfir's leadership and stresses the value of ELI-NP, which it says needs to be rescued from bad management.

On 24 July, Zamfir fired Trache from IFIN-HH because of what Zamfir described to *Nature* as a "breach of the regulations forbidding the spreading of false information about the institute". Nearly 70 international colleagues defended Trache in an open letter to the science minister and Ciuparu on 9 August, describing him as an "international key leader in the field of nuclear physics and astrophysics", and requesting his reinstatement at IFIN-HH.