

Elephant left to die as Romania's zoos struggle

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in Bucharest

EUROPE'S OLDEST elephant died after Romanian police set their dogs on it when it refused to enter its winter quarters, a new report has revealed.

Bucharest zoo staff originally claimed that Gaya, 48, had died of old age. But a report commissioned by the city council, which owns the zoo, found that keepers had asked local police to set their dogs on the elephant to force it to move from its pen.

The scandal emerged six months after Romania's entry into the EU turned the spotlight on the fate of animals in the country's 29 zoos.

Animal rights groups had hoped that EU membership, with new laws on minimum cage sizes, would improve the situation. But without the funding to make the changes, zoo managements have been left with animals they can no longer afford to keep, or to re-house.

The new report reveals that Gaya panicked, fell, and broke a leg, after being bitten a number of times by the dogs. Eyewitnesses said the female

elephant, which weighed four tons, was too heavy to lift and had been left on the ground for two days by zoo staff, who did not know what else to do.

According to the report, the animal cried out continuously until it died, probably from stress and respiratory problems. It also revealed that less valuable zoo animals had been killed as food for more expensive reptiles, and noted that no staff member had been fired or faced any criminal charges.

At the zoo last week one visitor, Mirela Ionescu, 32, said: "I had hoped things might be better now but I can see little has changed. Zoos here in Romania are even sadder places than they were."

Other zoos are also struggling to keep going. In Timisoara in western Romania, zoo managers have three lions which they are expecting to have to shoot because time has run out to find them a new home.

Mihaita Afrenie, the zoo's manager, said: "Putting them down seems to be our only option now because the new EU rules say that their cage isn't big enough."