

ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (AA) IN ROMANIA: AA’S BEGINNINGS IN ROMANIA, A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: This paper aimed to trace the evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in Romania from its establishment there in 1991, focusing on the experiences and efforts of early members to develop the fellowship, disseminate the AA message and create relationships of cooperation and trust with existing religious and healthcare institutions. A qualitative ethnographic study was conducted between March and April 2021 and included 7 participants from the first two AA groups founded in Romania. Data were collected using ethnographic interviews and content analysis was used to obtain a comprehensive synthesis of the data. In addition, archival research was used. Four research categories emerged: AA’s founding moments in Romania, AA’s development in Romania, AA’s relationship with professionals, and perceptions of the disease of alcoholism, then and now. Results suggest that AA’s development in Romania was slow due to the political context, lack of information and professionals’ reluctance to support AA. In addition, there is a need to build strong relationships with professionals in the area of substance abuse, social work and religious institutions to facilitate recovery for those who suffer from alcoholism.

Keywords: Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Romania, Communist Regime, Disease Concept of Alcoholism, Perceptions on Alcoholism.

Résumé : Cet article visait à retracer l'évolution des Alcooliques Anonymes (AA) en Roumanie depuis sa création en 1991, en se concentrant sur les expériences et les efforts des premiers membres pour développer la fraternité, diffuser le message des AA et créer des relations de coopération et de confiance avec institutions religieuses et sanitaires existantes. Une étude ethnographique qualitative a été menée entre mars et avril 2021 et a inclus 7 participants des deux premiers groupes AA fondés en Roumanie. Les données ont été recueillies à l'aide d'entretiens ethnographiques et une analyse de contenu a été utilisée pour obtenir une synthèse complète des données. De plus, la recherche d'archives a été utilisée. Quatre catégories de recherche ont émergé : les moments fondateurs des AA en Roumanie, le développement des AA en Roumanie, les relations des AA avec les professionnels et les perceptions de la maladie de l'alcoolisme, hier et aujourd'hui. Les résultats suggèrent que le développement des AA en Roumanie a été lent en raison du contexte politique, du manque d'informations et de la réticence des professionnels à soutenir les AA. De plus, il est nécessaire d'établir des relations solides avec des

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professionnels dans le domaine de la toxicomanie, du travail social et des institutions religieuses pour faciliter le rétablissement des personnes qui souffrent d'alcoolisme.

Mots-clés : Alcooliques Anonymes (AA), Roumanie, régime communiste, concept de maladie de l'alcoolisme, perceptions de l'alcoolisme.

Rezumat: Această lucrare și-a propus să urmărească evoluția Alcoolicilor Anonimi (AA) în România de la înființarea sa în 1991, concentrându-se pe experiențele și eforturile primilor membri de a dezvolta camaraderia, a disemina mesajul AA și a crea relații de cooperare și încredere cu instituțiile religioase și sanitare existente. Un studiu etnografic calitativ a fost realizat în perioada martie – aprilie 2021 și a inclus 7 participanți din primele două grupuri AA fondate în România. Datele au fost colectate folosind interviuri etnografice; analiza de conținut a fost utilizată pentru a obține o sinteză cuprinzătoare a datelor. În plus, s-au folosit cercetări arhivistice. S-au conturat patru categorii de cercetare: momentele fondatoare ale AA în România, dezvoltarea AA în România, relația AA cu profesioniștii și percepțiile despre boala alcoolismului, atunci și acum. Rezultatele sugerează că dezvoltarea AA în România a fost lentă din cauza contextului politic, a lipsei de informații și a reticenței profesioniștilor de a sprijini AA. În plus, este nevoie de a construi relații puternice cu profesioniștii din domeniul abuzului de substanțe, asistență socială și instituții religioase pentru a facilita recuperarea celor care suferă de alcoolism.

Cuvinte cheie: Alcoolicii Anonimi (AA), România, regimul comunist, conceptul de boală a alcoolismului, percepții asupra alcoolismului.

1. Introduction

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935 and it is one of the oldest and most popular mutual-help organizations which aims to help individuals who suffer from alcoholism to attain and maintain sobriety by spiritual means (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001; Rose, 2021). It is a fellowship of men and women who share their experiences, strength and hope with each other, as well as a program of recovery from alcoholism based on the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (Kurtz, 2010; Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001). As Makela et al. (1996) state, AA is one of the great success stories of our century which started as a mutual-help movement, an untraditional organization where affiliation is based on individual life experiences, auto proclamation and identification. However, the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill W. and Doctor Bob refer to AA as a fellowship, not as an organization (AA Grapevine, Preamble, 1946).

AA's origins and the early years of AA in the United States (US)

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935 in Akron, Ohio, USA, by two men suffering from alcoholism, William Griffith Wilson (Bill W., the AA name), and Robert Holbrook Smith (Doctor Bob, the AA name). Bill W. and Doctor Bob first met in Akron, in the lobby of the May-flower Hotel, where Bill W. was alone on a failed business trip which left him worrying about a possible relapse. To avoid a relapse, he knew he needed to talk with another alcoholic, who turned out to be Doctor Bob. Although Doctor Bob agreed to meet him for only a few minutes to talk due to his reluctance, their meeting lasted for more than ten hours and the

discussion remains anonymous until today. A few weeks following this meeting, on the 10th of June 1935, Doctor Bob became sober and this date is considered to be the founding moment of Alcoholics Anonymous (Makela et al., 1996). However, Kurtz (2010) in his book, „Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous”, has a different perspective on the founding moment of AA. The author identified four „founding moments” different from the official founding date of the AA fellowship: the meeting between Rowland H. and Dr Carl Gustav Jung in 1931 (the idea of a vital spiritual experience as the solution for alcoholism), the visit of Bill’s W. schoolmate, Edwin in November 1934, Bill’s spiritual experience in Towns Hospital a month later, in December 1934 and the meeting between Bill W. and Doctor Bob in May 1935) (Kurtz, 2010; White & Kurtz, 2008). In the US, AA’s development started after the main AA textbook (the Big Book) was published in 1939 and its fast growth was considered to be due to mass media support and the support of influential figures of the time such as John D. Rockefeller Jr. who became involved in The General Service Board (the headquarters of AA) (Kurtz, 1995). AA's roots reside in The Oxford Group religious principles which served as a basis for the 12 Steps spiritual program of Alcoholics Anonymous (Peterson, 1992; Trice & Staudenmeier, 1989).

AA outside of the US, AA's expansion elsewhere

Alcoholics Anonymous expansion began at the end of World War II and after the AA literature was published, spreading across the Atlantic and the Pacific Rim, in the south borders (Makela et al., 1996). Given that the AA literature was originally written in English and the US had a strong Protestant culture it was only natural that the diffusion of AA began in Anglo-Saxon countries and the Protestant world (Makela et al., 1996). The diffusion of AA outside the US followed the same pattern as its foundation. As Bill W. travelled for business in Akron, where he met Doctor Bob and they founded AA, other AA members from the US, generally middle-class workers, carried the message of AA when travelling for work, tourism or when moving to a different country, founding AA groups (Kurtz, 2010). Highly economically developed countries which reported strong ties with the US and gained independence after World War II were the first ones to embrace AA groups (Makela et al., 1996). On the other hand, countries with French colonial backgrounds reported a lack of AA groups shortly after World War II ended, so Makela et al. (1996) concluded that these differences between countries with French and British colonial backgrounds could be partially explained by internal social and cultural differences.

The diffusion of AA in European countries

The first European Alcoholics Anonymous support group was founded in Ireland, an English-speaking country, in 1946. The Irish Connor F., a former tavern owner who became an AA member in Philadelphia travelled to Ireland with his wife and during their vacation, they visited a Dublin sanitarium. The two were introduced by a doctor to a patient from Belfast suffering from alcoholism, called Richard P, with whom they shared the AA message of hope. After reading the Big

Book, Richard P. contacted AA members from Australia and with their help, the first AA group was founded in Ireland at the Country Shop on Dublin's St. Stephen's Green (Butler & Jordan, 1997). Among the challenges that AA has faced in Ireland were the Catholic Church, the dominant religious institution in Ireland, and the health care system which did not support AA at the beginning (Butler and Jordan, 2007). Finally, the Catholic Church accepted AA and by the end of 1970, AA could be found in all counties of Ireland and had become part of Irish social and cultural life (Sharma, 2011). One year later after the foundation of the first European AA group in Ireland, in 1947, the expansion of AA in Europe began. AA groups were founded in Rome, Italy and Paris, France, England, Norway and Sweden. The next year, the first AA groups in Germany and Finland were founded and in 1949 AA reached Scotland and Netherlands. Denmark (1950) and Austria (1963) followed. AA's expansion was strongly supported by direct contacts with the US AA members, who helped their fellows to start AA groups and sometimes even sponsored countries to receive AA (Makela et al., 1996).

The founding moments of AA in Romania in the context of the Communist regime

In a country with a history of dictatorship, terror, and institutionalized violence under the communist regime which started in 1947 and lasted until 1989, social control, repression and censorship were a common reality (Curtois et al., 1997; Cesareanu, 2005; Bichescu et al., 2005) and the disease concept of alcoholism was unknown to both professionals and commoners. Alcoholics Anonymous was also unknown in Romania, „no Romanian had ever heard of Alcoholics Anonymous” according to an article which reveals the story of the beginning of AA in Romania (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p.1). As a consequence, the first AA mutual-help group from Romania was founded only in 1991 in Timisoara city and currently, there are 66 AA groups in 35 cities. There are believed to be around 1000 recovered alcoholics and unlike other countries, there are no AA mutual-help groups in prisons and psychiatric hospitals, except the Clinical Psychiatric Hospital Dr Al. Obregia and, recently, the St. Stelian Center for the Evaluation and Treatment of Toxic Addictions for Young People are both located in the capital city of Romania, Bucharest. Only in 2018, the first women-only AA group in Romania was founded by two recovering ladies and it is located within the St. Stelian Youth Addiction Evaluation and Treatment Center. Within a developing country which fought the communist regime and still faces some of its consequences, the foundation and development of AA have faced and still face barriers which could explain its slow expansion. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to document the founding moments of AA in Romania and to identify the barriers that stood in the way of its development, focusing on the experiences and efforts of early AA members to found the first AA mutual-help groups and to develop the fellowship, as well as to disseminate the AA message and create relationships of cooperation and trust with existing religious and healthcare institutions.

2. Methods, participants, and instruments

The present study used qualitative methods. Seven in-depth interviews were used in gathering the data. In addition, archival research was used, mainly drawing on primary sources in AA archives in Romania. This method seemed most suitable for gaining insight into the founding moments of AA in Romania and its development through early AA members' experiences. The interviews were recorded between March and April 2021 using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 10 open questions. Each interview lasted between 20 and 70 minutes (an average of 40 min.). The open questions were related to members' first contact with AA and their first AA meeting, AA's beginnings in Romania, the AA meetings format, questions about the AA founders of the first two AA groups from Romania (Timisoara and Bucharest), AA's non-alcoholic supporters and trustees, about people's information and perceptions regarding AA and about the disease concept of alcoholism as well as questions related to AA's development and evolution in Romania. Even though a semi-structured interview guide was used, the interviewer allowed participants to participate proactively to understand their perspective and perception of the founding moments of AA in Romania and the life context at the time.

The early AA members participating in the study

The study included 7 men aged between 60 and 80 years old. Most of them have been founders and/or members of the first two AA groups from Romania from their beginning in 1991 (Timisoara) and 1993 (Bucharest). Some of them have attended AA meetings for a period reaching almost 30 years and some of them have retired from AA. They have different ages, sobriety ages, and time in AA and residential environments, as listed in *Table I*. (see in the Annexes). The name of all the men has been changed to protect their anonymity.

Analysis and categorisation

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed following the research objectives, seeking to establish the founding moments of AA in the Romanian context, to gain insight into AA's development, to understand people's mindset regarding AA and alcoholism, then and now, and its impact on the development of AA in Romania from the views of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Content analysis was performed to obtain an intelligible, interpretative and comprehensive synthesis. Following this process, four categories of analysis have emerged: AA's founding moments in Romania, AA's development in Romania, AA's relationship with professionals, and Perceptions of the disease of alcoholism, then and now. *Table II* (see in the Annexes) provides a summary of the final themes and theoretical codes.

Ethical issues

The data presented in this paper derive from ethnographic interviews recorded and transcribed. All participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study and all reports were kept completely anonymous ensuring

confidentiality. To ensure participants that their identities are not revealed, the name of the participants have been changed and the data related to their profile description was restricted to data on age, sobriety age and setting. The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the UB-FSAS (anonymized for peer review), Doctoral School of Sociology.

3. Results

a. AA's founding moments in Romania – archival research

In the context of the communist regime of Romania, the authorities did not allow Alcoholics Anonymous to operate before 1989. The history of AA in Romania began in Timisoara city, in the 1980s, when Fran P., an American AA member temporarily relocated from the US and established in Romania as an English Literature teacher at the University of Timisoara. As Fran P. himself wrote in a Grapevine article, he lived in Romania along with his wife, both recovering alcoholics, between 1984 and 1985. At the time there were no AA groups in Romania so the two of them started AA meetings in their apartment and called themselves Group Number One. His wife and children had to return to Washington State, so he found himself alone and with no support for his disease (Grapevine, Grupa Una, July 1990). Fran P. recalls he saw many people who could benefit from AA, but he „was quite hesitant to say anything to anyone in a country where suspicion and fear were a daily fact of life” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p. 1). In addition, he was quite sure that his apartment and phone were bugged and that his letters were verified before being sent. He had to be very careful about what he said or wrote because, „ the government was very hostile toward any new or different club or organization, fearing that such structures might be a cover for „subversive” political activities” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p. 1). One night, Fran received a strange visit from a young Romanian woman, called Rodica. She wrote him a note arguing that she needs to talk to him secretly. The two of them met and the woman asked him about the message he brings from America. Fran initially thought that she is interested in his work at the university because she was a teacher as well, so he started to talk about it. He mentioned alcohol and drinking in his speech and saw Rodica's reaction. He figured out she was interested in AA and started to share his experience with AA. At the time, Rodica was struggling with alcoholism and trying to find a solution for her troubles. Fran borrowed her the AA literature and they started to have secret AA meetings almost daily. Fran and Rodica used to meet in her apartment, in the park, on benches or even walking, so the first AA group in Romania „proved to be a travelling group-meeting from place to place as circumstance dictated” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p. 3). They met this way for five months until Fran had to return to Washington State. The day he had to live he found his apartment was searched and that his personal and AA tapes were erased by the Securitate. He told these facts to Rodica and took the train to leave Romania, but at the borders, the train stopped and he was taken to interrogation by the

Securitate. Fran was finally released and was able to return home. Since the event, he and Rodica agreed on a simple code for the letters and their phone conversations (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p. 4). This lasted for four years when in 1989, the Romanian revolution took place and AA could be brought to light. This was the moment when Fran found out from Rodica that six months after his departure, the Securitate had visited her and they had asked her different questions about him and their activities. He also found out that she was „permitted to correspond without reporting the topic of every letter and every one of her phone calls” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p. 4) and that „the words *fellowship*, *cooperation*, *group* and *God* had to be avoided at any price, as illegal” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p. 4). Although their first attempt to create the first Romanian AA group had failed, because of the Communist government which could not accept the spiritual ideas of Alcoholics Anonymous, relying upon a Higher Power to recover from alcoholism, they did not give up. At the time, „no Romanian had ever heard of Alcoholics Anonymous” (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1990, p. 1). Before Fran returned to the USA, Rodica took The Fifth Step with him and afterwards they started a long-term correspondence - Fran taught Rodica all he knew about AA and the 12 Steps. She started to work the 12 Steps program as a loaner. Rodica managed to maintain her sobriety as a loner with Fran`s help. At the time, in Seattle, in the 90s between the 5th and 8th of July, there was to come „AA's Ninth International Convention – „Fifty-five Years – One Day at a Time”, an anniversary AA convention where Rodica was invited to represent Romania. AA members from the USA gathered money and facilitated her participation. That was the first year when the Romanian flag was waved and Rodica`s story has been heard by all participants (AA delegates and members from over 71 countries). During her stay in Seattle, Rodica attended as many AA meetings as she could to learn about AA and the 12 Steps program. She returned to Romania determined to find the first AA group. It was not until February 1991 that the first AA Group in Romania was to be set up in Timisoara. It was founded by two ladies and called „Group One”. By 1992 Group One had already gathered 14 AA members and two different locations. „Group One” has been operating without interruption since 1991 and it is the basis of the entire AA community in Romania. To share the 12 Steps program with other alcoholics, Rodica translated and copied different AA materials she had from the USA AA members. Between the 26th and 27th of November 1992, an informal conference was organized at the University of Timisoara. Students, police officers and psychiatrists from Timisoara and Arad were invited. The purpose of the conference was to share information about AA. The same year marked the publishing of the first Romanian AA magazine, edited by Rodica, and called „Noi Înşine” – written by alcoholics for alcoholics. On the 27th of November 1992, a second AA group was founded in Arad. In 1993, a third AA group was founded in the capital city of Romania, Bucharest by Petrica and Damian, two alcoholics hospitalized in Clinical Psychiatric Hospital Prof. Dr Alexandru Obregia, with the help of Dr Doina Constantinescu and Patricia and Lee, an A.A. couple from the U.S.

AA's founding moments in Timisoara city – interview data

The interviews revealed information about the first contact with AA of the early AA members and founders and their experience and perception of the events that preceded the foundation of the first AA groups from Romania. In an interview, an early AA member from Timisoara recalls:

„It was in 1992 when I first heard about AA from an old drinking companion, an AA member at the time, who gave me some AA materials which seemed to be interesting, but at the time I thought it was too simple for me to work. It was only in 1997 that I first got to an AA meeting... Unofficially I know that the first attempts to find an AA group in Romania were started in Timisoara in 1987 by Rodica and another woman, called Viki who no longer lives. Rodica no longer lives in Romania and I don't have any information about her. They were the first two AA members of Group One, Timisoara.” (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA, Timisoara)

His story validates the results of archival research regarding the foundation of the first AA group from Romania since there wasn't possible to contact the two founders of Group One, Rodica and Viki. Catalin, an early member of the first AA group from Bucharest emphasizes the story told by Stan.

„Two years after my first AA meeting I contacted Lucia, one of the founders of the first AA group from Romania, Timisoara. She told me the story behind the founding moments of AA in Romania. Lucia and Rodica, both teachers, have learned about AA from a Mormon family from the US who gave them AA materials. The two of them met as an AA group secretly in university classrooms until the end of 1988 when Securitate found out about their meetings and forbade them to meet again. Two years after the fall of the communist regime, in December 1989, they were able to meet again as „Grupa Una” (in 1991), the first AA group from Romania.” (Catalin, 58 years old, 21 years in AA, Bucharest)

The birth of the first AA mutual-help group in Bucharest, the capital city of Romania – interview data

Information about the founding moments of the first AA group from Bucharest was easier to obtain since one of the founders of this group was available and willing to share his experience. In addition, we were able to interview early members of this group and this allowed us to create a clearer picture of the AA's founding moments in Bucharest. Marius, one of the founders of the first AA group from Bucharest, recounts in an interview:

„The foundation of the first AA group in Bucharest was possible with the help of two Mormons, Patricia and Lee, and with the help and support of Dr Doina Constantinesc, the Head of the 8th Section at the Clinical Psychiatric Hospital Dr Al. Obregia. There, I met Petrică and we were the first two AA members from Bucharest. At the time, we were only five or six people attending the AA meetings, Petrică and myself along with men hospitalized for treating their

alcoholism. We barely had any AA materials." (Marius, 65 years old, 28 years in AA, Bucharest)

An early AA member also recalls the way the AA meetings were held at the time:

„When I first came to AA, there was no AA literature and no Preamble, so we were reading the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions from loose papers translated from different languages. Later we were able to copy the Big Book and read it. Since 1996 AA some materials came from GSO and only after 2000-2002 we started to have AA literature." (Catalin, 58 years old, 21 years in AA, Bucharest)

The interviews have highlighted the difficulties faced by the AA founders and early members in conducting the AA meetings without proper AA materials and literature and their shared efforts in obtaining and providing the AA meeting and participants with these materials.

b. AA's development in Romania – interview data

In an interview, Stan shared his enthusiasm about the development of AA in Romania since its beginning:

„Since I began to attend AA, I think AA's development was fulminating. When I first came to AA, I think there were five or six AA groups in Romania and now I believe there are around fifty-nine." (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA, Timisoara)

Perceptions of the development of AA in Romania were different. An early AA member from Bucharest pointed out some of the barriers AA encountered in those early years.

„AA's development in Bucharest was not fast or easy. When the hospital location went into renovation we had to meet at our homes or in public locations such as parks, but this was difficult since we had to find unpopulated areas. We were able to hold AA meetings at the American Library and the Anglican Church for short periods. People were reluctant when hearing about AA." (Dan, 52 years old, 29 years in AA, Bucharest)

Although Timisoara was the city where AA was born on Romanian soil, it seems that presently Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, holds the first place when it comes to the number of AA groups. In this regard, an early AA member shares the following:

„Here, in Bucharest, we are truly blessed. We can attend AA meetings daily if we want to. We can even choose which AA group we want to go to on a certain day as there are two AA meetings on the same day, in different locations." (Sandu, 68 years old, 28 years in AA, Bucharest).

c. AA's relationship with professionals – archival research and interview data

Healthcare institutions

The interviews revealed that only a few psychiatrists and physicians knew about AA and were willing to support its development. In addition, their reluctance in cooperating with AA has had a great impact on its development.

„There were some physicians who supported AA in Timisoara, such as Georgeta Cădărean and Lucia, who was also an AA member. She no longer attends AA meetings after around 25 years of active involvement in AA, she retired to the countryside.” (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA, Timisoara)

In this regard, archival research provided data about the implication of psychiatrist Georgeta I. Cădărean who asked the Christiana Association to provide a small location in which the AA meetings could be held, in 1991 (Noi Înșine, 2021). As a result, the first AA meeting in Romania took place on 27th February 1991; four participants attended that meeting. One year later, on July 1992, the first AA group from Romania accounted for fourteen sober AA members (Noi Înșine, 2021).

In addition, in a public lecture at the Annual AA Conference (November 1992, Timisoara), psychiatrist Georgeta I. Cocian (previous name Cădărean) shared her experience about the disease concept of alcoholism as a result of her experience in an addiction treatment facility from the United States, where she deepened her studies on alcohol and drug addiction. In this regard, she underlines the tremendous difference in approaching alcohol addiction in the US compared to Romania. Even from the year 1971, in the US, that facility was providing individuals who were struggling with alcohol and drug addiction, with individual and group therapy, medical care, 30 beds with 120 qualified staff (many of them recovered alcoholics who were able both to share their own experience with alcoholism as well to offer their professional help). Furthermore, AA participation was highly encouraged. Moreover, she explained the disease concept of alcoholism from both the scientific view, as well as of the AA view. What AA states, that alcoholism is a disease characterized by the lack of control and obsession over alcohol (Alcoholics Anonymous, 2001), was clearly explained by psychiatrist Georgeta I. Cocian, to be a result of genetic predisposition and a different biochemical brain metabolism related to alcohol (Noi Înșine, 2021).

In Bucharest, the first AA group was born and developed with the help and great support of psychiatrist Doina Constantinescu who has constantly told and guided her patients towards AA. The interviews revealed her contribution as follows:

„I found out about AA from a psychiatrist, Dr Doina Constantinescu, in 2000 when I have been hospitalized for treating my alcoholism. She suggested I should attend AA meetings. In Bucharest, the first AA group was founded by Marius and Petrica B with the support of Doina Constantinescu and was located at Clinical Psychiatric Hospital Dr Al. Obregia.” (Catalin, 58 years old, 21 years in AA, Bucharest)

„I found out about AA in 1993 when I was hospitalized at the 8th pavilion of the Clinical Psychiatric Hospital Dr Al. Obregia to treat my alcoholism. Dr Florin Ene told me about AA. At the time, Dr Doina Constantinescu was Head of Section 8th and she was the one who supported AA along with Dr Florin Ene.” (Valeriu, 75 years old, 24 years in AA, Bucharest)

Religious institutions

Religious institutions have had different attitudes towards AA and their support and influence in the development of AA haven't been the same in Timișoara and Bucharest. Group One from Timișoara has had the support of the Orthodox Church from the beginning. An Orthodox priest was the first religious representative who supported AA in Timișoara and the one who provided them with a permanent and safe location.

„I know they were supported by a Romanian Orthodox priest who allowed them to organize AA meetings in his church, but I don't recall his name.” (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA, Timisoara)

In Bucharest, on the other side, religious institutions started to support AA only years after its foundation. In this context, AA's development in Bucharest followed different paths than that of Group One from Timișoara. In an interview, an early AA member from Bucharest reported the following:

„Only after fourteen years after the foundation of the first AA group in Bucharest, we were able to attain a second location at Monastery Radu Vodă, where we had the support of Father Fieraru who advocated the development of AA in Romania. Then other religious representatives became open to the idea and willing to help AA and cooperation between AA and religious institutions has begun.” (Catalin, 58 years old, 21 years in AA, Bucharest)

Perceptions of the disease of alcoholism, then and now

Alcoholism is a disease characterized by the obsession with alcohol and the allergy that the body experiences when ingesting alcohol (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001; Kurtz, 2002). However, the disease concept of alcoholism is little known among commoners and specialists as well. The interviews revealed the perceptions of the disease of alcoholism when AA first came to Romania, as well as the ones in the present.

It seems that in 1991 when the first AA group from Romania was established, little information about the disease concept of alcoholism was available. This shortage was reported to both commoners and professionals and affected those who suffered from alcoholism in terms of a lack of treatment options. The interviews revealed the mindset regarding alcohol abuse and dependence since most people thought that alcoholism was a moral weakness, a vice or a sin. In addition, people had no information about AA.

„When I first came to AA only my physician knew about AA. Until he suggests I should go to AA, I had no idea about its existence. People at the time knew

nothing about AA and alcoholism was a taboo” (Leon, 59 years old, 28 years in AA, Bucharest)

Despite this situation, AA members were struggling to disseminate the AA message.

„People knew little or nothing about AA at the time although AA leaflets were spread in trams or other public places, and that situation is no different than now. About alcoholism, few people knew that it was a disease.” (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA, Timisoara)

Small changes in people’s perceptions towards AA and alcoholism can be noticed today according to early AA members and founders.

„I can notice a small change since people became more informed but most of them have that information from movies; they think AA members stand in a circle and share about their drinking and this is it” (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA, Timisoara)

However, the situation is far from ideal since both healthcare and religious institutions are still reluctant in building strong relationships of trust and cooperation with AA.

„I have noticed that quite many AA participants find out about AA not from professionals, but on their own through online resources. There are still addiction specialists who do not suggest those suffering from alcoholism attend AA meetings and other specialists who have no idea that there are AA meetings available in Romania. I think this is due to people's mindset regarding alcohol dependence and lack of information.” (Sandu, 68 years old, 28 years in AA, Bucharest)

4. Conclusions and discussions

While research on AA in Romania is just getting started (Bulumac, 2022), this paper met its purpose and managed to unveil, on one hand, the founding moments of AA in Romania, and on the other, the barriers that stood in the way of its development. Nonetheless, results should be regarded carefully since they concern a theoretical sample, thus they cannot be generalized. Although the number of early AA members who participated in the present study is limited due to the passing or disappearance into the anonymity of some of them, the interviews have been proven to be of great importance since they allowed a glimpse into the experiences and efforts of early AA members to found the first AA mutual-help groups and to build the fellowship. In addition, the interviews unveiled how the AA message was disseminated in Romania, as well as how AA managed to create relationships with existing religious and healthcare institutions. Archival research was also useful since it completed and confirmed the data from the interviews. Among the difficulties that emerged while conducting the study, worth noting, on one hand, the AA anonymity principle which hindered access within AA, and, on

the other, the difficulty of identifying and contacting the early AA members. Yet, the open and friendly attitude of Romanian AA representatives and that of the participants facilitated this research. Bottom line, this study was able to fill a gap in the AA literature, since no previous studies are addressing the founding moments of AA in Romania and may constitute the basis for further research into the Romanian AA community. The significance and validity of this study are sustained by the fact that the study was performed within AA and is based on both interviews with early AA members as participants, as well as on archival research, which confirmed the data from the interviews.

Although the foundation of AA has faced barriers such as the communist regime, people's and professionals' reluctance towards AA and poor cooperation with healthcare and religious institutions, its development was possible with the support of open-minded professionals and religious representatives. However, AA's development in Romania is still conditioned by the society's mindset towards alcohol consumption and alcoholism, which is still perceived as a vice, a moral weakness of the individual or even as a sin, not as a disease. In this context, we suggest building trust and cooperation between social work practitioners, mental health specialists, religious representatives and AA to better tailor interventions and advise clients on their options, as well as the order to disseminate the AA message. Hence, research on the lack of knowledge on alcoholism, AA and the 12 Steps Program among social workers, addiction specialists, religious representatives and physicians is essential and would improve treatment outcomes. In this regard, the inclusion of training programs across disciplines with special addiction units is also essential. Results suggest that AA's development in Romania was slow due to the political context, lack of information and professionals' reluctance to support AA. In addition, there is a need to build strong relationships with professionals in the area of substance abuse, social work and religious institutions to facilitate recovery for those who suffer from alcoholism.

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Annexes

Table I. Data on the identification of early AA members participating in the study (Bucharest, 2022)

Name	Age (years)	Sobriety (years. months)	Time in AA (years)	Residential environment
Catalin	58	21	21	Bucharest
Dan	52	28	29	Bucharest
Leon	59	28	28	Bucharest
Marius	65	28	28	Bucharest
Sandu	68	28	28	Bucharest
Stan	63	24	29	Timisoara
Valeriu	75	24	24	Bucharest

Table II. Final themes and theoretical codes

Theme	Example quote
<i>AA's founding moments in Romania</i>	
Timisoara	<i>„The foundation of AA in Romania was a late and difficult one due to the political context at the time and the restrictions that came as a result of the communist regime” (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA)</i>
Bucharest	<i>„In 1993 the first AA group from Bucharest was established. Among pioneers there were Petrică and Dr. Doina Constantinescu who supported AA from the beginning and provided a location for the AA meetings within the 8th Section of the Clinical Psychiatric Hospital Prof. Dr. Alexandru Obregia.” (Marius, 65 years old, 28 years in AA)</i>
<i>AA's development in Romania</i>	
Timisoara	<i>“AA's development was fulminating in Romania.” (Stan, 63 years old, 29 years in AA)</i>
Bucharest	<i>“First years of AA's development were quite difficult in Bucharest since there were times we had no location for holding an AA meeting. We had to support each other and adapt to maintain sobriety.” (Sandu, 68 years old, 28 years in AA, Bucharest)</i>
<i>AA's relationship with professionals</i>	
Healthcare institutions	<i>“There is still reluctance among professionals towards AA and its activity, but there are specialists who know what AA is and does and they are the ones we cooperate with.” (Catalin, 58 years old, 21 years in AA, Bucharest)</i>
Religious institutions	<i>“It took time to create cooperation relationships with religious institutions due to the mindset regarding alcoholism and AA. However, in the present AA is better known among religious representatives and some support AA.” (Dan, 52 years old, 29 years in AA, Bucharest)</i>
<i>Perceptions of the disease of alcoholism</i>	

Theme	Example quote
Then	"The general opinion at that time was that alcoholism is a moral weakness, a vice or a sin."(Valeriu, 75 years old, 24 years in AA, Bucharest)
Now	"There is still a need to educate people and specialists regarding alcoholism since approaches towards this disease are still inappropriate in different environments. There is still a lack of information on alcoholism and AA." (Geanina, 54 years old, single, 12 years in AA and 3 years participating in the women-only AA group)

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