

# THE CRISIS IMPACT ON THE CULTURAL CONSUMPTION IN ROMANIA

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**Rezumat:** Pe 15 septembrie 2008, momentul când banca Lehman Brothers și-a anunțat falimentul, s-a declanșat oficial criza economică mondială. În articolul de față ne ocupăm de impactul imediat al crizei economice asupra consumului cultural în România, în ultima parte a anului 2008 și prima jumătate a lui 2009. Pentru aceasta am folosit datele Barometrului de Consum Cultural din 2008 și 2009.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** criză economică, achiziție carte, consum cultural, consum public, consum domestic

**Abstract:** On September 15, 2008, when Lehman Brothers Bank announced its bankruptcy, the global economic crisis officially emerged. In this paper we discuss the immediate consequences of the economic crisis on the cultural consumption in Romania, at the end of 2008 and first half of 2009. With this regard, we have used the Cultural Consumption Barometer for 2008 and 2009.

**Keywords:** economic crisis, books purchasing, cultural consumption, public consumption, domestic consumption

**Résumé:** Le 15 Septembre 2008, lorsque la banque Lehman Brothers a annoncé sa faillite, a officiellement lancé la crise économique mondiale. Dans cet article, nous traitons l'impact immédiat de la crise économique sur la consommation culturelle en Roumanie dans la deuxième partie de l'année 2008 et le début du 2009. Pour cela nous avons utilisé le Baromètre de la consommation culturelle 2008 et 2009.

**Mots-clés:** crise économique, achat des livres, consommation culturelle, consommation publique, consommation domestique

## 1. Introduction

On September 15, 2008, when Lehman Brothers Bank announced its bankruptcy, the global economic crisis officially emerged, although it had started

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earlier. Its effects have been quickly felt in the cultural field too, at various levels: public funding and sponsorship of cultural projects, public and domestic cultural infrastructure, investment in art, activity of state cultural institutions, of private companies and non-governmental organizations, cultural consumption, etc. This article aims to describe the dynamics of cultural consumption in Romania after the crisis appeared. With this regard, we will use a series of Cultural Consumption Barometers and, before that, we will use the items for the analysis of cultural consumption of the Centre for Research and Consultancy on Culture (CRCC).

## **2. CRCC topics: public consumption and domestic consumption**

For the analysis of cultural consumption, CRCC makes a distinction between public and domestic consumption. Public consumption is divided into three categories: consumption of “elitist culture” (opera/operetta, theater, museums/exhibitions), of “mass culture” (entertainment/music, local festivals/events, going to cinema) and “non-cultural activities of leisure” (consumer activities in hyper/supermarkets and malls, body care activities, attending sporting competitions, attending discos/clubs, traveling, outdoor activities in parks or green areas). Domestic cultural consumption is measured through consumption of TV shows and purchasing behavior of cultural goods (books, movies, music). To this, we will add a discussion on the frequency of reading books which virtually completes the topic of cultural domestic consumption.

In the following, we will make a brief comparison between the cultural consumption in 2008 and that in 2009, according to the data presented by the Cultural Consumption Barometer (CCB) for 2009 of CRCC, a barometer that consists of a nationally representative poll, applied on a sample of 1100 respondents over 15 years. The maximum sampling error, at a confidence level of 95%, is +/- 3% for national data.

**2.1. Public consumption.** The category “elitist consumption” of the topic public consumption, according to CCB for 2009, shows that: in 2009, the average consumption of theater was 15% compared to 2008, especially among the regular audience and graduates of higher education: museums and exhibitions consumption decreased by 20% in 2009 compared to 2008, especially among those with secondary education: frequency of attending opera and operetta decreased by 8%, especially in the regular audience represented by those who had access to higher education.

The component “mass culture” of public consumption, shows the following data: the average consumption of cinema in 2009 decreased by 17% compared to previous year 2008, reaching the lowest level in the last five years; the consumption of entertainment and music shows decreased by 17% compared to

2008, when it had reached the highest rate in the last five years, a decline which is less visible among regular audience, among those who have graduated high school as their last school, but among graduates of higher education; taking part in local festivals and events also decreased by 15%, reaching the lowest value of the last five years; the average value in attending sporting competitions decreased by 14%; consumer activity in super / hypermarkets or malls decreased by 17% among all categories of respondents: body care activities also decreased by 18%, going to disco decreased by 10%, traveling decreased by 25%; outdoor activities, in parks or green areas, in 2009, remained at the same rate as in 2008.

**2.2. Domestic consumption.** Domestic cultural consumption, to remember, is measured by the following categories: watching TV and purchasing behavior of cultural goods (books, movies, music). Consumption of TV shows decreased by 7% in 2009 compared to 2008. Regarding cultural goods, the trend is towards non-consumers, especially for movies and music. In 2009, 71% did not buy any movie, while in 2008 only 53% were non-consumers. The number of music buyers decreased by 33% in 2009 compared to 2008. Book buyers have decreased the least, 6%, from 55% in 2008 to 49% in 2009.

### **3. Books purchasing behavior**

As we saw in the CCB for 2009, 45% of Romanians over 15 years did not buy any books in 2008, and their percentage increased to 51% in 2009. Regarding the purchasing behavior, from the "People Activities and Cultural Practices of Romanians in 2010" (IRES), we find out that in 2010, 65% of Romanians over 15 years did not buy any books. From the study "Reading Habits of Romanians" (IRES, 2011) we find out that 12% never buy books, 25% bought less than one book a year, 25% bought less than five books a year, 13% bought 5-10 books and 22%, over 10 books. The profile of the assiduous buyer of books, according to the number of titles, is a woman, 36-50 years old and lives in urban areas. The non-buyer is also a woman, over 65 years old and lives in rural areas. To purchase books, 12% spend less than 50 RON per year, 26% spend 51-100RON, 21% allocate 101-200RON, 8% between 501-1000 and 5% over 1000. Those with consistent budget (over 500 RON per year) are likely women, up to 35 or over 65 years old, live in urban areas, and, regionally, they are more likely from Moldova, Bucharest or the southern part of the country.

People buy books from the bookshops (58% of the readers), book corners in shopping centers (15%), from second-hand bookshops (8%), ordered from websites in Romania (6%) or from abroad (1%). Those who purchase books get information directly from the bookshop or place of purchasing (50% of readers), from friends or acquaintances (30%), from editorials in the newspapers and

magazines (28%), from websites of publishing houses (15 %), from posters or billboards in bookshops or shopping centers (15%), from bookstore sites (13%), specialized sites containing reviews and presentation of new issues (7%), online forums (5%). Those who read, even if they do not buy books (a multiple choice question) re-read books from personal library (44% of readers), borrow from friends or acquaintances (43%), receive books as gifts (18%) or lend books from the library (15%). Those who buy books also re-read titles from personal library (49%), borrow from friends or acquaintances (22%), receive them as gift (10%) or borrow from the library (20%). 47% of book readers do not buy books that are sold with newspapers, 14% rarely buy such books, 31% only when they are interested in a certain book, and 7% buy them with every issue.

#### 4. New crisis in reading?

Domestic cultural consumption concept can be enriched if we add to the purchased cultural goods the actual consumption, i.e. watching movies, listening to music or reading books. We will focus on reading below, trying to reconstruct its dynamics from the collapse of dictatorship and until the economic crisis, according to the existing data.

Since 1990, due to the Diagnosis of the Quality of Life and, afterwards, to the Public Opinion Barometer (POB) of OSF (Open Society Foundation), we can study the dynamics of non-consumers of books. Thus, the percentages of adults (18 years and over) from Romania who declared they did not read books at all are: in 1990 - **28%** (ICCV-The Research Institute for Quality of Life ), in 1991 - **29%** (ICCV), in 1992 - **35%** (ICCV), in 1993 - **39%** (ICCV), in 1994 - **37%** (ICCV), in 1995 - **41%** (ICCV), in 1996 - **50%** (ICCV), in 1997 - **53%** (ICCV), in 1998 - **50%** (ICCV), in 1999 - **56%** (ICCV and **34%**, POB OSF), in 2000- **48%** (ICCV and **47%**, POB OSF), in 2001- **36%** (POB OSF), in 2003 - **43 %** (POB FDS-Foundation for a Open Society - in May, Gallup, and **45%** in October, CURS) in 2004 - **46%** (POB OSF), in 2006 - **56%** (ICCV and **41%**, POB OSF), in 2010 - **54%** (ICCV).

In ICCV questionnaire, the reading scale had three steps, “often”, “seldom” and “not at all”, while the POB OSF questionnaire the answer options were “almost daily”, “several times a week”, “several times a month”, “once a month or less” and “not at all”. So, only “not at all” is common, in order to get a long series of data, the non-consumer analysis being the most appropriate. We do not have any national survey regarding the reading frequency before 1989, so we can not make a meaningful comparison between the two periods. From the above data, we can identify three periods: 1990-1999, which represent the years of decline in the number of readers, at first slowly, then faster and with a poor attempt at stabilization in the last four years; 2000-2007/2008, which is a period of slight

increase in the number of readers, with fluctuations, and a third period, after 2008, which meant the beginning of the economic crisis, a period which, taking into account the results of ICCV 2010, seems to reflect a subsequent decrease in the number of readers. Meanwhile, from the Cultural Consumption Barometer (CCB) for 2006, we find out that 35% of people aged 15 and over do not read literature, and, from the BCC for 2008, that 34% of the same kind of people never read books, articles or magazines. From the report of IRES "Reading Habits of Romanians", we find out that, in 2011, 22%<sup>2</sup> of the adult population of Romania (which owns a telephone) declares they not read at all, 2% read only books for school / faculty, and 20% declared they had read their last book more than a year before. Taking into account the results of BCC and IRES, the economic crisis seems to multiply the number of readers, if we consider the increase from 2000-2007/2008 will continue. Even when surveys are made in the same year, having the same target population, sometimes puzzling differences occur, difficult to manage, as is the case of 1999 when, according to ICCV, we have 56% of non-consumers of books, and POB OSF, 34%. Perhaps the particular events in the eve of data collection period induced a series of distortions. From the existing data, up to now incomplete and sometimes contradictory, we cannot say with certainty that after the economic crisis appeared the book reading frequency increased or decreased, but even with the negative scenario, that is the decrease, it does not compare to the collapse registered in the first ten years after the fall of communism.

Assuming that there is a relationship between the dynamics of the number of readers and the evolution of book market, we will see what happened to the latter. From the "The Cultural Life Index in Romania (1998-2007)" published by CRCC we can see that in 1998 there were published 0.63 books per capita and 0.23 book titles/per capita, and in 2007, after a fluctuating evolution, especially in the print run, it reached 0.41 books copies/capita and 0.67 titles/per capita. Broadly speaking, we can say that with fewer readers, print runs also registered a decline, but we have a big increase in the number of titles, that is a rich editorial offer. It is assumed that once the economic crisis emerged, in addition to a diversification policy of book offer, we have a policy regarding prices.

### **Some conclusions**

To be sure, cultural consumption, as it was defined by CRCC, decreased in 2009 compared to 2008. It is hard to establish to what extent this decrease is caused by the economic crisis or by other factors such as obsolete public infrastructure

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<sup>2</sup> The percentage is probably higher. Its value is smaller because interviews were conducted by telephone, on one hand, and, on the other hand, because the respondents had the possibility to choose an answer that was meant to protect their self-esteem, i.e. the last book they read in more than one year before.

(mainly cinemas); or we should think that, in general, after a period of intense cultural consumption (2006, 2007), a certain recession occurs. However, the fact that cultural practices with a regular audience, such as attending opera and operetta, recorded a decrease (8%) shows that the economic crisis and cultural consumption should not be neglected. It would be a mistake to think that a decline in cultural consumption is subject only to an economic pattern. The behavior of social actors during the crisis is complex: some prefer to limit expenditures (culture represents the last priority on the Maslow pyramid of needs; therefore, probably, of the leisure activities, outdoor activities in parks and green spaces, being cheap, registered no decrease in 2008 compared to 2009), others prefer to work harder to maintain their living standards, which means less free time (this explains, among other things, a decrease by 7% of a cheap, but time-consuming activity, that is watching TV), while others prefer to make sacrifices for their favourite cultural activities (cultural activities with a regular audience, like going to opera, which declined by only 8%, or going to disco, by only 10%). Regarding the purchase of cultural goods, having in view music-movies-books pattern, books had the best sales, with the smallest decline, of only 6%, but for a short period, because in 2010 and 2011, sales decreased more. Perhaps the advantage books have versus movies and music is that they are more difficult to be reproduced by infringements of copyright. With regard to the reading behavior, we cannot conclude that the reading activities intensified/decreased after the economic crisis, as the data at our disposal do not allow this, but even with the negative scenario, that is, the 46% decrease in the number of readers (ICCV, 2010), it does not compare to the collapse of the first decade after the fall of dictatorship.

### **Some solutions**

The Cultural Consumption Barometer for 2009 sets forth three types of solutions to reduce the effects of the economic crisis on cultural consumption: financial, social and innovative. Regarding the first type, it was suggested to cut down entrance fees (to cultural institutions delivering performances and music shows), to bring special offers and programs, and take measures to counteract the tendency to save money. Solutions to social networking issues have in view the arrangement of spaces inside museums, theaters, cinemas, such as bars or cafes. Innovative solutions refer to a better adaptation of cultural production to audience needs, which could increase consumer motivation in performing cultural activities. We can identify other solutions by examining the activity of institutions in various areas of culture. Publishing houses, theatres and entertainment agencies started to use online promotion, which means both a decrease in expenditures and a better informed audience for which the traditional advertising has fewer results. Using social networking services (Facebook or Twitter) in promoting cultural goods has

registered a strong increase. Another attempt to face crisis is the initiation, after more than twenty years from the collapse of dictatorship, of a pocket book series having reasonable prices for cultural consumers. Beyond the clear shortcomings the economic crisis causes to the cultural consumption, we can also see some positive aspects, such as a better adaptation to financial constraints, to the cultural needs of the general public or the promotion, with increased creativity, of cultural goods.

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