# SOCIOLOGIE ŞI ASISTENŢĂ SOCIALĂ

# SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK

**Aims**: *Analele Științifice ale Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza" din Iași. (Seria nouă) Sociologie și Asistență Socială* aims to promote the remarkable results of scientific and empiric researches of professorates, researchers, students, and practitioners in the field of humanist sciences in order to stimulate the optimal functioning of academic and social fields. Analyses and theoretical-methodological sociological explanations as well as the exemplification of their values at the political and social work strategies and interventions level are welcome.

# SUMMARY

# THE ROLE OF SOCIAL POLICY IN MITIGATING ENERGY POVERTY AND ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

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**Abstract**. This paper examines the multifaceted phenomenon of energy poverty, with a particular focus on its alarming expansion in Romania within the broader European and global contexts. Adopting a multidimensional theoretical perspective, it analyses energy poverty not merely as an economic issue, but as a complex challenge with profound socio-economic, health, and environmental implications. Drawing upon a synthesis of recent quantitative data from official sources (e.g., Eurostat, World Bank) and qualitative analysis of specialized academic literature and policy documents, the article demonstrates how energy poverty now affects not only traditionally vulnerable categories but also increasingly middle-income households. The main conclusion advocates for the urgent development and implementation of integrated social policies that combine social protection measures with investments in energy efficiency and the transition to renewable energy sources, arguing that this comprehensive approach is essential for a fair and sustainable energy transition. Furthermore, the synthetic nature of this review itself underscores the critical need for more dedicated empirical research to inform robust policy development in Romania and across the EU.

**Keywords**: energy poverty, social policies, energy efficiency, energy vulnerability, energy transition, Romania, European Union

**Résumé :** Cet article examine le phénomène multiforme de la précarité énergétique, en se concentrant particulièrement sur son expansion alarmante en Roumanie, dans un contexte européen et mondial plus large. Adoptant une perspective théorique multidimensionnelle, il analyse la précarité énergétique non seulement comme un problème économique, mais aussi comme un défi complexe aux profondes implications socio-économiques, sanitaires et environnementales. S'appuyant sur une synthèse de données quantitatives récentes issues de sources officielles (par exemple, Eurostat, Banque mondiale) et sur une analyse qualitative de la littérature universitaire spécialisée et des documents politiques, l'article démontre comment la précarité énergétique touche désormais non seulement les catégories traditionnellement vulnérables, mais aussi de plus en plus de ménages à revenu moyen. La principale conclusion plaide en faveur de l'élaboration et de la mise en œuvre urgentes de

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politiques sociales intégrées qui combinent des mesures de protection sociale avec des investissements dans l'efficacité énergétique et la transition vers des sources d'énergie renouvelables, affirmant que cette approche globale est essentielle pour une transition énergétique juste et durable. En outre, la nature synthétique de cette revue souligne la nécessité cruciale de mener davantage de recherches empiriques dédiées à éclairer l'élaboration de politiques solides en Roumanie et dans l'ensemble de l'UE.

**Mots-clés** : pauvreté énergétique, politiques sociales, efficacité énergétique, vulnérabilité énergétique, transition énergétique, Roumanie, Union européenne

**Rezumat.** Această lucrare examinează fenomenul multidimensional al sărăciei energetice, concentrându-se în special pe expansiunea sa alarmantă în România în contextul european și global mai larg. Adoptând o perspectivă teoretică multidimensională, analizează sărăcia energetică nu doar ca o problemă economică, ci ca o provocare complexă cu implicații socio-economice, de sănătate și de mediu profunde. Bazându-se pe o sinteză a datelor cantitative recente din surse oficiale (de exemplu, Eurostat, Banca Mondială) și pe o analiză calitativă a literaturii academice de specialitate și a documentelor de politică, articolul demonstrează modul în care sărăcia energetică afectează acum nu numai categoriile vulnerabile în mod tradițional, ci și gospodăriile cu venituri medii. Concluzia principală pledează pentru dezvoltarea și implementarea urgentă a unor politici sociale integrate care combină măsurile de protecție socială cu investițiile în eficiența energetică și tranziția către surse regenerabile de energie, susținând că această abordare cuprinzătoare este esențială pentru o tranziție energetică echitabilă și durabilă. În plus, natura sintetică a acestei analize subliniază nevoia critică de cercetare empirică mai dedicată pentru a informa dezvoltarea politicilor solide în România și în întreaga UE.

**Cuvinte cheie:** sărăcie energetică, politici sociale, eficiență energetică, vulnerabilitate energetică, tranziție energetică, România, Uniunea Europeană

### Introduction: general notions, methodology, and objectives of the article

Energy poverty is a multifaceted issue that affects a significant portion of the global population, with varying definitions and implications depending on regional contexts. Energy poverty, particularly prevalent in developing nations and specific regions within more industrialized countries, refers to the insufficient access to modern and reliable energy services at the household level (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015). This issue manifests in the absence of a stable electricity supply and the continued reliance on hazardous and inefficient cooking methods. As of 2022, approximately 759 million individuals worldwide lacked consistent access to electricity, thereby limiting their ability to benefit from essential services such as lighting, refrigeration, and communication. Furthermore, an estimated 2.6 billion people depended on traditional biomass, coal, or other suboptimal fuel sources for cooking, exposing them to serious health risks due to indoor air pollution and contributing to environmental degradation (United Nations, 2023).

Addressing energy poverty is crucial for promoting economic development, enhancing health outcomes, and advancing global sustainability efforts. The Energy Poverty Action initiative of the World Economic Forum emphasizes that access to energy is a fundamental prerequisite for enhancing

overall quality of life and serves as a crucial driver of economic development. Despite significant advancements in global energy infrastructure, even though energy poverty remains a pervasive challenge in many parts of the developing world, it can still be found in the developed world. The persistent lack of reliable and affordable energy services hinders economic growth, restricts educational opportunities, and exacerbates social inequalities.

Energy poverty is a complex concept that can be defined in several ways, but the most widely used definition describes it as the inability of a household to provide the energy services necessary for a decent living at affordable costs (Bouzarovski & Petrova, 2015). This definition encompasses both the dimension of the affordability of energy and that of physical access to energy infrastructure. In the European context, energy poverty is often measured by indicators such as the percentage of income spent on energy, the inability to maintain an adequate temperature in the home, the accumulation of debts on utility bills, and the renunciation of other essential needs to pay energy bills.

The methodology used in this article combines the analysis of quantitative data from official sources (Eurostat, the National Institute of Statistics, the World Bank) with the qualitative analysis of policies and specialized studies. Recent trends (2021-2024) regarding energy poverty in Romania compared to other European Union member states are examined, as well as the structural and behavioural factors influencing this phenomenon. Existing social policies and their potential to reduce energy disparities are also assessed.

The main objectives of this article are: (1) to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of energy poverty, with a focus on the situation in Romania; (2) to identify the determinants and socio-economic implications of this phenomenon; (3) assess the effectiveness of existing policies; and (4) to propose integrated solutions for reducing energy poverty, adapted to Romania's specific context.

This article addresses a critical gap in the sociology and social work literature by providing a comprehensive and current analysis of energy poverty, particularly focusing on Romania within a broader European and global context. While existing research often examines energy poverty through economic lenses or in the context of developed versus underdeveloped nations, this paper uniquely highlights the alarming expansion of energy poverty in Romania to include not only traditionally vulnerable groups but also middle-income households. Furthermore, it proposes integrated social policies that combine social protection measures with investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy, offering a holistic approach that moves beyond fragmented, reactive solutions often found in current policy responses. This interdisciplinary perspective, blending sociological insights on vulnerability and inequality with practical policy recommendations for a just energy transition, offers novel contributions to both academic understanding and practical interventions in combating energy poverty.

While this paper primarily serves as a comprehensive narrative literature review with limited original empirical findings, its very nature underscores a significant argument: the pressing need for more in-depth empirical studies on

energy poverty, especially within Romania and the broader EU context. By meticulously synthesizing existing knowledge and compiling up-to-date statistics, this work effectively highlights current gaps in the sociological and social work literature regarding the multifaceted dimensions and policy effectiveness related to energy poverty. Thus, the paper's contribution lies not just in its overview but in demonstrating the critical need for further granular research to inform more robust and tailored social policies in this crucial area.

## 1. Reviewing the academic literature on energy poverty

Energy poverty is characterized by the inability of households to meet their basic energy needs, often due to high energy costs and reliance on non-renewable energy sources, as seen in countries like the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia (Lisicki *et al.*, 2024). The phenomenon is not only an economic issue but also a social and health concern, as inadequate energy access can lead to severe health problems, including respiratory diseases and mental disorders (Ruiz *et al.*, 2024). Addressing energy poverty requires a comprehensive approach that includes energy justice principles, which advocate for equitable access to clean, safe, and reliable energy sources as part of sustainable development goals (Sampaio & Prolo, 2024). The energy transition presents both challenges and opportunities for alleviating energy poverty, as demonstrated by the differing strategies of Poland and Sweden. Poland faces significant hurdles due to its coal dependency, while Sweden's advanced infrastructure and welfare systems have largely mitigated energy poverty, though challenges remain for low-income rural households (Janikowska *et al.*, 2024).

Innovative financial models, such as Social Impact Bonds (SIBs), have been proposed to fund interventions aimed at reducing energy poverty and improving public health, highlighting the potential for public-private collaborations to address this pressing issue (Ruiz *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, the literature suggests that improving energy efficiency and integrating renewable energy sources are critical strategies for reducing energy poverty and achieving a fair energy transition (Fabbri, 2024; Janikowska *et al.*, 2024). Overall, a multi-disciplinary approach involving policy interventions, financial innovations, and social support systems is essential to effectively combat energy poverty and promote well-being.

The phenomenon can be studied through diverse research methods, including economic analyses and energy policy evaluations. The literature review highlights the relationship between energy poverty and poor building conditions, thermal comfort, and introduces the concept of cooling poverty as an emerging area for future research.

The academic literature on energy poverty has evolved significantly over the past decade, moving from approaches focused solely on access to energy to multidimensional perspectives that integrate economic, social, health, and environmental aspects. Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015) have fundamentally contributed to this evolution by overcoming the traditional dichotomy between

„energy poverty" and „fuel poverty", proposing a unified conceptual framework that recognizes the complexity of the phenomenon.

Recent research highlights the close link between energy poverty and other forms of social vulnerability. Thomson *et al.* (2023) demonstrate that households affected by energy poverty are at higher risk of suffering from mental health problems, social isolation, and educational difficulties. These findings are supported by Castaño-Rosa *et al.* (2022), who developed a multidimensional energy vulnerability index that integrates factors such as housing quality, household income, and the health status of its members.

In the context of the energy transition, the literature highlights both opportunities and risks for vulnerable households. On the one hand, Sovacool *et al.* (2021) argue that the transition to renewable energy sources can reduce energy costs in the long term and create employment opportunities in emerging sectors. On the other hand, Bouzarovski and Tirado Herrero (2022) warn of the risk that the initial costs of the energy transition will be disproportionately borne by low-income households, exacerbating existing inequalities.

In terms of research methods, there is a diversification of approaches, from economic analyses and energy policy evaluations to ethnographic and participatory studies. Middlemiss *et al.* (2022) stress the importance of integrating the perspectives of people affected by energy poverty into policy-making, proposing innovative participatory research methods.

An emerging area of research is that of „cooling poverty", conceptualized by Thomson *et al.* (2022) as the inability of households to keep their homes at a comfortable temperature during periods of extreme heat. In the context of climate change and the increasing frequency of heatwaves, this dimension of energy poverty is becoming increasingly relevant, especially in the southern regions of Europe.

## 2. Energy poverty in underdeveloped countries versus developed countries

Energy poverty remains a persistent issue worldwide, disproportionately affecting underdeveloped countries due to limited energy infrastructure, financial constraints, and reliance on traditional biomass fuels (Ashena & Shahpari, 2024). In contrast, developed nations struggle with energy affordability and household energy efficiency rather than absolute access. Studies highlight that energy poverty in underdeveloped countries is driven by economic and demographic factors, where GDP growth alone does not necessarily translate to better energy access (Aqdas *et al.*, 2024). Developed nations, on the other hand, focus on mitigating high energy costs and improving energy efficiency, with multidimensional indices revealing disparities even within high-income regions (Al Kez *et al.*, 2024).

A global assessment found that energy poverty is improving in developing regions post-2008, yet Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia remain the most affected (Salman *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, energy poverty significantly impacts health and socio-economic development, with research indicating a strong correlation between household energy poverty and childhood disabilities in low-income

countries (Sen *et al.*, 2023). Policies targeting energy poverty in developed countries focus on subsidies and efficiency programs, whereas underdeveloped nations require significant investment in infrastructure and clean energy solutions. The global energy transition must address these disparities by integrating targeted financial models, digitalization, and sustainable energy investments to ensure equitable energy access worldwide.

Energy poverty manifests itself differently in underdeveloped countries compared to developed countries, reflecting economic, technological, and infrastructural disparities globally. While in underdeveloped countries the main problem is physical access to modern energy services, in developed countries the focus is on energy affordability and energy efficiency of homes.

In underdeveloped regions, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, energy poverty is manifested by a lack of access to electricity and a reliance on traditional fuels such as biomass, coal and animal waste for cooking and heating. According to data from the International Energy Agency (2023), approximately 759 million people worldwide do not have access to electricity, and 2.6 billion people do not have access to clean cooking solutions. This situation has serious consequences for health, education and economic development. Indoor air pollution caused by the inefficient combustion of traditional fuels causes an estimated 3.8 million premature deaths annually, disproportionately affecting women and children (WHO, 2023).

Ashena and Shahpari (2024) highlight that energy poverty in underdeveloped countries is driven by structural factors such as limited energy infrastructure, financial constraints, and reliance on traditional fuels. Aqdas *et al.* (2024) stresses that GDP growth does not automatically translate into improved access to energy, and specific policies are needed to ensure the fair distribution of the benefits of economic development.

In contrast, in developed countries, energy poverty is manifested by the inability of households to afford adequate energy services at reasonable costs. Al Kez *et al.* (2024) have developed multidimensional indices that reveal significant disparities even in high-income regions. In Western Europe and North America, the main challenges are related to high energy costs, low energy efficiency of old buildings, and the impact of the energy transition on prices.

Salman *et al.* (2022) carried out a comprehensive assessment of energy poverty, finding an improvement in the situation in developing regions after 2008, although sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia remain the most affected. Sen *et al.* (2023) highlight the strong correlation between household energy poverty and child disabilities in low-income countries, highlighting the profound impact of this phenomenon on human development.

Policies to combat energy poverty differ significantly between the two categories of countries. In developed countries, the focus is on subsidies for vulnerable consumers, energy efficiency programs, and consumer protection regulations. In contrast, underdeveloped countries require significant investment

in energy infrastructure and clean energy solutions, often with international support.

The global energy transition needs to address these disparities by integrating targeted financial models, digitalization, and sustainable energy investments to ensure equitable access to energy worldwide. Initiatives such as „Sustainable Energy for All" (SE4All) and „Global Energy Alliance for People and Planet" (GEAPP) promote public-private partnerships to accelerate access to clean energy in underdeveloped regions, combining the Sustainable Development Goals with those of combating climate change.

### 3. Energy poverty in the European Union

Energy poverty in the European Union (EU) is a critical issue, affecting millions of households that struggle to afford adequate energy services. Recent studies highlight that energy poverty is particularly severe in Eastern and Southern European countries due to lower income levels and inefficient housing infrastructure (Cyrek *et al.*, 2024). The problem has been exacerbated by rising energy prices, economic instability, and the transition to renewable energy sources (Taušová *et al.*, 2024). The European Commission has implemented various policy measures, including the Clean Energy for All Europeans package, which aims to promote energy efficiency and consumer rights, and the Fit for 55 package, which focuses on reducing greenhouse gas emissions while ensuring a just transition for affected populations (Campagna *et al.*, 2024). Research suggests that both objective and subjective measures of energy poverty vary across the EU, with countries like Hungary and Croatia showing improvement, while France, Germany, and Spain have seen worsening conditions (Wojewódzka-Wiewiórska *et al.*, 2024). Additionally, innovative financial solutions such as Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) are being explored to fund energy efficiency programs and combat the issue (Ruiz *et al.*, 2024). Despite progress, addressing energy poverty requires sustained policy efforts, investment in renewable energy, and targeted financial support for vulnerable households.

Energy poverty is a significant challenge for the European Union, affecting around 50 million people, according to estimates by the European Commission (2023). The phenomenon varies considerably between Member States, being more pronounced in the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe. According to Eurostat data (2023), Bulgaria (23.7%), Greece (17.5%), Cyprus (17.3%), and Romania (14.4%) have the highest percentages of the population that cannot afford to maintain an adequate temperature in the home.

The energy crisis triggered in 2021-2022 exacerbated the problem of energy poverty across Europe. Rising energy prices, driven by factors such as the post-pandemic recovery, the conflict in Ukraine, and disruptions in supply chains, have disproportionately affected vulnerable households. According to an article by Eurostat (2023), electricity prices for household consumers increased significantly in the EU between December 2020 and December 2022, the highest being in

Romania (+112%) and Czechia (97%) and the lowest being in Luxemburg (+3%), Austria and Germany (+4%) while natural gas prices doubled over the same period.

The European Union has responded to this challenge with various policy initiatives. The Clean Energy for All Europeans package includes measures to promote energy efficiency and protect vulnerable consumers. The „Fit for 55" package also proposes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, while ensuring a just transition for affected populations (European Commission, 2023).

The EU Energy Poverty Observatory plays a key role in monitoring the phenomenon and facilitating the exchange of best practices between Member States. It uses several primary and secondary indicators to measure the different dimensions of energy poverty, including delays in paying utility bills, inability to maintain an adequate temperature in the home, the percentage of income spent on energy, and the quality of the home (presence of dampness, seepage, or damaged roofs).

Recent research (Campagna *et al.*, 2024) highlights the need for a differentiated approach to energy poverty according to the specific context of each country. While in the Nordic countries the main problem is the financial accessibility of energy, in the southern and eastern countries, there are added challenges related to the quality of housing and access to modern energy infrastructure. This heterogeneity requires policies tailored at the national and regional level, within the framework of a coherent European strategy.

### 4. Energy poverty in Romania

Energy poverty in Romania remains a significant problem, influenced by climatic, economic, and political factors. According to a recent study, the demand for energy for heating and cooling can serve as an indicator of the risk of energy poverty, and forecasts for the next nine years highlight areas with high vulnerability (Grigorescu *et al.*, 2024). Another study analyses the financing of energy efficiency as a viable solution, showing that there is an imbalance between urban and rural areas in accessing European funds for energy efficiency (Damean & Joița, 2024). In addition, the green transition and energy security are essential for everyday well-being, but high energy prices put pressure on vulnerable consumers (Joița *et al.*, 2022). At the macroeconomic level, Romania and Bulgaria face high energy vulnerability in the European context, which underlines the need for effective policies to reduce energy poverty (Kicsi *et al.*, 2023). Also, in peripheral urban areas, such as Roma communities, lack of infrastructure and inadequate policies exacerbate extreme energy poverty (Teschner *et al.*, 2020).

In Romania, public policies regarding energy poverty lack clear definitions, measurement instructions, and systematic data collection. There are no long-term national strategies to address energy poverty, and policymakers prioritize other challenges over the urgent needs of affected communities (Teschner *et al.*, 2020). Energy poverty in Romania is addressed through the country's commitment to the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda, focusing on green transition strategies to enhance energy accessibility and ensure well-being for vulnerable consumers while balancing macroeconomic and social aspects (Joița *et al.*, 2022).

Romania is facing one of the most difficult situations of energy poverty in the European Union, the phenomenon being amplified by structural factors such as the low quality of housing, dependence on fossil fuels, and low income levels for a significant part of the population. According to recent data from the World Bank (2025), Romania continues to have the highest poverty rate in the European Union, with about a third of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion. In 2023, about 13.6% of Romania's population faced difficulties in paying utility bills, one of the highest rates in the EU, with the percentage rising to 28.3% among those living in poverty.

The 2023 study by the Romanian Energy Poverty Observatory (ORSE) highlights an alarming increase in energy poverty, including among the middle-income population. According to this study, 21% of households in Romania were in a situation where they gave up other essential needs to ensure their thermal comfort in 2022, double the level of 2021 (10.5%). The analysis by income deciles shows that the phenomenon affects not only traditionally vulnerable categories, but also middle-income households. For example, the energy poverty rate among households in the 5th income decile increased more than fivefold, from 6% in 2021 to 34% in 2022.

A particular aspect of energy poverty in Romania is the urban-rural disparity. In rural areas, about 80% of the population still heats with wood, in homes with low energy efficiency. This situation is aggravated by the limited access to European funds for energy efficiency, with a significant imbalance between urban and rural areas in accessing these funds (Damean & Joița, 2024).

Grigorescu *et al.* (2024) developed a spatiotemporal forecasting model of energy needs for heating and cooling as a measure of energy poverty in Romania. Their results highlight areas of high vulnerability, especially in the northeastern and southwestern regions of the country, where extreme climatic conditions overlap with high levels of monetary poverty.

In terms of public policies, Romania faces the absence of a long-term national strategy to combat energy poverty. Existing policies are fragmented and reactive, focusing on short-term social protection measures (such as heating aid) and less on addressing the structural causes of the phenomenon. Teschner *et al.* (2020) highlight the lack of clear definitions, measurement guidelines, and systematic data collection on energy poverty, which makes it difficult to develop effective policies.

The energy price cap, implemented in response to the 2021-2022 energy crisis, provided temporary protection to consumers but did not solve structural problems. According to data from the National Energy Regulatory Authority (ANRE), the capping measures cost the state budget about 3.5 billion euros in 2022-2023, raising questions about the financial sustainability of this long-term approach.

## 5. Social policies to combat energy poverty

Effectively tackling energy poverty requires an integrated approach that combines social, economic, and environmental policies. In this section, we will

analyze the main types of policies implemented at the European and international level, assessing their potential for application in the specific context of Romania.

### 5.1. Short-term measures

Short-term measures aim to immediately protect vulnerable consumers and prevent energy poverty from worsening in times of crisis. These include:

Direct financial aid: Heating subsidies, reductions in energy bills, and social tariffs are essential tools for the protection of vulnerable consumers. In Romania, the current heating aid system covers around 500,000 households (Ministry of Labour, 2023), but restrictive eligibility criteria and complicated bureaucratic procedures limit many vulnerable households' access to these benefits.

Protection against disconnection: The prohibition of disconnection from energy networks during winter periods for vulnerable consumers is a measure implemented in several European countries. In Romania, the Electricity and Natural Gas Law (Law 123/2012, as amended) provides for certain protections, but they are insufficient and inconsistently applied.

Price capping: Although controversial from a market economy perspective, temporarily capping energy prices can protect in times of extreme market volatility. Romania implemented such measures in 2022-2023, but the high budgetary costs (around €3.5 billion) raise questions about the sustainability of this approach.

### 5.2. Long-term measures

Long-term measures aim to address the structural causes of energy poverty and create a fairer and more sustainable energy system:

Energy efficiency programs: Renovating buildings to improve energy performance is one of the most effective long-term strategies. The EU's Renovation Wave program aims to double the rate of energy renovation of buildings by 2030. In Romania, the National Program for Energy Renovation of Residential Buildings, financed by PNRR, allocates approximately 2.2 billion euros for the energy renovation of multifamily residential buildings, but its implementation encounters difficulties related to administrative capacity and local co-financing.

Promoting renewable energy at the community level: Energy communities are an innovative model that allows citizens to produce, consume, and share renewable energy locally. The EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED II) provides a legal framework for these initiatives. In Romania, the potential of this model is significant, but its development is still in its early stages due to legislative and administrative barriers.

Energy education and advice: Energy education and advice programs can help households optimize their energy consumption and access available support schemes. Experiences in countries such as France (the 'Habiter Mieux' programme) and the UK (Energy Saving Trust) demonstrate the effectiveness of these approaches.

### 5.3. Case Studies

– „Habiter Mieux" programme (France): Launched in 2010, this programme combines financial assistance for energy renovations with personalized technical advice. By 2020, the program supported the renovation of more than 500,000 homes, reducing energy consumption by 40-45% on average and significantly improving the thermal comfort of beneficiaries (ADEME, 2025).

– Križevci Energy Community (Croatia): This pilot project, launched in 2018, allowed citizens to invest in solar panels installed on the roof of a public building through a crowdfunding model. Investors receive an annual return of 4.5%, and the community benefits from affordable clean energy. The model has been replicated in other Croatian cities and is a successful example for community engagement in the energy transition (Energy Cities, 2022).

– Warm Homes Programme (Ireland): This programme provides free energy efficiency improvements for low-income households, including insulation, efficient heating systems, and energy consultancy. Evaluations show that the programme has reduced beneficiaries' energy costs by 20-25% and significantly improved their health and well-being (Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, 2023).

### 5.4. Recommendations for Romania

Based on the analysis of existing policies and good international practices, we can recommend some basic measures that could contribute positively to combating energy poverty in Romania, and from which we can develop more comprehensive and exhaustive social and public policies:

1. Develop an integrated national strategy on energy poverty, with clear objectives, monitoring indicators, and inter-institutional coordination mechanisms.

2. Reform the heating aid system to simplify administrative procedures, extend eligibility criteria, and ensure better information for potential beneficiaries.

3. Create a national energy renovation program dedicated to vulnerable households, with full or majority public funding and technical assistance.

4. Promoting energy communities by removing legislative and administrative barriers and providing fiscal and financial incentives.

5. Develop a network of energy advisory centers at the local level, providing information, technical assistance, and support for accessing available programs.

6. Integrate energy poverty policies with other social, health, and environmental policies to maximize the impact and effectiveness of interventions.

### Conclusions

Energy poverty is a complex and multidimensional challenge that affects millions of households in Romania and across the European Union. This phenomenon is not limited to economic aspects, but has profound implications for health, education, social inclusion, and sustainable development. The analysis

carried out in this article highlights the scale and severity of the problem in Romania, where about a third of the population is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and 13.6% of the population faces difficulties in paying utility bills.

A worrying aspect revealed by recent research is the extension of energy poverty beyond the traditionally vulnerable categories, increasingly affecting middle-income households as well. The study by the Romanian Observatory of Energy Poverty shows that 21% of households in Romania gave up other essential needs to ensure their thermal comfort in 2022, double the level of 2021. This trend reflects the impact of the recent energy crisis, but also the structural vulnerabilities of the energy and social system in Romania.

Urban-rural disparities represent a specific dimension of energy poverty in Romania, with about 80% of the rural population still heating with wood, in low-energy efficiency housing. This situation is aggravated by limited access to European funds for energy efficiency and underdeveloped energy infrastructure in rural areas. Addressing these disparities requires differentiated policies and targeted investments in rural energy infrastructure.

In the context of the energy transition and the ambitious decarbonization goals assumed by Romania and the European Union, there are both opportunities and risks for vulnerable households. On the one hand, the transition to renewable energy sources can reduce energy costs in the long term and create economic opportunities. On the other hand, the initial costs of this transition may be disproportionately borne by low-income households, exacerbating existing inequalities. Ensuring a 'just transition' is therefore a key priority for energy and social policies over the next decade.

The international experiences analysed in this article offer valuable lessons for Romania. Successful programs in countries such as France, Ireland, and Croatia demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated approaches that combine financial assistance with technical advice, community engagement, and energy efficiency measures. Adapting these models to Romania's specific context could significantly contribute to reducing energy poverty.

The recommendations made in this article aim to develop an integrated national strategy on energy poverty, reform the heating aid system, create a national energy renovation program dedicated to vulnerable households, promote energy communities, develop a network of energy advice centers, and integrate energy poverty policies with other social, health, and environmental policies.

The implementation of these recommendations requires a coordinated and multisectoral approach, involving national and local public authorities, energy companies, civil society organizations, and local communities. It is also essential to make efficient use of the European funds available through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, the Just Transition Fund, and the 2021-2027 operational programs.

In conclusion, combating energy poverty is not only a moral obligation towards vulnerable citizens but also an essential condition for achieving a fair and sustainable energy transition. By taking a long-term view and implementing

integrated policies, Romania can turn current challenges into opportunities to create a fairer, more efficient, and more sustainable energy system that leaves no one behind.

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# THE IMPACT OF MIGRATION ON SOCIAL COHESION IN DESTINATION SOCIETIES. A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract**. International migration represents one of the most complex contemporary social phenomena, with profound implications for the demographic, economic, and cultural structures of destination societies. The present paper aims to investigate how migration influences social cohesion, using a sociological theoretical framework and a comparative approach across distinct national contexts (France, Germany, the United States, Romania, Poland, and the Scandinavian states). The study highlights that migration can be understood as an ambivalent phenomenon: on the one hand, it contributes to cultural diversity, demographic revitalization, and economic dynamism; on the other hand, it can generate segregation, identity tensions, and social polarization, especially in the absence of coherent public integration policies. The comparative analysis shows that inclusive integration models (such as those in Scandinavia) foster social cohesion, whereas restrictive or assimilationist models (such as those initially applied in France and Germany) may lead to fragmentation and conflict. In the case of Romania and Poland, as emerging immigration states, the challenges are amplified by the lack of clear policies and by the ambivalent perceptions of the majority population.

**Keywords**: international migration, social cohesion, integration, social capital, discrimination, multiculturalism

**Résumé :** La migration internationale représente l'un des phénomènes sociaux contemporains les plus complexes, avec des implications profondes sur les structures démographiques, économiques et culturelles des sociétés de destination. Le présent travail se propose d'examiner la manière dont la migration influence la cohésion sociale, en utilisant un cadre théorique sociologique et une approche comparative entre des contextes nationaux distincts (France, Allemagne, États-Unis, Roumanie, Pologne et pays scandinaves). L'étude met en évidence que la migration peut être comprise comme un phénomène ambivalent : d'une part, elle contribue à la diversité culturelle, à la revitalisation démographique et au dynamisme économique ; d'autre part, elle peut engendrer la ségrégation, des tensions identitaires et la polarisation sociale, notamment en l'absence de politiques publiques cohérentes d'intégration. L'analyse comparative souligne que les modèles inclusifs d'intégration (tels que ceux des pays scandinaves) favorisent la cohésion sociale, tandis que les modèles restrictifs ou assimilationnistes (comme ceux initialement appliqués en France et en Allemagne) peuvent conduire à la fragmentation et au conflit. Dans le cas de la Roumanie et de la Pologne, en tant qu'États émergents d'immigration, les

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défis sont accentués par l'absence de politiques claires et par les perceptions ambivalentes de la population majoritaire.

**Mots-clés :** migration internationale, cohésion sociale, intégration, capital social, discrimination, multiculturalisme

**Abstract.** Migrația internațională reprezintă unul dintre cele mai complexe fenomene sociale contemporane, cu implicații profunde asupra structurilor demografice, economice și culturale ale societăților de destinație. Lucrarea de față își propune să investigheze modul în care migrația influențează coeziunea socială, utilizând un cadru teoretic sociologic și o abordare comparativă între contexte naționale distincte (Franța, Germania, Statele Unite, România, Polonia și statele scandinave). Studiul evidențiază că migrația poate fi înțeleasă ca un fenomen ambivalent: pe de o parte, ea contribuie la diversitatea culturală, revitalizarea demografică și dinamismul economic; pe de altă parte, poate genera segregare, tensiuni identitare și polarizare socială, în special în absența unor politici publice coerente de integrare. Analiza comparativă evidențiază faptul că modelele incluzive de integrare (precum cele din Scandinavia) favorizează coeziunea socială, în timp ce modelele restrictive sau asimilative (precum cele aplicate inițial în Franța și Germania) pot conduce la fragmentare și conflict. În cazul României și Poloniei, ca state emergente de imigrație, provocările sunt accentuate de lipsa unor politici clare și de percepțiile ambivalente ale populației majoritare.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** migrație internațională, coeziune socială, integrare, capital social, discriminare, multiculturalism

## 1. Introduction

International migration is one of the most complex and dynamic realities of the contemporary world. The increase in transnational mobility, supported by economic, political, and cultural factors, has significantly changed the structure of today's societies, bringing both opportunities and difficulties for maintaining social cohesion. In recent decades, migration flows have diversified, including both voluntary displacement for work and forced migration generated by conflict, instability, or climate change (Castles, by Haas & Miller, 2019; UNHCR, 2023).

From a sociological perspective, migration cannot be reduced only to demographic changes or economic effects. It must be analysed in correlation with how the destination communities manage to integrate newcomers and maintain social balance. Social cohesion, defined by trust, solidarity, and civic participation, is a central benchmark of stability (Putnam, 2000, 2007). However, these dimensions do not manifest themselves uniformly, as smaller communities appear to be more vulnerable to tensions, while large urban centres develop more flexible coping mechanisms.

Western experience shows that public policies play a decisive role. France and Germany, for example, have tested various models of integration, and the effects are directly seen in the quality of social relations (Favell, 1998). In the United States, the „melting pot" model has long been idealized; however, the current reality reveals the persistence of economic and cultural cleavages (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Thus, these experiences show that no model is universally valid;

Success depends more on the social and political context than on the theory adopted. In Eastern Europe, Romania and Poland have transitioned from being exporters of labor to becoming destination spaces, which presents new challenges regarding the integration and acceptance of diversity (Sandu, 2010; European Institute of Romania, 2020).

In this context, the central question is: how does migration influence the level of social cohesion, and to what extent can integration policies strengthen or weaken communities? In this paper, I propose a comparison between different national contexts, emphasizing both the positive effects (cultural diversity, expansion of social capital, revitalization of aging communities) and the associated difficulties (segregation, identity tensions, discrimination). However, I believe that the emphasis must be placed not only on the analysis of problems, but also on the identification of realistic solutions adapted to each context.

The sociological relevance of the theme is twofold. On the one hand, migration provides fertile ground for testing theories about integration, multiculturalism, and social capital. On the other hand, understanding the impact of migration on social cohesion has practical implications for public policies, integration strategies, and the functioning of democratic institutions. In the current conditions, marked by the intensification of migratory flows and the polarization of the political discourse on immigration, the sociological diagnosis of this phenomenon becomes indispensable for the anticipation and management of social changes.

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

### 2.1. Social cohesion

The concept of social cohesion occupies a central place in the analysis of migration phenomena, as it describes the degree of solidarity, trust, and civic participation within a community. Putnam (2000) defines cohesion in terms of „social capital", i.e., networks of relationships that facilitate cooperation and collective action. In his subsequent research, the author (Putnam, 2007) pointed out that ethnic and cultural diversity can initially lead to a decrease in social trust, but in the long run, it can stimulate innovation and the expansion of civic communities.

Esser (2006) complements this perspective, arguing that the level of social cohesion is directly conditioned by migrants' ability to acquire language skills and access the host society's social networks. Language works not only as a communication tool but also as a resource of cultural and social capital, facilitating educational, professional, and civic integration. In the absence of it, interactions between migrants and the majority population remain limited, which can lead to forms of isolation and community segregation. From this perspective, social cohesion should not be understood as a static state, but as the result of dynamic processes of adaptation and interaction, in which both migrants and host institutions have an active role.

Similarly, Chan, To, and Chan (2006) propose a multidimensional approach to social cohesion, based on trust, belonging, and economic inclusion, which provides an operational framework for assessing this phenomenon. In their study, entitled „Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research", Chan, To, and Chan (2006) started from a critical review of the literature on social cohesion, highlighting the need for a clearer definition and a unitary framework of analysis. The authors proposed a multidimensional approach, in which social cohesion is structured in four essential dimensions: trust, belonging, participation, and recognition. To validate this conceptual framework, the research was based on questionnaires applied to representative samples, collected in various social contexts. The data analysis was performed using advanced statistical methods, such as factor analysis and validation models, designed to test the consistency and relevance of the proposed dimensions. The final result was the development of an operational tool to measure social cohesion, which can be applied in international comparative studies and adapted to different cultural and political contexts.

At the same time, Bauböck (2001) demonstrates that genuine cohesion cannot be achieved without recognizing the political and civic participation of migrants, which transforms cohesion into a process of ongoing negotiation between diversity and common solidarity.

In the study „Social cohesion as a real-life phenomenon: Assessing the explanatory power of the universalist and particularist perspectives", Janmaat (2011) analyses social cohesion at the macro level, trying to determine whether it is influenced mainly by universal factors, such as socio-economic development, the existence of functional democratic institutions and access to education, or by particular factors, related to the specificities of the cultural and historical aspects of each region. Methodologically, the study has an international comparative character, based on data from the *World Values Survey* and other similar sources. The author used indicators such as *social trust, perception of equality, and consensus on fundamental values*, which he analysed through statistical regression models. The results show that economic development, fair distribution of resources, and democratic institutions support social cohesion, but there are also distinct regional patterns – such as the differences between Western and Eastern Europe – which demonstrate that some forms of social cohesion resist homogenisation processes. In conclusion, Janmaat argues that *social cohesion is a hybrid phenomenon*, determined both by the general socioeconomic conditions and by the cultural and historical context specific to each society. The relevance of this study for migration analysis is significant. The author points out that the integration of migrants and the level of social cohesion cannot be explained exclusively by economic development or by general integration policies, but must also be understood in the light of the historical and cultural particularities of the host states. Thus, it becomes clearer why the same integration policy can produce different results in France, Germany, or the countries of Eastern Europe.

## 2.2. Theories of migration and integration

The study of migration has generated several theories on how individuals and groups integrate into destination societies. One of the earliest approaches is the theory of assimilation formulated by Gordon (1964), which describes integration as a linear process, whereby migrants gradually adopt the values, norms, and cultural practices of the majority. Although influential in classical sociology of migration, this perspective has been criticized for its rigidity and inability to capture hybrid identities or transnational processes (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Moreover, the exclusive focus on migrants' adaptation neglects the role of the host society and institutions in shaping the integration process.

In contrast, the models of multiculturalism proposed in the 1980s–1990s promoted the recognition of cultural differences and the coexistence of multiple identities within a common framework of citizenship (Bauböck, 2001). They are based on the idea that diversity is not an obstacle, but a resource for the host society, provided that the rights of minorities and equal access to resources are guaranteed. However, Joppke (2004) points out that multiculturalism has entered a "political decline" in many Western states, replaced by more restrictive integration policies focused on linguistic and civic requirements and the testing of loyalty to majority values. This change reflects the tensions generated by globalization, the refugee crises, and the rise of populist parties, which have brought the idea of national cohesion back into question.

A more recent direction is interculturalism, which emphasizes dialogue between groups and building a common space for interaction. Favell (1998), analyzing the case of France and Great Britain, demonstrates that the success of integration depends on the way in which the state articulates citizenship rights and the recognition of diversity. Interculturalism proposes a more flexible approach than multiculturalism, encouraging mutual participation and continuous negotiation of identities, rather than mere coexistence. In this regard, Esser (2006) emphasises that integration cannot be separated from the acquisition of language skills and access to the social networks of the host society, elements that constitute the prerequisites for social cohesion.

Thus, the evolution of migration theories shows a shift from assimilative and unidirectional visions to models that recognize the dynamic, interactive, and bidirectional character of integration. New approaches no longer look at migrants only as passive beneficiaries of policies, but as social actors who contribute to the reshaping of communities and collective identities.

## 2.3. Social capital and migration

The link between migration and social capital has been intensively studied, as social networks constitute both a support for migrants and a bridge of interaction with the host community. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) show that transnational networks facilitate economic and social integration through access to information, resources, and job opportunities, but can also produce enclave effects when they remain closed to the majority society. In this case, internal

solidarity turns into a self-protection mechanism, which, while providing security, limits contact with the institutions and social networks of the local population.

In the case of Romanian migration, Anghel (2013) demonstrates that community networks in Italy functioned as resources of material and symbolic support, facilitating finding a job, accessing housing, and maintaining cultural ties. However, the same networks have generated dependencies and contributed to the reproduction of relatively closed occupational and social models, which can limit long-term integration. This situation shows that social capital is ambivalent: it can be a cohesive factor when it promotes civic participation and openness to the host society, but it becomes an obstacle when it reinforces segregation and community isolation.

In the study entitled „Reconsidering social cohesion: Developing a definition and analytical framework for empirical research", Chan, To and Chan (2006) argue that to function as a cohesion resource, social capital must be understood not only as internal solidarity ("bonding social capital"), but also as openness to external links ("bridging social capital"), which facilitates intergroup contacts. In the same vein, Putnam (2007) notes that ethnic diversity may initially cause retreat into homogeneous networks, but in the long term, through sustained interactions, it stimulates the expansion of social capital and the strengthening of civic communities. Thus, the social capital of migrants must not only be analysed in terms of internal support, but also in terms of the degree of connection to the institutions and networks of the host society. In the absence of this balance, the risk is that community solidarity will turn from a resource of integration into a factor of social fragmentation, with direct consequences on the level of cohesion.

### 3. International migration and its effects on destination societies

International migration produces multidimensional transformations in destination societies, affecting economic, cultural, and political structures. From a sociological perspective, these effects can be classified into two broad categories: opportunities for social cohesion and challenges that can lead to fragmentation and conflict.

### 3.1. Positive effects on social cohesion

A first positive effect of migration is *cultural diversity*, which can stimulate innovation and creativity in host communities. Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2019) argue that ethnic diversity contributes to economic and cultural dynamism, especially in large urban centers. In the same vein, Bauböck (2001) points out that societies that promote multicultural recognition can turn cultural differences into a resource for social cohesion.

Migration also plays an important role in *demographic and economic revitalisation*. European countries facing an ageing population benefit from the contribution of migrants to the labour market, contributing to the sustainability of social systems (OECD, 2022). From this point of view, migration is a partial solution to labour shortages and demographic imbalances. Moreover, migrants' social

networks can generate new forms of social capital, connecting local communities with transnational spaces. Portes and Rumbaut (2006) show that these networks facilitate economic integration and the expansion of opportunities, while Anghel (2013) highlights, in the case of Romanians in Italy, that community solidarity can support social integration and access to resources.

### 3.2. Challenges and risks to social cohesion

Although migration brings significant benefits, it is often perceived as a source of social fragmentation. In the paper "The retreat of multiculturalism in the liberal state: Theory and policy", Joppke (2004) shows that in many Western societies, the policies of multiculturalism, although initially designed to recognize cultural diversity, have had the side effect of consolidating relatively closed *ethnic enclaves*, in which interactions between migrants and the majority population have been limited. This situation has fuelled debates on the *decline of multiculturalism* and led states to adopt civic integration policies, focused on language requirements and the promotion of common values. From the perspective of social cohesion, this phenomenon can reduce the level of intergroup trust and civic participation, transforming multiculturalism from a tool of recognition into a factor of fragmentation when intercultural dialogue is lacking.

Another challenge is *discrimination and xenophobia*, phenomena that fuel identity tensions and affect the stability of social relations. Putnam (2007) argues that diversity, when not managed through inclusive policies, can lead to the withdrawal of individuals from community life and the erosion of social capital, reducing the level of generalized trust. From the perspective of acculturation processes, Berry (1997) shows that the attitudes of the majority towards migrants decisively influence the integration strategies adopted by them. In contexts marked by discrimination, migrants tend to opt for separation or even marginalization, avoiding contact with the host society, which weakens social cohesion. Instead, where there are inclusive policies and a framework for recognizing diversity, the integration strategy is favoured, which combines the maintenance of one's own cultural identity with active participation in the majority community. Thus, discrimination and xenophobia not only hinder integration but also generate the risk of *persistent identity cleavages* between majorities and minorities.

### 4. Benchmarking of national contexts

International migration manifests itself differently depending on the historical, political, and economic context of the destination countries. This section looks at the impact of migration on social cohesion in six contexts: France, Germany, the United States, Romania, Poland, and Scandinavia. The comparison of these cases makes it possible to identify the factors that favour or hinder social integration and the maintenance of community cohesion.

### 4.1. Western Europe: France and Germany

France and Germany have strengthened migratory traditions, but with different models of integration. In France, the republican model emphasizes cultural assimilation and the standardization of civic values, which can reduce the visibility of ethnic differences but often generates tensions among migrants who want to preserve their cultural identity (Favell, 1998). Brubaker (1992) points out that this approach derives from a tradition of universalist citizenship, in which national membership is based on the adoption of common norms and values rather than ethnic origin.

Germany, on the other hand, initially adopted a „guest-worker" model that involved temporary economic integration, but not social integration. This has led to urban segregation and difficulties in strengthening social cohesion (Castles, by Haas & Miller, 2019). Koopmans *et al.* (2005) point out, however, that in recent decades, Germany has evolved towards more inclusive policies, adopting elements of civic and multicultural integration, in an attempt to respond to the realities generated by long-term immigration.

This difference in approach between France and Germany shows that integration models are not uniform, but reflect *distinct historical and institutional traditions*, which shape both the migrant experience and the level of social cohesion in destination societies.

### 4.2. The United States: the „melting pot" model

The United States is a classic example of integration through the *„melting pot" model,* in which cultural differences are gradually absorbed into a common American identity through the adoption of the values, norms, and practices of the majority (Gordon, 1964; Portes and Rumbaut, 2006). This model implies a progressive assimilation, in which minorities gradually lose their distinctive cultural features to integrate into the dominant social and economic framework. However, recent research shows that the integration process is not uniform and that there are persistent ethnic and economic cleavages, especially in large cities, where residential segregation, unequal access to quality education, and limited economic opportunities affect social cohesion (Putnam, 2007).

Portes and Rumbaut (2006) point out that while the „melting pot" may facilitate the economic and linguistic integration of the first generations of migrants, it does not necessarily guarantee long-term social equality. Research on the second and third generations points to the persistence of structural inequalities, subtle discrimination, and segregation in schools or neighbourhoods, which limit intergroup interaction and affect social trust. In this context, the American model shows that integration through cultural absorption can work to create a common identity, but it does not automatically eliminate economic and social barriers, which implies the need for active policies of inclusion and equal opportunities.

### 4.3. Scandinavia: inclusive models

The Scandinavian countries – Sweden, Norway, and Denmark – are examples of relatively inclusive integration policies, characterised by a strong focus on social equality, access to education, and civic participation. Bauböck (2001) stresses that these policies aim not only at economic integration but also at the development of extensive social capital, which facilitates intergroup interactions and the maintenance of social cohesion. The OECD (2022) confirms that government interventions in education, language, and vocational training contribute to reducing inequalities and stimulating the active participation of migrants in civic life.

In addition, Scandinavian models emphasize intercultural dialogue and community mediation through local programs that encourage cooperation between migrant communities and the majority population. This type of approach limits the risk of social isolation and facilitates cultural integration, while maintaining an inclusive collective identity. However, even in these favourable contexts, rapid diversity and consistent migration flows can generate local tensions, such as pressures on urban infrastructure or conflicts over the perception of cultural identity. It stresses that, regardless of the national model, integration remains a dynamic process, requiring proactive, adaptable policies underpinned by a sound legislative and institutional framework (Esser, 2006; Favell, 1998).

Thus, the Scandinavian models provide an example of a balance between recognising cultural differences and maintaining social cohesion, demonstrating that inclusive policies and investments in social capital can alleviate the tensions generated by migration.

The comparative analysis of the models presented highlights some essential conclusions:

1. **The integration model adopted by the state** directly influences social cohesion: inclusive models foster trust and civic participation, while restrictive models can produce segregation (Favell, 1998; Bauböck, 2001).
2. **The social capital of migrants** plays an ambivalent role: strong networks support economic integration but can limit interaction with the majority society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Anghel, 2013).
3. **Public perception and local policies** affect social cohesion: polarizing discourses and a lack of clear policies increase tensions and reduce community trust (Putnam, 2007; European Institute of Romania, 2020).

Migration is therefore not in itself a factor of fragmentation, but its effect on social cohesion depends on the complex interaction between policies, social perceptions, and community networks.

### 5. Conclusions

International migration is a complex phenomenon with significant effects on social cohesion in destination societies. Theoretical and comparative analysis has shown that migration can bring both benefits and challenges, and its impact

depends on the interaction between public policies, migrants' social networks, and the perception of the majority population. On the one hand, cultural diversity, demographic and economic revitalisation of host societies as well as the expansion of social capital and the creation of networks of mutual support are some of the opportunities brought by migration. On the other hand, social fragmentation, ethnic segregation, identity tensions, and negative perceptions of the majority population are some of the challenges to social cohesion.

International migration is not a negative or destabilising factor in itself; its effects depend on how destination societies manage diversity, integrate migrants, and foster civic participation. Migration, when supported by effective public policies, active community involvement, and intercultural dialogue, can be a **driver of social cohesion**, supporting sustainable development and strengthening stability in contemporary societies.

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# INTRODUCTORY ELEMENTS FOR THE ANALYSIS OF DISSIDENTSHIP. A DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE IN FORMER COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

## Otilia BĂLINIȘTEANU[1]

**Abstract.** The issue of dissidence, as it evolved in the former communist countries, can contribute to defining a complex social phenomenon because even if a relatively small number of elites were more exposed, in reality, entire masses of people tacitly agreed with the opposition to the political regimes in those countries, the stake being, in fact, the transition to democracy. The resistance was rather moral and ethical, focused on respecting human rights and much less on violent actions of social change. From the outside, the Helsinki Accords of 1975 also had an increased importance. The complexity of the dissidence phenomenon comes from the diversity of the social groups involved: intellectuals from literary or scientific fields, groups of whistleblowers regarding the respect of human rights, certain religious groups, or bodies specific to economic activity (unions). Relatively small groups of opponents had a significant social impact through the force of the messages they transmitted, by creating a 'parallel society' of openness, by encouraging social change, and by providing a new elite capable of managing broad social reforms. This article proposes a complex approach to the phenomenon of dissidence, starting from the definition of the phenomenon, the analysis of its historical evolution, and insisting on the role of elites, but also on the social dimension of an important phenomenon of recent history**.**

**Keywords:** communism, dissidence, social change, political power, recent history

**Résumé** : La question de la dissidence, telle qu'elle a évolué dans les anciens pays communistes, peut contribuer à définir un phénomène social complexe. En effet, même si un nombre relativement restreint d'élites y était davantage exposé, en réalité, des masses entières adhèrent tacitement à l'opposition aux régimes politiques de ces pays, l'enjeu étant, en fait, la transition démocratique. La résistance était plutôt morale et éthique, axée sur le respect des droits humains et beaucoup moins sur des actions violentes de changement social. Vu de l'extérieur, les accords d'Helsinki de 1975 ont également revêtu une importance accrue. La complexité du phénomène de dissidence tient à la diversité des groupes sociaux impliqués : intellectuels issus des milieux littéraires ou scientifiques, groupes de lanceurs d'alerte concernant le respect des droits humains, certains groupes religieux ou organismes spécifiques à l'activité économique (syndicats). Des groupes relativement restreints d'opposants ont eu un impact social significatif par la force des messages qu'ils ont transmis, en créant une « société parallèle » d'ouverture, en

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encourageant le changement social et en fournissant une nouvelle élite capable de mener de vastes réformes sociales. Cet article propose une approche complexe du phénomène de dissidence, partant de sa définition, puis de l'analyse de son évolution historique, et insistant sur le rôle des élites, mais aussi sur la dimension sociale d'un phénomène important de l'histoire récente.

**Mots-clés :** communisme, dissidence, changement social, pouvoir politique, histoire récente

**Rezumat.** Problematica disidenţei, aşa cum a evoluat în fostele ţări comuniste, poate contribui la definirea unui fenomen social complex, deoarece, chiar dacă un număr relativ redus de elite au fost mai expuse, în mod real mase întregi de oameni au pactizat în mod tacit cu opoziţia faţă de regimurile politice din ţările respective, miza fiind, în fapt, tranziţia spre democraţie. Rezistenţa a fost mai degrabă morală şi etică, concentrată pe respectarea drepturilor omului şi mult mai puţin pe acţiuni violente de schimbare socială. Din exterior, Acordurile de la Helsinki din 1975 au avut şi ele o importanţă crescută. Complexitatea fenomenului disidenţei vine din diversitatea grupurilor sociale implicate: intelectuali din domeniile literar sau ştiinţific, grupurile de avertizori în ce priveşte respectarea drepturilor omului, anumite grupuri religioase sau organisme specifice activităţii economice (sindicate). Grupuri relativ reduse de opozanţi au avut un impact social semnificativ prin forţa mesajelor transmise, prin crearea unei „societăţi paralele" a deschiderii, prin încurajarea schimbării sociale, prin oferirea unei noi elite capabile să gestioneze reforme sociale ample. Articolul de faţă propune o abordare complexă a fenomenului disidenţei, plecând de la definirea fenomenului, analiza evoluţiei sale istorice, insistând pe rolul elitelor, dar şi pe dimensiunea socială a unui fenomen important al istoriei recente.

**Cuvinte cheie:** comunism, disidenţă, schimbare socială, putere politică, istorie recentă

### Introduction

After World War II, certain states in Central and Eastern Europe entered the Soviet sphere of influence, „importing" the form of government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) - the communist political regime. The group of states formed by the USSR, the German Democratic Republic, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria constituted what is now known as the Eastern Bloc, an area ideologically dominated by Moscow, considered a „sanitary" perimeter between East and West during the Cold War.

In all these states, the communist regimes installed between 1947 and 1949 were harsh, repressing fundamental freedoms. Deprived of minimum rights, faster or slower, depending on the country and the political and social context, society reacted. The opposition to power took different forms in the Eastern Bloc states, manifested itself gradually and had the final effect either of „taming" the political regime and a profound social change through the peaceful transition to democracy (in states such as Hungary, Czechoslovakia or Poland), or an attempt to reform the communist system of government and then the transition to a democratic regime (USSR in the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika*) or it just maintained hope at the social level and was a support for the population in not forgetting the meaning of democracy (Romania).

For this article, we consider it important to clarify the concept of *dissidence.* The meaning that consecrated this term, especially in the West, and later also in the Eastern Bloc countries, was that of „movements and reactions of society to the totalitarian phenomenon, in the proper sense of the public expression of difference of opinion, opposition/opposition and resistance” (Bălănescu, 2020, p. 383). At the international level, the unanimously accepted definition for dissidents in the communist states of the Soviet Bloc is the one given by the KARTA Center in Poland, which, wishing to produce a *Dictionary of Dissidence in the former communist countries*, took into account criteria such as: active attitude against the communist system in defense of human rights and fundamental freedoms, inspiration of resistance actions, peaceful opposition and respect for „the principles of democracy in their undemocratic world” (Andreescu, 2009, p. 16). „The dissident, as defined by the West in relation to socialist countries, is the person who 'publicly manifests nonconformist attitudes and critical opinions', gaining a certain degree of respect in his own country and a certain protection from the West, protection that will not save them from being marginalized by the authorities, but saves them from any form of radical persecution” (Deleanu, 2015, p. 64). In this sense, the concept was used in the present research, highlighting some nuances necessary in certain particular cases.

## Theoretical framework of the research

The theme of dissidence is addressed in numerous classic reference works in the fields of communication sciences, social sciences, history, and political sciences, as well as in current scientific studies and articles in these fields. Historiography and political science refer to this concept as a form of open, public opposition to the communist regime, in the sense consecrated by Western journalists regarding public intellectuals who were known opponents of the regime, especially through samizdat, in the USSR. „Anti-communist dissidence developed within totalitarian societies, the strategy, the dissident action being built in relation to the Leninist-type political system and its related constraints” (Cătănuş, 2014, p. 25).

In the social sciences, *dissent* is explained as a form of opposition to the dominant discourse, to the majority. In the 16th century, Protestants who did not accept the official religion of the Church of England were called dissidents. In a political sense, the term was used only in the first half of the twentieth century. In these terms, of opposition to the hegemonic position of the discourse of power, the phenomenon is observable especially in the case of authoritarian or totalitarian states, as is the case with those analysed in this research. Havel, for example, gives expression to this action of contestation with the phrase „living in truth”, suggesting that dissent must be above all a living form of moral opposition to the official lie. The dissident doesn't need to have a political program, but to „live in truth”, to refuse conformism and to reach a reconciliation with himself. A similar point of view is held by Solzhenitsyn, who appreciated that dissent is represented as an ethical choice of a few to live „not by lies” (Budraitskis, 2022, p. 108).

In communication sciences, dissidence is defined as the discursive and semiotic process by which individuals or groups express their opposition to the dominant discourse and the official norms of communication. The perspective on dissidence is, therefore, closely related to the public space, a phrase theorized by Jürgen Habermas. Dissidents become the creators of a communication space in dissonance with the official public space. In this sense, in the communist states of the Eastern Bloc, dissidents opposed the regime through codified forms of communication: samizdat – the clandestine self-publication of literature or texts in which social, ethical and opposition issues against state ideology were addressed; tamizdat – consisting of samizdat texts or publications illegally transferred to Western Europe or the United States and published as separate volumes or collections; cultural metaphors; aesopic language; Satire; subversive literature. They also resorted to publicly assumed forms of communication: open letters, public appeals, platform-manifestos ("The Two Thousand Words", a manifesto written by the writer Ludvik Vaculik and published on June 17, 1968 in Prague, Charter '77, founded by Václav Havel and Jan Patočka, also in Czechoslovakia), letters sent and read to the Free Europe radio station. In a public space occupied by ideology and official propaganda, dissidents tried to offer alternatives for communication and debate on issues important to society, such as fundamental rights and freedoms. From their ranks crystallized what Marlies Glasius calls in research related to the writings of dissidents in Eastern Europe and South America „proto-civil society" (Glasius, 2011, p. 7).

There are, however, epistemic controversies surrounding the concept of *dissent.* Not every form of disagreement, resistance or distancing from power, during the communist regime, can be considered an act of dissidence, at least not in the unanimously accepted sense regarding the phenomenon manifested in the Eastern Bloc – that of open opposition to the political regimes in power. An example is *the ketman* (inner exile), illustrated by Czeslaw Milosz (1999). Also, the duplicitous attitude encountered in many cases in the Eastern space (Czechoslovakia, Romania) – one thing you think, another you say – does not have the characteristics of a dissident act, being rather a form of personal salvation, mental and moral hygiene.

Ana Maria Cătănuș underlines the temptation that existed, especially in Romania, after 1990, to consider dissidence the courage to listen to or tell jokes about the communist regime or the oft-invoked „resistance through culture", suggesting that from here to saying that all Romanians were, in one way or another, dissidents is only one step (Cătănuș, 2014, p. 12). Real dissent is, from the perspective of discourse and public action, the most elaborate form of opposition. Gabriel Andreescu offers a clarification in this controversy, proposing the term resistance for those people who tried to oppose the regime in a subversive way (planning demonstrations, spreading manifestos, sending information abroad, letters to Free Europe). Some had the power to then move from the stage of „resisters" to that of „dissidents", that is, of public assumption, of anti-communism (in the '80s, the case of Iulius Filip or that of Radu Filipescu) (Andreescu, 2009, p. 16).

## Methodological framework of the research

This article presents a series of results of documentation through the content analysis of scientific articles, studies, volumes, etc., an analysis structured according to three criteria:

1. The historical dimension (certain identifiable moments in the communist period that produced transformations in terms of the manifestation of dissidence as a phenomenon – de-Stalinization, the period 1975-1985, *the perestroika* and *glasnost period*, the post-1990 period);
2. Geographical dimension (the states of the Eastern Bloc geographically closer to the West and those isolated from the West, in the immediate vicinity of the USSR);
3. Typology of communist regimes (authoritarian or dictatorial).

The historical and geographical dimensions allow us to follow the evolution of the phenomenon of dissidence in the Eastern Bloc states by identifying a „map" of the phenomenon, which could indicate directions of irradiation from one country to another or possible causal links that can be traced in future research.

## Results of documentary research

## The emergence of the phenomenon of dissidence

Opposition to communist regimes in the Eastern Bloc has gradually increased. It started in the USSR, where, although social manifestations and actions of disagreement appeared in the circles of poets and in the circles of young socialists since the late 1950s, a visible movement of dissidence coagulated only at the end of the thaw period instituted by Nikita Khrushchev, in the mid-1960s. It was characterized by a „common space for communication and distribution of information" (Judt, 2008) through samizdat literature. Samizdat was then a communication platform used in other Eastern Bloc states, such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. In the USSR, dissidence had prominent figures in the field of literature, starting with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Bukovsky, Yuri Galanskov, Ilya Bokshtein, Gabriel Superfin, Ludmila Alekseeva, Joseph Brodsky, and Nadezhda Mandelshtam. Mikhail Gorbachev is a prominent figure of dissidence within the Communist Party. In other European countries, the phenomenon of dissidence took shape and developed only 10 years later, after the Helsinki Agreement of 1975. „From that moment on, dissidence encompassed a wide range of approaches and strategies, from rejecting politics to exerting pressure on communist regimes to make them reconsider their relationship with their societies" (Cătănuș, 2011, p. 348).

The characteristics of dissidence in the Eastern Bloc identified from various messages, open letters or public appeals were generally the following: open, public position, respect for the law (given that the communist states did not respect their own laws), non-violence, disagreement with the ideological, economic, moral principles promoted by the communist regimes, the use of the discourse related to

human rights as a strategy to build a „moral platform" into which to attract so many dissidents from the intellectuals, as well as reformist communists (the case of the Charter of '77 and the essay *Power of the Powerless*, in which Václav Havel called for a peaceful opposition, centered on respect for human rights and the rejection of ideological lies), the „anti-political" approach, theorized by the Hungarian dissident György Konrád (Konrád, 1984) and the „apolitical politics" popularized by Havel (Havel, 1978). Until 1989, *apolitical politics* „meant the refusal to participate in corrupt and ossified political institutions and, from a position outside power, the demand for fundamental civil rights and the fair application of the law" (Feinberg, 2022, p. 153). After all, what we today would call activism.

The typology of the forms of dissidence is also very diverse: social and then political dissidence, towards the end of the period, in the USSR, cultural and artistic dissidence (through samizdat – in the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary, art, underground music – in Czechoslovakia), religious dissidence (the actions and support of the Catholic Church and Pope John Paul II in Poland, the clandestine actions of Greek Catholics in Romania, after the bishops were arrested), workers' dissidence (the strong trade union action of Solidarność in Poland, workers' solidarity in Czechoslovakia, strikes – in Romania the strike in the Jiu Valley in 1977 and the strike followed by the workers' revolt in Brașov in 1987), intellectual dissidence (in Hungary, through the „Budapest School", and in Romania).

Due to the diversity of forms of action and social particularities in each country of the former Eastern bloc, a series of explanatory clarifications are necessary, because a whole series of social actions have been indirectly related to the idea of dissidence. A number of authors recall that the forms of tacit disagreement with the regime were, in fact, a necessary „mask" to resist. Those strategies that integrated the „public and private spheres" (Petrescu & Petrescu, 2007) designated sui generis forms of opposition. We recall here the passive resistance, marked by the culture of duplicity, practiced on a large scale in Ceaușescu's Romania, but also identifiable in Czechoslovakia, where the public characteristics of life hardly represented the reality experienced by its citizens (Brozek, 2022).

In this context, we can deduce that not every latent form of confrontation with the regime can be characterized by cowardice or collaborationism. One of these refers to „existence through culture", a much broader phrase with a much clearer nuance than the more often circulated „resistance through culture". Andreescu (2015) defines it as „an attribute of human beings for whom the cultural manifestation gives meaning to their own life." Interiority is saved. In the extension of „existence through culture", there are the „cultural niches of existence", characterized by „the promotion of a true human project, built in harsh conditions". In other words, intellectuals and artists preferred marginalization in the cultural project of the moment instead of compromise. For example, the eighties generation of authors (writers and poets) was integrated into this form of resistance in Romania.

**Countries with strong dissidence**

Chronologically, Poland was the next state in which a dissident movement crystallized, the strongest in Eastern Europe, favored by the existence of a strong civil society and the influence of the Catholic Church, through the personality of Pope John Paul II, a Pole by origin, considered the „spiritual father" of the Polish labor movement (Walesa, 2012). This was strengthened by workers' solidarity and then by the establishment of the Workers' Defence Committee (KOR) in 1976 and the trade union Solidarność (Solidarity) in 1980. The dissent was strong because there was a fusion of public solidarity between workers, intellectuals, and the Catholic Church. The locomotive personalities of the Polish dissidence were Lech Wałęsa, Adam Michnik, and Bronisław Geremek.

In Czechoslovakia, after the dramatic events during the Prague Spring (1968), after the Helsinki Agreement, which had the role of de-escalating relations between East and West during the Cold War, and under the influence of what was happening in Poland, the Charter '77 appeared. It was a social and moral manifesto, focused especially on respect for human rights, which resonated throughout the Eastern Bloc and constituted a platform for civic dissidence. The most prominent figures of dissidence were Jiří Němec, Václav Havel, and Jan Patočka (Petrescu & Petrescu, 2007).

Although not as vigorous as in Poland or Czechoslovakia, dissent in Hungary was visible and important, especially in the 1980s. Hungarian society alternated between the violently repressed revolution of 1956 and the „silent dissidence" of the last communist decade, as János Kornai (1992) called it. The dissidents were communist reformists, but also many intellectuals. Samizdat was also in Hungary, as in the USSR, a form of coded communication through which opposition to the regime was manifested (Deleanu, 2015). Hungarian dissidence made possible a peaceful transition of the country to a democratic regime. The most important figures were György Konrád and János Kis.

**Countries with weak dissent**

In the German Democratic Republic (GDR) the dissident movement was almost non-existent. The situation can be explained by the standard of living that the East Germans had, by the harsh repressive system, ready to stifle any action against the state, and a certain type of dialogue that Eric Honecker, the president between 1971 and 1989, managed to have with the intellectuals (Cătănuş, 2014). Therefore, from the period of Eastern European dissidents, the cases of two East German dissidents whose actions were quickly blocked by their expulsion to the Federal Republic of Germany can be remembered in the GDR: the music soloist Wolfgang Biermann and the philosopher Rudolf Bahro.

A similar situation, in the sense of a dissidence that is not very visible, was recorded in Bulgaria, a country loyal to the USSR. Here, there were only a few particular situations: the dissidence of the Turkish-Muslim minority, which militated for religious rights, and certain individual positions. The most famous Bulgarian dissident is Jeliu Jelev, who, after 1990, became president of the country.

### The case of Romania

In Romania, against the background of an extremely harsh dictatorial regime, dissidence was limited in action. It manifested itself from the end of the '70s, with the Open Letter of Paul Goma, in which the author announced that he was in solidarity with the anti-communist protesters of the '77 Charter in Czechoslovakia. There was, rather, a „solitary dissidence", as defined by the mathematician Mihai Botez, himself a dissident, a sum of individual dissidents. It was made up of a diverse social fabric. Romanian dissidence „depended on personal details, almost impossible to put into a scheme" (Andreescu, 2009, p. 15), some of the regime's opponents moving from subversive resistance to public assumption of anti-communism.

„It seems to be devoid of names and prominent movements", says Koranyi (2023) of Romanian dissidence. The overall picture, as it looked from outside the country, shows weak dissent. The explanation comes first of all from that picture of the „political culture of resistance", very different in the societies of these communist countries. Romania did not have a participatory political culture. (Petrescu & Petrescu, 2007).

Then, under the conditions of a dictatorial regime, as happened under Ceauşescu, Romania was an isolated, closed state. Censorship was careful to eliminate from the cultural, literary, and press discourse any type of dissonance with the official discourse. The continuous surveillance, the reprisals, the strict control of the institutions through centralization made the idea of dissidence adapt, chameleon-like, to the repressive context. However, the dissidence had a specificity that cannot be denied. The criteria for fitting into the Western construct of the term could not be reached in a critical mass of the Polish type. The reality of the opposition to the regime was much more fluid; There were gestures of dissidence, and there were also actions of dissidence. The „solitary dissidence", theorized by Mihai Botez, implied that any person, in his own name and publicly, should express his opinion about the shortcomings of the society in which he lived and propose alternative solutions. This avoided rapid liquidation, as would have been expected in the case of dissident groups. The mathematician, therefore, proposed a platform for debate in which voices do not unite in a chorus, but assert themselves individually. The only condition is that they are heard. Among the most famous dissidents are Paul Goma, Doina Cornea (thanks to Radio Free Europe), Radu Filipescu, Dorin Tudoran, Gabriel Andreescu, Mihai Botez, Mircea Dinescu (Paica, 2011, p. 55).

Dissidence appeared sporadically, fragmented, because it did not have the necessary levers to create networks of dissidence (for example, the university system, as in Hungary) or solidarities such as those in Poland or Czechoslovakia. The only attempt to establish a trade union in Romania, SLOMR, in the late 1970s, a body that campaigned for an end to discrimination against workers who demanded rights, a shorter working week, and the right to a disability pension, was brutally repressed by the regime, with leaders being locked up in psychiatric hospitals or in prisons (Cătănuş, 2014).

As for the topics of debate that could have mobilized society towards a certain type of solidarity, they were impossible to advance in a public space occupied by official discourse and propaganda, with a main theme, that of national sentiment, confiscated by the ideology of national-communism. In addition, the support of the official church, the Orthodox Church, was lacking; the „spiritual exercise of solidarity", as Doina Cornea called it, was missing.

The crackdown on free speech was another impediment to a broader dissent movement. Romanians did not have an internal platform for communication and debate (like the samizdat texts in the USSR), but rather one mediated externally by Radio Free Europe and Romanian intellectuals in exile. Distancing through silence and dissimulation from the regime, isolation in the intimacy of the family were forms chosen by most of society, concerned not with how to fight communism, but with how to survive physically in a country where the standard of living was below the limit of precariousness.

### Continuity of forms of dissent after 1989

In all countries of the former Eastern Bloc, both former dissidents and those claiming their legacy militate for democratic principles, good governance, and the rule of law (Feinberg, 2022, p. 154). They are embedded in what is generically called „post-dissidence".

Today, dissident actions similar to those of the period under investigation can still be identified in Russia, led authoritatively by Vladimir Putin. The case of Alexei Navalny is notorious, who, until his death in February 2024, and after that, remained an example of resistance and the ability to mobilize the masses to defend their rights. As a means of communicating his anti-corruption and anti-establishment discourses, he used the YouTube platform, reaching an elaborate form of „digital activism" (Glazunova, 2020, p. 129). Other activists, such as Alexei Gorinov, Grigory Melkonyants, Oleg Orlov, and Aleksandra Skochilenko, were silenced by their sentence to detention. Similar situations are recorded in the press in Belarus, where opponents of the Lukashenko regime are censored and arrested.

In Romania and Bulgaria, after 1989, dissidence took on another form of action: the fight against corruption in the system of state institutions. In Hungary and Slovakia, partly also in Poland, dissidence took the form of the fight against deviation from democratic principles and values - positions taken by intellectuals in exile (Hungary), protests, some very strong (Slovakia). In Slovakia, „post-dissidence" was at the core of the protest movement that erupted after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in February 2018.

### Conclusions: synthesis, limits, future directions

Anti-communist dissidence in the Eastern Bloc was an asymmetrical phenomenon, manifesting itself differently from one country to another. It did not consist of a traditional political opposition, not even in the USSR, only partially, in the last part of the communist regime, but in a moral, ethical opposition. The

dissidents' discourse has mostly centered on the defense of human rights, and they are sometimes referred to as „Eastern European activists."

In Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, countries with larger urban populations, dissent had stronger forms of public manifestation, based on consistent solidarity. In Hungary, the 1956 Revolution was one of the earliest and most violent opposition movements to the Soviet regime and occupation, and generated dissent supported by the intelligentsia and reformist communists. In Czechoslovakia, the „Prague Spring" (1968) was repressed just as violently, generating in society the seeds of vigorous dissent.

Although dissent has manifested itself to a greater or lesser extent in all the countries of the Eastern Bloc, one cannot speak of a contagion phenomenon in the full sense of the term. If we refer to the social science definition of the concept of *contagion*, which involves the diffusion between distinct groups of ideas, practices or patterns of action, we cannot say that societies throughout the Eastern Bloc have experienced the same type of social movement. There were, however, cases of imitation of some models of action (the fight for human rights, solidarity around the demands contained in the '77 Charter, such as that of Paul Goma in Romania). We consider that the most comprehensive and faithful metaphor of what dissidence meant, one from which its uneven, non-unitary character also shines through, is Vaclav Havel's remark: „the ghost that haunts Eastern Europe". There were also influences at the level of the Eastern Bloc, made possible by listening to the same radio station - Radio Free Europe - and adhering to the principles of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement.

The distinction between an authoritarian regime and a dictatorial regime does not explain certain paradoxes. Both in the USSR and in Romania, there were dictatorial regimes, but freedom of expression made more progress under Gorbachev than under Ceaușescu. Rather, random/accidental factors have played an important role in the evolution of the phenomenon of dissidence.

The states located in central and western Europe were better able to sustain this phenomenon, thanks to their proximity to the West. In Poland, for example, the links between civil society and Western European and American sources of information and the magazine „Kultura", which was published in Paris, were important, considered a „red thread" that united the Polish intelligentsia inside the country with those in exile.

The limits of the research are given by the fact that, in terms of dissidence in the Eastern Bloc, there is a huge volume of specialized literature, which requires systematic research, but also by the still-persistent epistemic controversies around the concept. In future research, a detailed transnational synthesis of dissident movements would be useful. As far as the Romanian space is concerned, investigating the dissidents' discourse could provide an in-depth look at the ways of challenging communist ideology and politics in the Eastern Bloc and their effects in the public sphere to date.

Starting from the title of the article, I believe that a theoretical and methodological answer is possible regarding a sociology of dissidence. The

fundamental terms that can contribute can be easily deduced from the theoretical elements already mentioned: dissidence as a form of crystallization of collective action, as broad social action based on social and political opportunities, as an element of Social Movement Theory. Another important study directions are: dissidence and the frames of reference in which it can function (Goffman, 1974), dissidence and resource mobilization, the problem of parallel society/culture, the perspective of the sociology of elites, and dissidence and the role of transnational networks.

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# THE UNSEEN FACES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

## Carmen PALAGHIA[1]

**Abstract**: Goal 5.2 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to „eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including *trafficking and sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation*" (p. 22). In Romania, *the National Strategy Against Trafficking in Persons* for the period 2024 - 2028 reveals that *in the field of combating trafficking in human beings, the specialized human resources are insufficient, and the need to train the main categories of specialists who can come into contact with the alleged victims of trafficking in persons persists.* In this context, we clarify in our article aspects such as the distinction between trafficking in human beings and „voluntary prostitution"; we delineate the causes, forms and indicators that differentiate prostitution from trafficking in human beings; the way in which recruiters aim to attract victims in situations involving the sale of one's own body as a commodity through the use of devastating psychological techniques and the installation of addiction to drugs, alcohol and, above all, abusive. The main conclusion of the research is that traffickers' strategies are increasingly complex, followed by efforts to avoid criminal liability.

**Keywords:** human trafficking, prostitution, drugs, domestic violence, refugees

**Résumé** : L'objectif 5.2 du Programme de développement durable à l'horizon 2030 des Nations Unies est « d'éliminer toutes les formes de violence à l'égard de toutes les femmes et de toutes les filles dans les sphères publique et privée, y compris la *traite et l'exploitation sexuelle et les autres formes d'exploitation* » (p. 22). En Roumanie, *la Stratégie nationale de lutte contre la traite des personnes* pour la période 2024-2028 révèle que *dans le domaine de la lutte contre la traite des êtres humains, les ressources humaines spécialisées sont insuffisantes et que la nécessité de former les principales catégories de spécialistes susceptibles d'entrer en contact avec les victimes présumées de la traite des personnes persiste.* Dans ce contexte, nous clarifions dans notre article des aspects tels que la distinction entre la traite des êtres humains et la « prostitution volontaire » ; nous définissons les causes, les formes et les indicateurs qui différencient la prostitution de la traite des êtres humains ; la manière dont les recruteurs visent à attirer les victimes dans des situations de vente de son propre corps comme marchandise par l'utilisation de techniques psychologiques dévastatrices et l'installation d'une dépendance à la drogue, à l'alcool et, surtout, abusive. La principale conclusion de la recherche est que les stratégies des trafiquants sont de plus en plus complexes, suivies des efforts visant à éviter la responsabilité pénale.
**Mots-clés :** traite des êtres humains, prostitution, violence domestique, réfugiés

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**Rezumat**: Obiectivul 5.2 al Agendei 2030 a Naţiunilor Unite pentru Dezvoltare Durabilă este de a „elimina toate formele de violenţă împotriva tuturor femeilor şi fetelor în sfera publică şi privată, inclusiv *traficul şi exploatarea sexuală şi alte forme de exploatare*" (p. 22). În România, *Strategia Naţională împotriva Traficului de Persoane* pentru perioada 2024 - 2028 relevă că *în domeniul combaterii traficului de fiinţe umane, resursele umane specializate sunt insuficiente, iar necesitatea de a pregăti principalele categorii de specialişti care pot intra în contact cu presupusele victime ale traficului de persoane persistă.* În acest context, clarificăm în articolul nostru aspecte precum distincţia dintre traficul de fiinţe umane şi „prostituţia voluntară"; conturăm cauzele, formele şi indicatorii care diferenţiază prostituţia de traficul de fiinţe umane; modul în care recrutorii urmăresc să atragă victime în situaţii care implică vânzarea propriului corp ca marfă prin utilizarea unor tehnici psihologice devastatoare şi instalarea dependenţei de droguri, alcool şi, mai ales, abuzive. Principala concluzie a cercetării este că strategiile traficanţilor sunt din ce în ce mai complexe, urmate de eforturi de evitare a răspunderii penale.

**Cuvinte cheie**: trafic de persoane, prostituţie, violenţă domestică, refugiaţi

## Introduction

Human trafficking is a violation of human rights, especially to liberty and personal integrity, and is characterized by *the exploitation of vulnerable people for material gain* (Touzenis, 2010). The forms of exploitation can be sexual (prostitution, pornography) or for work, forced marriage, committing crimes by coercion (online fraud, recruitment of other victims, drug trafficking, pickpocketing), organ trafficking, surrogate mothers (those women who are used to give birth to children), etc.

Traffickers use *vulnerable people* of different ages, ethnicities, and cultures, with the clear aim of obtaining illicit gains as much as possible. It should be noted that victims do not consent to exploitation, but, as research and reports by the 'National Agency against Trafficking in Persons' reveal, are deceived with *too good to be true offers* by traffickers who do everything they can at the beginning to establish a close connection with them, to gain their trust; they come up with *life-saving solutions* for any problem they face.

### 1. The distinction between human trafficking and „voluntary prostitution"

Prostitution has its origins in Antiquity, and throughout human civilizations, there have been certain rituals and legal provisions, some for and others against this practice. It is practiced in both economically and socially developed countries, and is often seen in some circles as „the oldest profession in the world." Professor Doru Buzducea argues that prostitution is part of the category of social problems, as it „survived" even during the Inquisition. „Practitioners" expose themselves to risks such as serious health problems, violence, and even death. The consequences are also reflected at the level of society as a whole, as they destroy moral norms, threaten public health, diminish social control, and contribute to the development of other social problems (Buzducea, 2005).

The girls are usually very young and are either victims of human trafficking, or due to reasons such as poverty, lack of a job, lack of a family, or a disorganized family, marked by tensions, they end up practicing for a period of time „providing sexual services" to different people, for sums of money. This serious problem is associated with other social problems, such as alcohol consumption, drug use, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, and crime (Buzducea, 2010; Lazăr, 2010; Buzducea, 2022).

## 2. Life stories of women who are „behind the label of prostitute"

Elena Alina Tariceanu (2014) reveals the life stories of women who are „behind the label of prostitute". Some of them ended up in this situation because „they started using drugs out of curiosity". The author presents the case of Gina, a 16-year-old girl, who had started practicing prostitution „at the request of her boyfriend at the time", who was a drug user. Another case is that of Mihaela, a young woman from the provinces, who had come to the capital to continue her master's degree studies and who, after completing her studies, got a job at a bank where she earned enough money to be able to support herself in a city like Bucharest, but she entered an entourage that led her to heroin consumption and her salary began to become insufficient to cover food expenses, maintenance and purchase of doses, which, according to her, were of „the best quality", therefore also very expensive. Mihaela was, at the time of the investigation, arrested and convicted of drug trafficking, but, being pregnant at the time of incarceration, she was released from the penitentiary to give birth to the child. There are very few prostitutes who get pregnant and give up drug use, and their children are born with very serious health problems, or even die. The author reveals that women who sell their bodies for money in the street environment are usually stable in terms of geographical area and the activity of such a person in a certain area of a city is given by a certain „relational fabric" made up of the relationships she has with certain policemen, with the pimp, with a certain clientele, but also by the positioning of one's own home. They can migrate from one area to another, depending on the relationships they have with the pimps who correspond to those areas; the amounts earned often differ from one area to another.

Another case is that of Steliana, a young woman who blamed herself for choosing this „wrong path", but who managed not to be fined: she was careful not to expose herself, permanently carrying out her „activity" in a fixed location: she refused to go anywhere else, and the place she chose, she called it „the room" and it was owned by „Mrs. Dida", a mature Roma woman, about 40 years old, who fulfilled „all the characteristics of a pimp or a matron, providing prostituted women with a few rooms for the sale of sex and mediating the relationship with the police" (Tariceanu, 2014, p. 269).

Another author, Marian Ursan (2010, p. 512) reproduces in the research entitled *Drugs and prostitution: 'combinations' and nightlife in Bucharest,* statements of some pimps, of which we present some excerpts:

 Mitu, 38 years old, a „combiner", declared: „I take commission from the girls, I have nothing to do with them. As some can't stay outside, I find another boy, I combine him, and if he enters the room, I also have my share...".

Alin, 23, „a small pimp, with big, unrealistic plans, „has only one girl who shoots for him" and „wants prostitution to be legalized, because he can no longer stand the abuses of the police". Also, „in the area where Alin works, there are four other pimps, and between them there is a degree of kinship, which also gives him a certain degree of protection, he is not able to impose himself... he considers that he is a fine boy, who takes care of his daughter..." (Ursan, 2010, pp. 512-513).

According to the *New Penal Code*, Article 213, pimping represents: „determining or facilitating the practice of prostitution or obtaining patrimonial benefits from this practice by one or more persons and is punishable by imprisonment from 2 to 7 years and prohibition of the exercise of certain rights".

Shocking are the cases of those women for whom „leaving prostitution is equivalent to death". The *Abraca case* is the story of a young woman who had started practicing prostitution at the age of 16 and suffered from diabetes, and the lack of health insurance and drug addiction made the disease advance rapidly. Although she had reached one of her lower limbs with gangrene that „had extended to the entire leg and gave off a pestilential smell", she continued to practice prostitution and still had „clients, „only that she could no longer perform normal sex, but only oral" according to the statements of the employees of the ARAS Social Ambulance. There is certainly a special psychological profile for that type of men who „resort to the sexual services of a dying woman" (Tariceanu, 2014, p. 273).

### 3. Causes and forms of voluntary prostitution

Drug addiction, along with the „mirage of money" and a precarious family environment, *can often lead to entry into prostitution* (Ursan, 2017). Narcotics close the „vicious circle of prostitution", as women end up resorting to such practices to quickly earn the amounts of money necessary to procure their „daily dose". There are, of course, also the nuanced forms of the phenomenon, such as the so-called „luxury prostitution" masked under the screens of erotic massage parlours, which are aimed at clients with greater financial possibilities, and the gains obtained from the development of these networks are huge and difficult to quantify or tax, being a component of the underground economy. This social phenomenon is a controversial one, and the solutions outlined over time have been either criminalization (prohibition and punishment) or legalization.

Felicia Ceaușu, a researcher at the Romanian Academy, notes that „after the revolution, but especially in the last five years, the pornography industry has grown. There are *porn stars who appear on well-known talk shows, at peak hours*, explaining why they like to have this job and why it is better this way. There are also thousands and thousands of pornographic sites on the internet, and in Romanian, in which the announcement forbidden to minors is more of a formal one, because too few are paid" (Ceaușu, 2024, p. 181). In the same direction, Virgiliu Gheorghe (2011, p. 30) reveals that „it has been found that the rate of marital

infidelity increases by 317% in the case of pornography consumers", and „the use of pornography on the Internet increases by 370% the probability of resorting to the paid services of prostitutes".

## 4. Indicators differentiating prostitution from human trafficking

Prostitution and human trafficking are extremely serious problems of contemporary society, with devastating consequences at the individual, family, community, and societal levels. The indicators that differentiate prostitution from human trafficking are:

1. The clothes they wear are not appropriate for the season, and often, the girls are on the street, dressed very scantily in winter.

2. They work long hours, even if they get sick.

3. They don't know the city, the area, and they don't socialize.

4. They are on the street in unfavourable weather conditions.

5. If they are in other countries, they do not return to their country of origin for long periods of time, even if they have children in the country.

6. They change their behaviour in the presence of group members. The presence of a single indicator may suggest low self-esteem or lack of determination, but a combination of two or more indicators present over a longer period of time strongly suggests a potential exploitative situation (Pascoal, 2020).

In human trafficking, psychological torture is due to isolation, disorientation of victims, impossibility of communication, lack of documents, and the abuses to which they are subjected.

Here are some statements by some teenage girls, edifying on the trafficking of girls:

„I asked him to let me go home. I was crying. They watched me while I was talking on the phone, but even so, my mother realized that something very bad was happening" (p. 19).

„I lived with my brother, my mother, and her husband in our village. I went to high school, and every day I had to walk 8 kilometres from home to school and back. My mother's husband drank alcohol every day, and whenever he got drunk, he sexually assaulted me. My mother knew about it, but she didn't do anything" (p. 18).

"When I decided to leave Romania, there was no chance for me here. I had a child to raise, my parents kept asking me for money, and the child's father had gone to Italy and had never returned. I tried many times to find work, but who would hire me without a high school diploma and with a child waiting for me at home? So, I thought this was my last chance. I went to Serbia with the help of a man, but there I was sold, and finally I found myself in Sarajevo" (p. 29).

„I don't know who to trust. Sometimes I don't even have it in me" (p. 21).

„At first, (when I came back) I was afraid to go outside in the daylight... I was afraid that people would see how ugly I was" (p. 21).

„I proposed to a girl that we run away. We had no idea that the pimp and the police were keeping an eye on us. They caught us and sold us. They knew we were

*going to try to run away. I realized that I had no escape. The police brought us back every time"* (p. 23).

„*They destroyed my papers, they gave me another name, they stole my identity"* (p. 23).

„*It was a police raid. The pimp hid us in the basement. I stayed there for almost a week. We were desperate and hungry. We thought they had forgotten us there"* (source: Galit, 2004, pp. 11-29).

The interventions of the social worker involve working with people who practice commercial sex, victims of human trafficking, drug users, men who use such services or who have sexual relations with other men, homeless people, people infected with HIV/AIDS, etc. To support each beneficiary, counselling, support, and social (re)integration services are provided, and primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs are implemented for children and young people at risk. An effective, Evidence-based intervention is aimed at addressing all the social problems concerned.

## 5. Alcohol and drug addiction in the context of human trafficking

On November 18, 2024, the press in our country reported „the investigation of dozens of pupils and students from Iasi, Bucharest, Galati, and Vaslui for 'trafficking in high-risk drugs, trafficking in high-risk drugs and carrying out, without right, operations with psychoactive substances, committed especially in school environments" (Netedu, 2024, p. 202). It is a reality in which the new generations of children and adolescents, amid conflicts with their parents, remain extremely vulnerable both to addictions and to the phenomenon of human trafficking. There is also a vulnerability of girls who are victims of (cyber)bullying in the face of human trafficking (see also Palaghia, 2019; Palaghia, 2024b). In Bacău there was a method of recruitment among high school students, in which girls who were part of the trafficking networks entered the school toilet and sedated the victims (vulnerable students, schoolmates, previously subjected to (cyber)bullying aggression) with formaldehyde; they declared to the responsible adults (teaching or auxiliary staff) that the victim was ill and accompanied her home. Subsequently, the victims were taken to places where they were abused, filmed, and later blackmailed by the members of the network with those compromising videos; thus, the victims were still kept in traffic (see Tăbuşcă 2020; 2022). Even if they are recruited through the „fake love" method, the victims are drugged without their knowledge, even during the recruitment period, and end up confusing addiction with the love they have for the aggressor (see also Tăbuşcă, 2024).

In an analysis of this contemporary phenomenon, Cristina Gavriluţă reveals how the „heads of trafficking networks" exercise their control by outlining the profile of the trafficker who imposes his authority and power on the victims (Gavriluţă, 2017). Addiction can be physical, mental, or mixed, the latter category being mostly narcotics (Rădoi, 2015). Specialists who work directly with surviving victims of human trafficking reveal that if in a period of two to three months the girls are not „taken out of trafficking" it is very difficult to get out of the clows of

the traffickers, since drug addiction is well established, the traumatic bond is strongly created, and the constraints go as far as the threat that if they are not sacrificed, loved ones (younger brothers or sisters) will be brought into traffic or close family members will be killed. In the case of families recruited for work, there are cases in which the girls of those families, who remain alone, known by traffickers as vulnerable, are also recruited through the „false love" method and end up being trafficked (Tăbușcă, 2021).

## 6. Gaslighting in the context of human trafficking

A series of researchers (Aninușanu *et al.*, 2016; Pascoal, 2020) reveals that traffickers are 75% narcissistic, boasting that they have „relationships". They often receive the support of female relatives who have the role of controlling the victim and ensuring that the victim has no ties to other people outside the socio-family network they have created, thus shaping an environment in which the victim remains the only person the victim still has. This is why, at an initial stage, vulnerable girls are identified who have no friends and do not get along with family members. Victims of domestic abuse can be abused children or children who come from very authoritarian families. Traffickers give them the necessary attention, gaining their trust, and they act as if they can rely on them in any circumstance. They are very open and communicative, even discussing the illegal activities they engage in. They target victims as young as possible, who lack love, who have family difficulties, or who grew up in placement centers.

It is worth noting that not all poor families are vulnerable to the phenomenon of human trafficking, as traffickers are mainly looking for girls who do not get along with their parents or who are abused in their families of origin, which are not necessarily poor (Gavriluță, Gavriluță, 2013). In sexual exploitation, girls are determined to bring them as much money as possible, but not necessarily by using force, but especially by outlining a marital plan, such as raising money to buy a house, a car that they can benefit from together, and other similar matrimonial goals.

Traffickers use *devastating psychological techniques* to keep their victims subdued. One of these is *gaslighting*, a manipulation technique that causes the victim to question reality, including their own perceptions and memories (see also Stern 2023); *For the aggressors, it is a tool of systematic control through which they deny the things that happened and claim that things happened that in fact did not exist.* They downplay the seriousness of the abuse by stating either that the victim is exaggerating or imagining things; thus leads it to question its own experience and to accept increasing abuses; she ends up becoming convinced that the trafficker wants her well and is the only person she can rely on; she begins to feel responsible for the abuses to which she is subjected, she loses confidence in her own memory and ability to discern, thus becoming dependent on the aggressor and in terms of how she comes to understand reality.

The victim ends up living in a state of permanent confusion, no longer being able to distinguish between lies and truth; *thus, they become, by eroding self-*

*confidence (see also Rădoi, Irimescu, 2021), dependent and psychologically dependent on the trafficker; it end up depending on his approval even for the basics.* The effects of gaslighting on victims can be devastating and long-lasting: *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* (see also Enrile, 2017; Schwartz, 2024), *anxiety disorders, depression*, personality disorders such as *addictive personality disorder*, or more serious ones, such as *borderline* disorder and *schizophrenia*; difficulty trusting other people and reintegrating into society and *eating disorders (anorexia and bulimia).*

## 7. Motherhood in the context of human trafficking

In the specialized literature, there is research (Pascoal, 2020) that reveals that the victims identified in human trafficking are traumatized people who prefer not to talk about their own experience as a defense mechanism. Victims of sexual exploitation often do not consider themselves victims, as the exploitation is camouflaged by the sentimental bond with the trafficker, in which they can also become mothers. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has outlined a definition of APON (Abuse of Position of Vulnerability) as „any situation in which the person involved has no real or acceptable alternative but to submit to abuse" (OHCHR, 2010). Gallagher points out that the phrase „real and acceptable alternative" remains unclear (Gallagher 2012).

With the advent of the loverboy recruitment method, the absence of physical violence at this stage appears; it is basically replaced by a method based on a blind trust of the victim in the trafficker (Palaghia, 2024a). There are cases in which the recruiter maintains his role as a loverboy during the exploitation period, even going up to marriage. This method is much more effective than the former, as *the victim is almost unable to perceive the deception; he or she may appear as a victim of domestic violence, but does not consider himself a victim of human trafficking.* The act of marriage comes a lot in support of the trafficker, who can emotionally manipulate the victim much more easily in this way. The children of victims of human trafficking are either neglected or abused by relatives in whose care they are left or given to social services. Rafaela Pascoal shows that there are cases in which some children are controlled by a member of the criminal network; situations in which traffickers condition the mother's access to the children on the payment of new and huge „debts", always increasing and justified as „expenses for the child". Debts are constantly increasing due to situational factors created by traffickers, which lead to continuous exploitation. In particular, the children of exploited Nigerian women in Spain and Italy were used as coercive tools by the exploiters, as by keeping the children in them, traffickers could directly harm them, during which time they also emotionally abused the mother, to whom they suggested horrific ideas and made death threats, including „throwing from the balcony". Verbal and psychological abuse, together with the fact that they know their children are in danger, generates post-traumatic stress for mothers, which affects their decision-making capacity. They live permanently with fear, anxiety and have only one goal: to protect their child. The author reveals how such a woman was forced to pay the trafficker an extra 400 euros, in addition to the other

„debts", just to be able to visit her child. The traffickers told the authorities that the mother abandoned her child, continuing the exploitation and, in addition to the previous debts, asked her for another fee of 200 euros, justified as „expenses for the child". The child entered the child protection system, was placed in foster care, and later became eligible for adoption (Pascoal, 2020).

From another perspective, Laura Ecedi-Stoisavlevici, in a criminological research on *women convicted of committing the crime of human trafficking* (2015), reveals that several factors favor their entry into trafficking, among which we mention: the existence of abuses, the precarious financial situation, the existence of relationships before the commission of the act with people involved in trafficking, as well as the lack of a place of work. Also, „most of the convicted women know the phenomenon quite well, before they themselves become trafficked, and the commission of this kind of crimes does not take place against the background of mistakes, of attracting them to commit the deeds by other people, but rather represents a rational choice, a risk taken", but it is „a forced choice between good and evil". As they could not find a job, these women „married or entered into cohabitation relationships at an early age, and the appearance of children surprised them with no experience on the labor market and not materially fulfilled, or they grew up in crowded families with serious financial problems, in which it was usual for only one family member to work, either they were caught up in prostitution, which no longer gave them the freedom and time needed to find a job, *or they grew up in criminal families, in which committing crimes was a state of normality*" (p. 199).

For women traffickers, „the children they have with male traffickers were used as a tool of manipulation and attraction in trafficking, it is a *modus operandi*: first the traffickers develop a relationship of „love" with the woman, after which the children appear, and after this moment the process of manipulation of the woman begins, she being forced to enter trafficking, at first as a victim, and then to go to the other side, recruiting, in turn, and exploiting girls much younger than her, who end up being „lovers" of their „boyfriend" and who, in turn, give birth to the children of the same „boyfriend". The risk of re-entering traffic after the sentence period remains extremely high, as individual resources place them in the category of persons who present an increased risk of vulnerability. In all cases, these women were „pushed into trafficking by their life partners and were exploited in this way even after the appearance of children" and the attraction of the other women in trafficking was carried out gradually, without being aware of it at first, and after that such activities come to be accepted, to be considered as natural, each of the women taking care of their own children (Ecedi-Stoisavlevici, 2016, p. 198).

## 8. Organized begging in human trafficking

In co-opting people for begging, recruiters initially appear in the lives of victims as a life-saving solution for the problems they face, for example, lovers who come to save women from poverty and who pretend to provide support for difficult

life situations: they can be single mothers, women, or men without sources of income and without support. The recruiter is, in such cases, an unknown person who makes a business proposal to people he has seen in difficulty and to whom he claims to want to provide support. There are cases in the literature of children who sell their parents to beg, husbands who sell their wives and children, mothers who sell their children, etc. (Ungureanu, 2013).

The main ways of recruitment that the networks use are either by deception, promising a job in the country or abroad, or even the direct promise of ensuring a safe place to beg abroad, and implicitly, to make a lot of money in a short time and without work. The vulnerable categories are people who have certain disabilities and, obviously, children who can be easily manipulated and exploited.

There is also research showing that, especially in small rural communities, *information is transmitted mainly through the snowball technique, which involves a person finding out information and passing it on to their loved ones; they, in turn, transmit it to others, and thus the circle of those who hold the information is constantly widening.* Subsequently, victims *self-integrate into job seekers, specialists* stating that *their own parents can sometimes mediate the recruitment of minors,* or there are cases in which entire families are recruited for begging.

Specific aspects of the well-known *Tandarei case* are related to the way in which the children were recruited: either their families ended up being in debt to the traffickers and in exchange for that money they ended up giving them for activities related to begging or theft, carried out on the territory of other states; or some parents gave them voluntarily, for a part of the amount thus obtained.

Gulf operation revealed that members of an organised criminal group recruited Roma minors from poor communities and smuggled them into the UK, where they exploited them by begging or committing street crimes. The British police identified 168 exploited minors, aged between 7 and 15, and *the Directorate for the Investigation of Organized Crime and Terrorism* from our country collaborated with the British authorities, under the coordination of Eurojust. In this case, „neither the families they come from nor the children consider themselves exploited," explains Norbert Celpek, a member of a foundation that deals with abused children: „When they earn money from stealing, children are praised, while it is put in their heads that going to school is a waste of time and money. After the age of 14, most of them end up prostituting themselves, because, no matter how skilled they are at stealing, traffickers no longer consider them useful. After all, the police can arrest them. After the age of 18, they marry and have children who become, in turn, victims of the same networks of traffickers" (in Burcu *et al.*, 2025, p. 37).

The methods of exploitation through begging can be of the type:
1. "*The outstretched hand that does not tell a story, does not receive alms*"[2]
   – is characterized by messages written by traffickers in the language

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[2] Actor Gheorghe Dinică's line from the movie *Filantropica*, released in 2002 and directed by Nae Caranfil.

of the destination country, intended, of course, to attract the pity of the public;
2. Playing a musical instrument;
3. Suggesting or presenting a disability;
4. Mothers who sit on the floor with their own children;
5. Street sale of newspapers, often used in countries such as Austria or Germany;
6. *Human statues* or disguising themselves as a character who stands still in crowded areas (see also Ungureanu, 2013).

### 9. Vulnerability of Ukrainian refugees to human trafficking

On February 24, 2022, when life seemed to resume its natural course after the COVID-2019 pandemic, the war in Ukraine began, and according to OSCE data, half of the people there lost their income, and over 6 million sought protection abroad, and over 5 million „were internally displaced" (OSCE).

Our country continued, through the competent public authorities, in 2022, to efficiently manage the situation of refugees from Ukraine, as a result of the armed conflict of the Russian Federation against this country, ensuring all measures and means for their integration in optimal conditions into the Romanian society, and the year 2022 was characterized by the transition from the specific measures of the Covid 19 Pandemic to specific measures to adequately address the needs of protection and support for refugees.

The vulnerability of Ukrainian refugees lies in the fact that around 90% of people fleeing the war are women and children, people at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking (especially children separated from their parents, who travel with people whose relationship with them cannot be verified); Ukrainians who do not benefit from any type of protection, due to lack of information or misinformation, people who do not have Ukrainian citizenship, Ukrainian Roma, people belonging to the LGBTQI+ community, the elderly or people with physical or mental disabilities are also at risk. As a rule, in „times of migration crises," there are criminals or criminal groups that take advantage of „large flows of people to exploit the most vulnerable in the countries of origin, transit and destination" (OSCE, p. 2).

### 9.1. The indicators for refugees at risk of being trafficked are:

- The presence of strangers near the spaces arranged for their temporary accommodation and the granting of other facilities;
- They are approached by unknown people, who offer them, without them having requested: transport by vehicle, housing, a job, etc.;
- They are asked to pay for „intermediate services" to obtain a job;
- The presence of several so-called „traffic nodes", which mainly target „people fleeing war on their own" (OSCE, p. 3);
- Providing a job with an „unrealistically high" salary offer, but which at first glance may leave the impression of an extremely attractive offer. The alarm

signals consist in the fact that complete information is not provided in relation to the position offered, and the job offer is an unofficial one;

- The refugee is either lured or pressured to follow the trafficker to a destination known only to him;
- A single refugee or an entire group either does not show up for the scheduled meeting with the social worker or simply suddenly disappears from the shelter.

### 9.2. Indicators which reveal that refugees may already be trafficked are as follows:

- The refugee has already been transported from one destination to another, even abroad;
- Refugees are coerced or manipulated into performing certain activities or having sexual relations without consent;
- Personal documents are retained by another person;
- The refugee no longer has freedom of expression and movement, being practically under the control of the trafficker and unable to contact relatives, trusted persons, such as family and friends;
- Working conditions violate employees' rights and the legislation in force;
- The refugee is either not paid or receives extremely low remuneration compared to the work performed;
- Signs of emotional, physical, or sexual violence are present – the person is afraid to communicate and is constantly afraid of being followed;
- The refugee is forced to repay some „debts" that the trafficker claims to have towards him.

### 10. Initial interaction and communication with a (suspected) victim of human trafficking

There are also some basic rules that the social worker must follow in the initial contact, interaction, and communication with a (presumed) victim of human trafficking, as follows:

a. Creating a safe environment for the victim (the person can be separated from the group and taken to a place where there is a „safe space for dialogue");
b. We ensure the effectiveness of communication by identifying a translator or cultural mediator, if possible, of the same gender as the victim;
c. We always ask for consent to start the conversation, as the person may not be willing to discuss traffic situations;
d. It is important to immediately identify the basic, urgent needs that the victim has, as „people fleeing war, especially if they are victims of human trafficking, may have suffered multiple traumatic experiences and thus manifest impulsive reactions of an emotional nature and beyond, and

frontline intervention personnel must be prepared to manage them" (OSCE, p. 4);

e. If we identify a (presumed) trafficked minor, we inform the child protection authorities or other competent institutions;

f. Leaflets or videos made in collaboration with ANITP, meant to provide information on detection procedures, the rights of trafficked persons, and social assistance services, can also provide an opening for a conversation with the social worker;

g. The social worker, after obtaining the consent of the presumed victim, has the duty to urgently notify the local coordinator for combating trafficking in human beings or the competent authority that will subsequently start the process of identification and provision of support and protection (if the person does not want to collaborate with law enforcement bodies, it remains extremely important to create the possibility for him to talk to an anti-trafficking specialist, either from legal public social services or from a non-governmental organization);

h. Any institution that claims to support vulnerable groups and people fleeing war must establish specific, clear procedures that both staff and volunteers must know and follow closely, especially when a person presents one or more indicators of potential victim of human trafficking.

According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, there are a series of questions aimed at identifying signs of human trafficking during the initial conversation, which we have structured into several ten, as follows:

1. Can you manage your own assets, money, and have access to all your documents, such as your passport, travel documents, residence permit, salary payments, and social security? Are they sure they are in your possession and not someone else's?

2. Has anyone suggested that you use a false identity, other documents, lie to the authorities, your family, or other people?

3. Do you feel that you have been subjected to coercion, manipulation, emotional, physical or sexual abuse on the way to – or after arriving in this country?

4. Have you been in a situation where you were promised a home and a job, but the conditions turned out to be different from what you initially thought: for example, were you asked to perform domestic work or have sexual relations with the owner of the house as a sign of gratitude for hosting or as a condition for continuing to stay there?

5. Do you or your family feel threatened?

6. Have you been forced to beg, steal, videochat, use pornographic materials, or prostitution?

7. If you have already signed an employment contract, do you think the conditions provided are correct (is there a specified remuneration, and are

the working hours reasonable)? And if you already work, do the conditions correspond to the contractual specifications?

8. Have you found yourself in a situation where, to flee the war, you had to go into financial debt, and there is someone who is pressuring you to pay off these debts?

9. Is there anyone who has promised you financial gains or given you a sum of money, encouraging you to follow him, with the promise of ensuring a better future?

10. Did someone threaten you to move?

The social worker must be aware that there are at least 5 situations in which trafficked people do not want to collaborate:

1 They do not recognise themselves as victims, as they are either in the transfer stage or in one that precedes the actual exploitation, or they normalise any type of abusive treatment, based on previous experiences, or, in extreme cases, they are terrified of the threats of traffickers;

2 Undocumented migrants or those who are forced to commit crimes may avoid appearing before the authorities, precisely for fear of being sanctioned (either by punishment for their irregular status or by expulsion);

3 There may also be cases where certain individuals are „afraid to communicate with state authorities and do not trust institutions due to negative experiences with such officials in their region or country of origin" (OSCE, p. 5);

4 The victim is in a relationship with the trafficker and „feels emotionally obliged not to report him" (OSCE, p. 5);

5 There are, of course, also victims who do not want to be stigmatized, with preparation if they have been subjected to sexual abuse.

It therefore remains extremely important, decisive for preventing or interrupting the operating cycle as soon as possible, the „proactive detection of traffic signals", together with the proper notification and reporting of situations of this type. It should also be noted that *a suspected victim of human trafficking cannot be reported to the authorities without their prior consent*, and if they request support to contact the authorities, it must be provided immediately.

### Conclusions

The anti-trafficking specialists in our country paid attention to the immediate identification of people at risk of being trafficked and took measures to prevent, rescue and assist the victims, but there are cases in which *children were born during sexual exploitation*, as the traffickers are so cunning and unscrupulous that they have started to marry the victims and have children, and the exploitation turns into a „family business" in which the child is usually used to beg, especially in countries where a high profit can be obtained. *The difficulty of extracting victims from trafficking* is also given by the fact that *Romanian society is used to blaming*

*them*, which makes their *psychosocial reintegration* much more difficult and *facilitates re-trafficking.*

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# BULLYING IN THE SPECIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM: A GENERAL PERSPECTIVE

## Maria Magda SIMION[1], Daniela COJOCARU[2]

**Abstract:** This paper examines the phenomenon of bullying from the perspective of the vulnerability of beneficiaries of the special protection system, highlighting the risks to which they are exposed. The study is theoretical in nature and is based on an evaluation of the specialized literature, current legislation, and statistical data provided by the National Authority for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Children, and Adoption (ANDPCA) for the period 2022–2024. The concepts of bullying and protection systems have been clearly defined, and the sources used include specialized books, academic articles, and relevant normative documents that are up-to-date and appropriate for the topic studied. The analysis reveals a significant correlation between being a beneficiary of a protection measure and the risk of experiencing bullying behaviour. The paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of the complexity of this phenomenon among beneficiaries of the protection system.

**Keywords:** bullying, abuse, resilience, beneficiary of the protection system

**Résumé :** Ce travail examine le phénomène du harcèlement (bullying) du point de vue de la vulnérabilité des bénéficiaires du système de protection spéciale, en mettant en évidence les risques auxquels ils sont exposés. L'étude est de nature théorique et s'appuie sur une évaluation de la littérature spécialisée, de la législation en vigueur et des données statistiques fournies par l'Autorité Nationale pour les Droits des Personnes Handicapées, de l'Enfant et de l'Adoption (ANDPCA) pour la période 2022–2024. Les concepts de harcèlement et de système de protection ont été clairement définis, et les sources utilisées comprennent des ouvrages spécialisés, des articles académiques et des documents normatifs pertinents, actualisés et adaptés au sujet étudié. L'analyse met en évidence une corrélation significative entre le statut de bénéficiaire d'une mesure de protection et le risque de devenir victime de comportements de harcèlement. Ce travail vise à offrir une compréhension plus approfondie de la complexité de ce phénomène chez les bénéficiaires du système de protection.

**Mots clés :** harcèlement, abus, résilience, bénéficiaire du système de protection

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**Rezumat:** Această lucrare examinează fenomenul de bullying din perspectiva vulnerabilității beneficiarilor sistemului de protecție specială, evidențiind riscurile la care aceștia sunt expuși. Studiul are un caracter teoretic și se bazează pe o evaluare a literaturii de specialitate, a legislației în vigoare și a datelor statistice furnizate de Autoritatea Națională pentru Drepturile Persoanelor cu Dizabilități, Copilului și Adopții (ANDPCA) pentru perioada 2022-2024. Conceptul de bullying și cel de sistem de protecție au fost clar definite, iar sursele utilizate includ cărți de specialitate, articole academice și acte normative relevante, actuale și corespunzătoare temei studiate. Analiza evidențiază o corelație semnificativă între statutul de beneficiar al unei măsuri de protecție și riscul de a deveni victimă a comportamentului de bullying. Lucrarea urmărește să ofere o înțelegere mai aprofundată a complexității acestui fenomen în rândul beneficiarilor sistemului de protecție.

**Cuvinte cheie:** bullying, abuz, reziliență, beneficiar al sistemului de protecție

### 1. Conceptual Delimitations

In contemporary times, the phenomenon of bullying has been approached from multiple perspectives. Some of these have been formulated by specialists whose field of study is human beings, while others have been developed by ordinary social actors within the community. I believe that studying the phenomenon of bullying in relation to the beneficiaries of the protection system is relevant, as they are more likely to become victims of this behaviour.

In order to define the term bullying, I consider it imperative to first present the definition given by the legislator and to state the perspective of specialists. According to Law No. 221 of November 18, 2019, „bullying is an action or series of physical, verbal, relational, and/or cyber actions, in a social context that is difficult to avoid, committed intentionally, involving an imbalance of power, resulting in the violation of dignity or the creation of an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive atmosphere, directed against a person or group of persons and targeting aspects of discrimination and social exclusion" (Art. 66).

This definition is also found in the *National Education Law No. 1* of 2011, republished, and the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language*, electronic version, confirms the use of this legislative definition for the term „bullying".

Furthermore, the law on pre-university education specifies that bullying may be linked to „race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, or disadvantaged status, or to beliefs, gender or sexual orientation, personal characteristics, and which takes place in pre-university educational institutions and in all spaces intended for education and vocational training" (Law No. 198 of July 4, 2023).

Thus, Romanian legislation recognizes bullying as a complex phenomenon that affects the dignity and safety of children in various social environments through deliberate and repetitive actions, impacting different social and personal categories.

Specialists interested in this phenomenon complete the picture outlined by legislation, arguing that bullying has three main characteristics: „it is intentional— the aggressor intends to hurt someone; it is repetitive—the same person is hurt

repeatedly; it manifests itself through an imbalance of power – the aggressor chooses their victim, who is usually vulnerable, weak, and unable to defend themselves" (Swearer & Hymel, 2015, apud Bîtca, 2024, p. 149).

In order to define the term bullying, we consulted the English-Romanian Dictionary, electronic version, where the verb to bully is translated as follows: „to intimidate, frighten, dominate, among other things, or as a noun, bully, hooligan, tyrant". Individuals involved in this phenomenon use physical force and harshness to physically or psychologically assault more vulnerable individuals. This translation is reinforced by the opinion of specialists who claim that bullying is a complex form of aggression and violence. However, not every violent act can be considered bullying (Netzelmann *et al.*, 2016, p. 10).

From a terminological perspective, the evolution of the word bullying reveals a different meaning: „in the 16th century, my bully meant my dear, my beloved; a century later, it appeared for the first time with its current meaning, but it was not until the 20th century that this word acquired the academic definitions used today" (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2016 apud Netzelmann, 2016, p. 10).

As noted above, this phenomenon has generated significant attention, drawing interest from specialists across multiple disciplines, which has led to a large number of studies examining its characteristics and implications.

Alongside the term bullying, it is necessary to outline the term „beneficiary of the protection system", as this research is based on the particularities of this social category, presenting bullying from this perspective.

The legislator defines the concept of social protection as follows: „in the context of the principles, values, and traditions governing social relations between individuals, groups, communities, and institutions in the European Union states and represents a set of measures and actions aimed at ensuring a certain level of welfare and social security for the entire population and, in particular, for certain social groups" (Law No. 292 of December 20, 2011).

The establishment of a special measure is a temporary solution, which may be determined, according to the law, in one of the following forms: „with a person or family, with a foster parent or, in the absence of other options, in a licensed residential center" (Law 272/2004, Art. 62). The latter option is only permitted if guardianship cannot be established and there is no possibility of placement with a family or foster parent. During the establishment of the protective measure, the child's domicile is considered to be with the person or institution caring for them.

For children under the age of 7, the law prohibits placement in residential centers, allowing it only in the extended family or with a foster parent. An exception is made for children between the ages of 3 and 7 with severe disabilities, who may be placed in a residential center only if this is justified by an official assessment confirming the child's special needs (Law 272/2004, republished in 2024).

Residential services provide children separated from their parents with temporary or permanent protection and care. These include various types of

housing where children stay for more than 24 hours, and have the following structure: family homes, apartments, emergency centers, and maternal centers. A family home is a space that provides the necessary conditions for up to 12 children, and in special situations, up to 16. Apartments can accommodate up to 6 children. Emergency reception centers provide temporary shelter for up to 30 children for a period of up to 6 months (Art. 123), and maternal centers support up to 9 mother-child couples for up to 2 years. The capacity of the residential centers for these services is determined based on the available space and complies with the minimum standards required by law. These services are managed by the General Directorates for Social Assistance and Child Protection, which adapt them to the needs of the children (Law 272/2004, republished 2024, Art. 123).

The protection system's main concern is to ensure the individual well-being of its beneficiaries by meeting their basic needs related to physical security, such as shelter and food. The system is also committed to guaranteeing respect for fundamental rights, including access to quality medical services and health insurance. Another important objective is to support the development of skills necessary for independent living, such as personal and home hygiene, as well as communication and interpersonal skills. These measures are also supported by the premise stated by Bunea and Karacsony (2023): „Protection is based on the assumption that if a child at risk (neglected, abused, exploited, or living in extreme poverty) is provided with adequate resources—both material and social—they will continue to develop at a level comparable to that of children who are not at risk."

Taking into account the definition of the protection system, it is necessary to specify the category of beneficiaries for whom a protection measure may be established. According to Law No. 272/2004 on the protection and promotion of children's rights, those who benefit from protective measures are: „children whose parents are deceased, unknown, deprived of parental rights, or who have been punished by the deprivation of parental rights, who benefit from legal counseling if their parents cannot exercise parental authority in accordance with the law, or from special guardianship, declared dead or missing by a court, when guardianship could not be established" (Art. 60). The same law specifies that protective measures are also established in the case of abused, neglected, deprived of parental care, or abandoned in health facilities, minors who have committed criminal acts and are not criminally liable (Art. 84), as well as children whose best interests are harmed when living with their parents (Law 272/2004).

It can be observed that children placed in the protection system are typically those who have experienced abuse or neglect, or whose parents are unable to provide a consistent and safe environment. Factors such as the reasons for placement, the child's adaptation to the rules and routines of the care facility or AMP, and their interactions with peers and caregivers all contribute to defining the social and behavioural profile of the beneficiary.

Being a beneficiary of the special protection system can be an additional vulnerability factor, as children in this environment are often perceived as

„different" and are more exposed to stigmatization, exclusion, and, implicitly, bullying behaviours.

## 2. Forms similar to bullying

As mentioned above, when referring to bullying, we must take into account the forms of bullying that current legislation and specialists attribute to this phenomenon. Thus, according to Law 221/2019 and the opinion of specialists, the following forms and manifestations of bullying are identified: physical bullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, and cyberbullying.

The literature supports the complexity of the phenomenon, and in addition to the previously proposed classification of forms of bullying, it proposes another classification, complementary to the one specified: „direct aggression, which includes physical and verbal aggression, and indirect aggression, which includes psychological aggression" (Grădinaru, 2021, pp. 73-74).

Both males and females are victims of bullying, although there are gender differences in how it manifests itself. Boys tend to engage in direct bullying, such as physical and verbal aggression, while girls prefer to use social exclusion and the prejudices and stereotypes that society has. Girls are more likely than boys to report bullying based on their sexual orientation, shape, appearance, and body size.

Women are considered more prone to victimization because of their heightened sensitivity, but also because of society's preconceptions and stereotypes (Zamfirache, 2022, p. 81). Girls are more likely than boys to report bullying based on their sexual orientation, shape, appearance, and body size.

Statistical data published by ANPDCA for the period 2022–2024 indicate that beneficiaries of the special protection system—children in the care of professional foster parents (AMP) or in residential services—continue to be targets of abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The most common form of maltreatment in these settings is physical abuse, with over 100 cases reported annually (2022: 115, 2023: 107, 2024: 108). There has also been a worrying increase in cases of emotional abuse, from 24 cases in 2022 to 39 in 2023 and 54 in 2024. Sexual abuse, although reported in smaller numbers (approximately 20–27 cases annually), remains a serious problem with major psychological implications for victims. Added to this are cases of neglect, which peaked at 67 cases in 2023. Although less common, cases of exploitation—whether through labor, sexual exploitation, or for the purpose of committing crimes—confirm the increased vulnerability of institutionalized children.

These alarming statistics indicate that there is a link between being a beneficiary of the protection system and the predisposition to be a victim of bullying. Coming from a foster care center or being placed with professional foster parents leads to the individual being labeled, which in turn leads to exclusion, marginalization, and stigmatization. These negative behaviours towards children only intensify the feelings/traumas experienced in the family, making it increasingly difficult to reintegrate into a family or socio-professional environment.

### 3. Vulnerability factors

About vulnerability factors, specialists identify several aspects that create a favourable environment for a child to become a victim of bullying. Specialists (UNICEF, 2021; Vanderbilt & D., Augustyn, pp. 315-320) identify the following predisposing factors: children with chronic illnesses, physical malformations, students in special education, individuals who do not meet desirable physical standards, the way individuals are perceived by others, generally weak or unable to defend themselves, as well as those who have fewer friends and are therefore unpopular, children who suffer from anxiety, depression, or lack confidence in their own abilities, when some children do not form positive peer relationships with others, they are labeled as annoying or provocative, children from poor families, students who study well and avoid conflict.

It should be noted that no universal factor has been identified that would predict a person's vulnerability to this phenomenon or that would prompt another person to subject others to this form of harassment.

Alongside vulnerability factors, the literature (Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2024, pp. 315-320; Tănăsescu and Voicu, 2024, p.7) also identifies a series of „red flags" for both victims and perpetrators. These must be known by both specialists and ordinary members of the community. Concerning victims of bullying, the „red flags" are as follows:

− Physical signs: insomnia, stomachaches and headaches, torn/damaged clothes or personal items, unexplained bruises, cuts, or scratches, etc.

− Psychological signs: depression, anxiety, feelings of loneliness, suicidal thoughts or gestures, etc.

− Behavioural changes: irritability, lack of concentration, refusal to go to school, etc.

− School and social problems: academic failure, lack of friends, difficulties in relationships with peers, etc.

About the aggressor, specialists (Cociug, 2021, p. 254; Vanderbilt, & D., Augustyn, 2024, pp. 315-320) identify the following signs:

− Intrinsic: aggressive, overly confident, lacking empathy, exhibiting oppositional or destructive behaviours, insecure, reckless, and having unresolved trauma;

− Extrinsic: comes from a family with a high risk of domestic violence, is often physically punished by family members, has a pattern of violent behaviour in conflict resolution learned from family or adult role models, lacks firm rules and consistent guidance, etc.

### 4. The consequences of bullying

Having presented the vulnerability factors and types of bullying to which beneficiaries of the protection system are exposed, I consider it necessary to provide a complete example of this phenomenon to highlight the effects it has on the individuals involved.

Save the Children Romania has focused on the phenomenon of bullying, highlighting in the article *Stop bullying!* the various consequences experienced by victims. These include the development of a negative self-image, where the child internalizes the belief that something is wrong with them, often resulting in public shaming; social withdrawal, which may initially appear as avoidance of potentially harmful situations, but can escalate to difficulties in adapting to social environments; and academic challenges, such as frequent absenteeism or school dropout, which victims may perceive as the most viable strategy to escape further bullying.

Building on the previously discussed effects, the same article notes that many victims of bullying eventually begin to exhibit similar behaviours toward less powerful peers, with these negative behaviours sometimes extending toward teachers. Academically, these children often experience difficulties, as the stress they endure reduces their motivation to achieve good grades. Long-term exposure to bullying may also lead to the development of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and other related disorders (Save the Children Romania, Stop bullying!).

According to professionals participating in the project „The Word is a Stage," the following signs can be identified in people who are subjected to bullying, visible to any social actor. We are therefore talking about immediate effects, other than those mentioned above: unjustified injuries, headaches or stomachaches, lack of energy, disinterest in everything around them, changes in eating habits, difficulty sleeping, decreased self-confidence, tendency to isolate oneself, self-destructive behaviours, absence of friendships, and inability to defend oneself are some of the manifestations that can occur rapidly after a person has been exposed to bullying (Tănăsescu and Voicu, 2024, p. 10).

The immediate effects of bullying have been presented above, but specialists also highlight (Cociug, 2021, p. 254) a series of long-term negative consequences. A child constantly exposed to such behaviour shows increased vulnerability in adulthood, manifested by low self-esteem, difficulties in initiating and maintaining social relationships, and a tendency to avoid social interactions. These individuals often feel a deep sense of guilt about their own condition, and the difficulty of building trusting relationships significantly affects their adult life, causing problems in obtaining and maintaining employment. In addition, bullying can cause changes in the brain, increasing the risk of mental disorders.

According to the author mentioned above (p. 254), the literature pays particular attention to the effects on victims, but also highlights the negative impact on perpetrators. In the short term, they may experience problems at school, reduced participation in classes, relationship difficulties, and an increased predisposition to alcohol or drug use. In the long term, antisocial tendencies, difficulties in professional integration, and problems in family life, such as abuse of partners or children, are observed. Aggressors may also develop severe emotional and behavioural disorders, such as chronic depression, anxiety, social

withdrawal, post-traumatic stress, self-harming behaviours, suicide attempts, substance abuse, and other mental health conditions.

Analyzing the situation of both individuals involved reveals that each experiences a wide range of negative consequences caused by bullying. Although their roles differ, the phenomenon leaves comparable psychological and social traces on both the victim and the abuser.

Given the above, it is clear that the effects of this phenomenon are detrimental to both the victim and the aggressor. Experts argue that child abuse is linked, in childhood and adolescence, to the development of dysfunctional relationships with peers, and later on, difficulties may arise in the victim's love life (Antonie, 2018, p. 175).

It can be deduced that beneficiaries of the protection system are predisposed to these effects, and traumatic experiences in the family, in the foster care system, and in society create an environment conducive to amplifying these effects in the lives of beneficiaries. Both victims and perpetrators experience short- and long-term effects, and exposure to bullying in childhood has fateful effects in adulthood if individuals do not identify methods of resilience and coping to overcome the situation and its negative effects.

## 5. Resilience strategies

In order to cope with the repercussions of this phenomenon, beneficiaries of the protection system have used all their inner resources, thus creating strong models of resilience. In the literature, resilience is defined as „the ability of individuals to thrive and achieve self-actualization despite the disadvantages, problems, or difficulties they have experienced" (Stein, 2005 apud Roth, 2019, p. 116).

To supplement the previous definition, we have identified that resilience refers to how a person manages to adapt when going through stressful or challenging periods, maintaining or regaining their balance. In particular, research has focused on children who have experienced trauma or difficult moments in their lives to understand how these things influence their development (Povian, 2015, p. 32).

In the Moral Report on Children Left in State Care. Herod's Children, written by Vlad Alexandrescu, in an interview with a center manager, the latter states that „every child is subject to this phenomenon of bullying. The important thing is how they get through it. How they get through it" (Alexandrescu, 2019, p. 63), thus referring to the methods of resilience adopted by the beneficiaries of the protection system.

The literature identifies several factors that have underpinned the development of resilience among beneficiaries of the protection system, including the following: the existence of a balanced relationship with at least one member of the immediate family and the extended family, the presence of a relationship with at least one adult outside the family who provides validation and whom the beneficiary takes as a role model, having friends, having the opportunity to understand what happened to them, self-esteem, a sense of self-efficacy, independence, and control over one's own life are the individual factors identified

in beneficiaries of the protection system who have developed resilience (Roth, 2019).

A separate ranking of beneficiaries of the protection system is based on their achievements. Roth (2019) identifies the following categories of beneficiaries: those who managed to cope with all the difficult situations in their childhood (moving on) are those beneficiaries who had successful school results; when they left the protection system, they did so in a planned, gradual manner, with discharge taking place on request, and when those who were discharged had security. They feel more „normal" in terms of completing their studies, entering the workforce, and starting a family.

Another category consists of those who merely survive; their lives are marked by instability and violence within the care facility. In their case, leaving the system was abrupt, without support or assistance in the process of social and professional integration. The last category in this hierarchy focuses on those who were exposed to the most traumatic events both before and after the protective measure was put in place. When they leave the system, they are totally unprepared for independent living (pp. 114-115).

Regarding representatives of the first category, specialists state that „some young people possess individual qualities that enable them to exploit the resources and opportunities available to them more effectively, integrating them with past experiences into a positive narrative on which they base their plans for the future" (Bunea, 2019, p. 331).

The article „Perceiving the placement center as an opportunity for development in the case of children and young people at risk," written by Bunea and Karaksony (2023), highlights the contribution that coming from the protection system has on the development of resilience. Thus, beneficiaries of the protection system enjoy better living conditions, develop new relationships with staff, and form friendships. Other opportunities for personal development and talent development are also identified, which a child from a family that does not provide a stable and secure environment cannot take advantage of.

Resilience is represented by the individual's ability to overcome the repercussions of bullying and everything that the experience of establishing a protective measure entails. Resilience depends on the personal abilities and experiences of the beneficiaries of the protection system within residential centers in Romania. „Resilience remains a matter of resources: in conditions of total absence of resources and/or overwhelming risk situations, it is unrealistic to expect positive results" (Bunea, 2019, p. 331).

## 6. From victim to aggressor

The literature shows that beneficiaries of the protection system have adopted a particular strategy to free themselves from the pressure created by their role as victims, becoming aggressors themselves (Cociug, 2021, p. 254). They adopt such behaviour for various reasons, such as the need to be respected, the desire to control situations or people around them, lack of empathy, impulsiveness, or even

the pleasure of causing suffering to others. There is also a similarity between the victim and the aggressor, in the sense that some children „put on an aggressor's armor" to hide their vulnerabilities and avoid becoming victims themselves. The aggressor's mask functions as a shield that hides the individual's fragile interior. According to the same source, most of those who become aggressors were themselves victims of violence in childhood, and in the absence of appropriate intervention measures, this type of behaviour tends to persist and even worsen over time.

Concerning children's predisposition to become abusers, the following characteristics are identified in the adoption of the abuser role: belonging to an inappropriate group, those who hold power and control and are overly concerned with maintaining this status, trying to subjugate those weaker than themselves. The other category refers to those children who are isolated, ignored by their peers, and who display low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, and show no interest in education (UNICEF, 2021, p. 8).

In order to outline the profile of the aggressor, specialists say that they need to be in control and to subjugate others; they need validation. The vast majority of aggressors grew up in an unfavorable environment marked by conflict, so it is assumed that aggressors have a degree of hostility toward their environment and that the suffering of their victims gives them satisfaction. Last but not least, there is an advantageous component to this behaviour, which offers a set of financial and material benefits to the aggressor. Aggressors often receive the objects and products they demand to refrain from exercising their aggression. Complementing aggressive behaviour is the social prestige that many aggressors enjoy and exploit (Grigore, 2016, pp. 79-80). From the perspective of specialists, a broad picture emerges of the abuser, who, for various intrinsic reasons, ends up resorting to this form of behaviour.

There is only one step from victim to aggressor, most of the time, children in the protection system, because of the abuse they are subjected to, to put up a barrier and because they choose to get out of the difficult situation they are in, prefer to adopt such behaviour, which allows them to have supremacy in their relationship with other beneficiaries and which brings them several advantages.

## 7. Conclusions

Bullying is recognized as one of the most harmful forms of abuse that can take various forms—physical, verbal, relational, or psychological—and affects the bio-psycho-social balance of both the victim and the aggressor. For beneficiaries of the protection system, the risk of becoming victims of bullying is high due to emotional instability, lack of family support, and social stigmatization. Types of bullying can be difficult to identify in these environments, but the effects are often more severe: low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and difficulties in social integration. Understanding the negative effects of bullying is essential to recognize the needs and provide the necessary support to victims.

Recent data from ANPDCA indicate that the number of abuse cases among children in the protection system has been rising between 2022 and 2024. The most common forms are physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect. It is difficult for beneficiaries to report these cases, especially because they must also be reported through the institution that manages the protection measure, namely the DGASPC, through the Child's Helpline - 119. This situation means that many children feel insecure or reluctant to ask for help, and so problems may go unreported. Bullying is therefore not just a form of aggression between children, but is part of a wider context in which vulnerable children need real support and a safe environment to develop.

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# BUILDING CHILDREN'S RESILIENCE TO PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

## Roxana-Gabriela BĂLĂCEANU[1]

**Abstract.** This article explores the concept of resilience from a theoretical perspective, analyzing the mechanisms through which individuals manage to respond positively to adversity. Starting from the premise that there is a logical connection between the individual, cultural, and social variables involved in the development of resilience, this article provides a theoretical basis for the process of building resilience. Therefore, the purpose of the article is to provide a theoretical understanding of how resilience develops by understanding both risk and protective factors and relevant theories.
The article makes a theoretical contribution by integrating various perspectives on resilience and emphasizes the importance of approaches that view resilience beyond a simple individual or static attribute, but as a dynamic process, dependent on context, available resources, and how they are accessed.

**Keywords:** resilience, risk factors, protective factors, positive adaptation, psychosocial development.

**Résumé :** Cet article explore le concept de résilience d'un point de vue théorique, en analysant les mécanismes qui permettent aux individus de réagir positivement à l'adversité. Partant du principe qu'il existe un lien logique entre les variables individuelles, culturelles et sociales impliquées dans le développement de la résilience, cet article fournit une base théorique sur le processus de construction de la résilience. L'objectif de l'article est donc d'offrir une compréhension théorique du développement de la résilience, en examinant à la fois les facteurs de risque et les facteurs de protection, ainsi que les théories pertinentes.
　　　Cet article apporte une contribution théorique en intégrant diverses perspectives sur la résilience et souligne l'importance des approches qui considèrent la résilience non seulement comme un simple attribut individuel ou statique, mais comme un processus dynamique, dépendant du contexte, des ressources disponibles et de la manière dont celles-ci sont accessibles.

**Mots-clés :** résilience, facteurs de risque, facteurs de protection, adaptation positive, développement psychosocial.

**Rezumat.** Acest articol explorează conceptul de reziliență dintr-o perspectivă teoretică, analizând mecanismele prin care indivizii reușesc să răspundă pozitiv la adversitate. Pornind de la premisa că există o legătură logică între variabilele individuale, culturale și

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sociale implicate în dezvoltarea rezilienţei, acest articol oferă o bază teoretică asupra procesului de construcţie a rezilienţei. Prin urmare, scopul articolului este de a oferi o înţelegere teoretică a modului în care se dezvoltă rezilienţa, prin înţelegerea atât a factorilor de risc, cât şi a factorilor de protecţie şi a teoriilor relevante.

Articolul aduce o contribuţie teoretică prin integrarea diverselor perspective asupra rezilienţei şi subliniază importanţa abordărilor care privesc rezilienţa nu doar ca un simplu atribut individual sau static, ci ca un proces dinamic, dependent de context, de resursele disponibile şi de modul în care acestea sunt accesate.

**Cuvinte cheie:** rezilienţă, factori de risc, factori de protecţie, adaptare pozitivă, dezvoltare psihosocială.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has faced numerous challenges: natural disasters, wars, economic crises, pandemics, famine, and many others. Despite these adversities, some individuals have found ways to overcome them. This capacity for adaptation and transformation is often reflected in myths, fairy tales, and cultural stories - that emphasize strength, learning, and growth. At the core of these narratives lies the concept of resilience.

Our childhood experiences, the way we are cared for and receive affection, but also the important and perhaps traumatic events we go through, mark and shape us as future adults, both emotionally and socially. It is important how we view these significant events and how we, as a society, manage to diminish the negative effects of risk factors on children. Many children live in environments that affect their well-being and development, from extreme poverty to family abandonment, various forms of abuse, school dropout, or problems with social integration and emotional instability. All of these are often linked, but some children still succeed in adverse conditions, developing resilience mechanisms, applying resilience strategies, and mobilizing both internal and external resources (family, educational, and community).

In this article, I aim to provide a theoretical basis for what resilience is, giving a brief overview of perspectives on resilience – from personality attributes to resilience as a process – discussing the importance of the environment, and presenting some theories that highlight resilience as a process. Last but not least, I will discuss child development in situations of risk and the importance of resilience mechanisms, which we might consider individual, but which are also born out of interaction with the environment.

Hriţuleac and Ceobanu (2015) point out that resilience has been around for as long as it is possible to imagine, even though the formal history of its study is relatively recent. The same author mentions that the decade between 1960 and 1970 represents the beginnings of the study of resilience, when specialists in the field of developmental psychopathology started a series of studies regarding children who could overcome severely unfavourable developmental periods and conditions without severe implications, managing to have a normal or even successful development. In social sciences, resilience is no longer considered merely a fixed

personal trait, but increasingly a dynamical process of adapting positively in the presence of adversity.

In a scientific landscape increasingly concerned with understanding processes of adaptation to uncertainty, transformation, and crisis, the concept of resilience takes on particular relevance. Understanding resilience involves not only defining a trait or outcome, but also exploring a complex, dynamic, and deeply contextualized phenomenon that is also used in various fields and disciplines. It is not just a multidimensional concept, but also a framework for interpretation that varies depending on the theoretical perspective and discipline that approaches it (Bunea, 2017). Childhood is an important stage in the development of the future adult, as the bonds of attachment, the quality of care, and the experiences we have influence and shape us, both socially and emotionally. Therefore, understanding children's needs and providing the necessary support are fundamental to harmonious development.

## 2. Conceptual framework of resilience

Resilience is a term used in exact sciences like physics and engineering, as well as in psychology and human development, and is widely used as a concept of positive adaptation to challenges. If in physics, resilience refers to „the ability of an object to withstand tension without breaking", or to „its ability to return to its original shape" following applied tension, such as a spring or an elastic band, resilience in the social sciences has a broader character and different meanings (Masten & Gewirtz, 2006). In the social sciences, a definition close to those in the humanities is provided by Masten (2011, p. 494): „Resilience is the ability of a dynamic system to withstand or recover from significant challenges that threaten its stability, viability, or development". Reich *et al.* (2010, p. 4) believe that resilience is best defined as „the outcome of successful adaptation to adversity" and that person and situational traits can identify resilient processes, but only if they lead to healthier outcomes following stressful circumstances. In psychology, resilience is viewed as a „process of coping in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress" (American Psychological Association, 2014).

Studies in the field of resilience, such as the research conducted by Michael Rutter (1993) on the development of resilience in children, provide a deep understanding of the mechanisms through which individuals and communities can overcome trauma and challenges. Masten (2001) describes resilience using the term „ordinary magic," emphasizing that it is a common and normative process arising from the typical functioning of human adaptive systems. Therefore, rather than being a rare or extraordinary trait, resilience manifests itself through everyday protective mechanisms that support positive development.

Many specialists lament the absence of a consensus definition of resilience, as the ambiguity of the concept complicates its study. This ambiguity may also be due to the different perspectives on resilience among specialists. Some authors consider resilience as a trait or a characteristic of the individual's personality; others see it as a process that reveals the interaction between the individual and

the environment in which the individual lives, or simply as the result of the absence of mental disorders or the disappearance, faster or not, of these disorders (Ionescu, 2013). Since there are several meanings of the concept of resilience, and it has also been developed and researched in several fields, Hrițuleac & Ceobanu (2015, p. 14) concludes that „resilience can be conceptualized both as a trait and as a process, both as a response to the stress of trauma and as a process that mediates the response to stress and trauma". Highlighting resilience as a process, Ungar (2012) states that resilience is described as a set of behaviours that manifest over time, emphasizing the interactions between individuals and their environment, particularly the opportunities for personal growth that are available and accessible.

Resilience is not an extraordinary individual trait that some people have, and others simply lack; rather, it is the end product of complex developmental processes involving common, positive factors that help groups of people avoid the negative implications of risk in their lives (Cutuli & Herbers, 2018). Also, Pânişoară (2024, p. 23) argues that resilience is more than an acquired personal trait or an individual characteristic of daily survival and asserts that resilience „represents a way of life that involves development, learning, psychological recovery, and adaptation following the experiences we go through, especially following failures, losses, and traumas encountered".

### 3. Risk and protective factors in understanding resilience

The concept of resilience is closely related to terms such as risk factors, protective factors, and vulnerability (Hanewald, 2011). Without reference to these concepts, it is not possible to understand the complex interplay of dynamics that determine children's outcomes over sustained periods of time. Risk and protective factors are characteristics of individuals, their families and communities, or the environment that either increase (the case of protective factors) or decrease (risk factors) the likelihood of a young person being resilient (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014).

### 3.1. Risk factors

Risk factors can be found at the individual, family, or community level and represent a context, experience, condition, adversity, or even an individual characteristic that increases the likelihood that a person will experience a form of maladaptive maladjustment (Carr, 2009, p. 395). Barankin and Khanlou (2014) categorize individual risk factors as including genetic vulnerability to substance use, mental health problems, physical health issues, low self-esteem, learning disabilities, visual or hearing impairments, poor nutrition, academic failure, difficult temperament, poor impulse control, and exposure to unsafe physical environments such as pollution and violence. Parental divorce, mental illness among parents or alcohol and substance abuse can be examples of family risk factors. Community-level risk factors may include factors such as violence in the community, high poverty, and the presence of multiple outlets selling alcohol to minors (Carr, 2009, p. 395).

In studying resilience, difficulties arise related to sampling, measurement, or the lack of universally applicable factors, as people respond differently to the same situations. A risk factor can have different effects depending on the moment and the individual context – for example, a particular child may be affected by the death of their father in one way, while the total absence of an abusive father may affect them differently, sometimes even protecting the child. Because resilience only emerges in the presence of risk, and definitions of risk are often ambiguous, this complicates a clear understanding of resilience (Ungar, 2004).

### 3.2. Protective factors

In essence, protective factors help to protect children and young people from the negative effects of risk factors (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014). Protective factors can also be found at the level of the individual's personality, family, or community, and reduce the likelihood that a person who has experienced serious risk situations will develop problems. These protective factors can also increase the chances of positive adaptation. Protective factors contribute to a child's positive adaptation either by promoting their competencies or by decreasing the child's exposure to risks. It is important to note that a protective factor is not something that simply produces good outcomes overall, but instead reduces the effects of a risk factor (Carr, 2009, p. 395).

According to Barankin and Khanlou (2014), protective factors at the individual level include good adaptability and flexibility, a calm and adaptable temperament, a sense of humour, strong problem-solving and decision-making skills, social and communication skills, assertiveness, empathy, high intelligence, and optimism characterized by a sense of hope, purpose, and direction. Additional protective factors encompass involvement in helping others, conflict resolution abilities, good health, talents and creativity, self-discipline, as well as engagement in hobbies and interests. There are endless lists of individual qualities or characteristics of resilient people, but it has been concluded that, in addition to character and personality properties, „environmental factors, educational climate, delegation of responsibility, and the intervention of a sense of belonging also play a role" (Berndt, 2014).

Thus, important protective factors at the family level include attachment, communication, family structure, the quality of the relationship between parents, parenting style, sibling relationships, parental health, and support networks outside the family (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014). At the community level, school-related factors are among the most common non-familial protective factors in the development of vulnerable children and young people (Cefai, 2007). Resilience is about the connections we create, which is why resilience has also become an important notion for school staff (Berndt, 2014). School, both as a socializing factor and through the aims of education, can play a significant role in the process of resilience.

An important protective factor of resilience is the individual's relationship with the parent or other significant adult, concretized in the secure attachment

style. Barankin & Khanlou, (2014) state that to be resilient, young people need a strong and positive emotional attachment to a loving and caring adult throughout childhood and adolescence. In some situations, parents are absent from their children's lives, and the role of attachment figure can be taken on by another person who is important to the child – a member of the extended family, a family friend, a neighbour, etc. Attachment theory and the implications of secure attachment in building resilience are being discussed by many experts. The parent-child attachment relationship can increase coping skills important in resilience, such as optimism, self-esteem, trust in others, ability to develop social relationships. At the same time, secure attachment allows the development of an efficient nervous system following trauma, and psychologically, attachment has implications in regulating stress or developing attention mechanisms (Mighiu, Benga & Muntean, 2009).

Berndt (2014) emphasizes the idea of a shared play between personality and environment, as the sense of belonging to society, along with confidence in one's personal value and importance, as well as in one's own actions, combined with pursuing a higher life purpose, are described as positive factors that help people better face challenges.

### 3.3. Positive adaptation

In addition to risk and protective factors, Carr (2009) also talks about the term positive adaptation, which is closely related to resilience. According to the author, positive adaptation consists of the emergence of psycho-social development outcomes that are visibly better than expected for a child exposed to certain risk factors. For example, pupils who attend low-performing schools in deprived neighbourhoods may be at risk of poor educational outcomes or developing deviant behaviours. If students achieve good educational outcomes and develop prosocial behaviours even in such circumstances, they are considered to have positive adaptation (Carr, 2009).

Risk and protective factors change depending on context and can lead to different outcomes (Walsh, 2003). Therefore, an important point to note, which also links with theories that attempt to explain resilience, is that risk and protective factors do not occur in a vacuum, nor do they exist independently of each other (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014).

Definitions of resilience have varied over time, and more recent studies provide evidence that reinforces the understanding of resilience as a dynamic process and highlights the importance of existing resources in an individual's environment and their mobilization in the process of building resilience.

### 4. Theories of resilience

Resilience theory provides researchers and practitioners with a conceptual model for understanding how children and young people overcome adversity and how this knowledge can be used to enhance strengths and build positive characteristics in themselves (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012). There are a number of

theories that explain resilience, including attachment theory, ecological theory, and constructivist theories. These three theories were selected because they emphasize resilience as a continuous and dynamic process, highlighting the relationship between the individual and the environment in which they live:

*a. Attachment Theory*

The term attachment is a complex term with a long history, and has been addressed mainly in the field of developmental psychology and psychiatry. Considered the father of attachment theory, John Bowlby conducted a series of important studies on orphaned children. Bowlby (1997) speaks of attachment as „any form of behaviour that results in closeness to a person" or maintaining a closeness to a preferred person. Ainsworth, on the other hand, is another important name in conceptualizing attachment theory. She, together with her collaborators, investigated, through the experiment known as the „*stranger situation*" (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978), how children attach. They were supervised and observed to see how they react in the presence or absence of their caregiver. Thus, four major types of attachment have been theorized: secure, insecure or avoidant, ambivalent (resistant), and disorganized (insecure). Therefore, from Bowlby onwards, we have been well educated about the importance of attachment and how a child bonds with their primary caregiver in the early months.

The benefits of secure attachment, as well as the harms of insecure (anxious) attachment, have an effect on both the child and the future adult as they are passed on. Secure attachment, however, is not a total guarantee of success in risky situations (Bunea, 2017, pp. 68-69). It may remain only a protective factor, which may not be strong enough to counteract the effects of risk factors.

*b. Ecological theory*

Research on resilience, which originated in developmental psychology and psychiatry, has focused primarily on individual factors, without paying particular attention to environmental factors. Thus, while the ecosystemic perspective is an old theme in the social work literature, it is relatively newer in terms of resilience research (Waller, 2001). Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) was the first to suggest that children's development occurs within an ecological framework. Subsequently, other authors and researchers have also noted and emphasized the importance of the environment in building resilience: „I suggest that to take full account of the processes associated with resilience, we need to shift our focus. There is evidence that resilience is less an individual trait and more a quality of a child's social and physical ecology. This ecological understanding of resilience has the potential to solve both definitional and measurement problems" (Ungar, 2011, p. 1).

Ecological theories have represented a paradigm change, shifting from seeing resilience as exclusively the result of individual abilities to resilience as a process, dependent on environmental factors. They shift the concern from the individual to the social structure and focus on how the environment influences the individual to adopt certain behaviours and paths in life at the expense of others. Within ecological theories, the interest of theorists is centered on the components

of the social system of which the individual is a part, and less on the personal characteristics that the individual may possess, and attempts are made to describe a „real child living in real environments" (Bunea, 2017, p. 72).

Furthermore, resilience is not an individual personality trait. Considering the individual-environment relationship is bidirectional, people influence adverse life situations and are also influenced by them. At different times, people may react very differently to identical or similar stressors. Likewise, a particular person may be resilient in response to one adverse life event but vulnerable in relation to another (Waller, 2001). Ungar (2008, p. 2025) offers a definition of resilience that emphasizes the interaction between the individual and the environment: „In the context of exposure to significant adversity, whether psychological, environmental, or both, resilience represents both the capacity of individuals to turn to resources that maintain their health, including opportunities to experience feelings of well-being, and a condition of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these resources and health experiences in culturally meaningful ways".

*c. Constructionist theories*

The constructionist perspective holds that social reality is not the same for everyone, but is a social construct. According to constructionism, just as wellbeing and illness are defined by society by creating languages for everyone, so can resilience be defined. Therefore, just as we can speak of a social construct of health and illness, so we can speak of several interpretations of resilience and its components, depending on the context. Moreover, from this perspective, resilience does not only consist of socially defined and accepted positive outcomes (adaptation, well-being, competence), but also of the criteria taken into account or defined by the risk group. In other words, it is the group that defines the positive outcomes, in its own terms (Bunea, 2017).

Ungar (2004b) defines resilience from a constructionist perspective as „the outcome of negotiations between individuals and their environments to maintain a self-definition as healthy". Resilience is no longer approached as a psychological trait, but instead as a narrative and relational process constructed by people through interactions with their family, community, school, and various other local institutions. From a social constructionist perspective, resilience can be understood as a construct that depends strongly on a situation that includes the individual's culture and the society or community to which they belong, as well as the specific context in which the concept is used. Therefore, resilience, as a social construct, would be highly dependent on the beliefs and worldviews of the individual or group being described and would explain why so many characteristics are used to define resilience (Aburn, Gott & Hoare, 2016).

## 5. Child development and resilience

Risk is the likelihood of an event or course of action, usually undesired by the subject (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1993). Children who succeed despite adversity have been identified as resilient, possessing certain strengths and benefiting from

protective factors that help them overcome adverse conditions and thrive (Zolkoski & Bullock, 2012).

Resilience research shows that in early childhood, it's essential for kids to have good care and quality learning experiences, proper nutrition, and support from the community for families to help them develop positive cognitive, social, and self-regulation skills. Masten & Gewirtz (2006) speak of young children who have healthy attachment relationships and good internal coping resources as having a high chance of having a good start in life, being well equipped with the human and social capital needed to be successful when entering school and society. Typically, these children demonstrate resilience in the face of risk, and their core protective skills and relationships continue to function and develop. The most profound threats to infants and young children arise when the fundamental developmental protection systems are impaired or compromised. During early childhood, children need to have protection, secure attachment relationships with loving and competent caregivers, as well as appropriate stimulation and care. These aspects are essential for the healthy development of the brain, providing opportunities to acquire new skills and experience self-confidence, as well as learning to set boundaries and develop self-control. Importantly, these early experiences lay the foundation for resilience in later stages of life. The quality of care and support received during childhood significantly influences how youth cope with challenges and adapt during adolescence and beyond.

Barankin and Khanlou (2014), in their book *Growing Up Resilient: Ways to Build Resilience in Children and Youth*, employ a metaphor comparing young people to trees of various shapes and sizes that grow across diverse environments worldwide. Thus, in the authors' view, families represent the fertile soil and water that nourish the roots of trees, while neighbours, schools, the community, and society as a whole function as sunlight, rainfall, and interactive wildlife. Variations in tree characteristics, soil quality, and weather conditions (such as sunlight and rainfall) influence tree health and growth. Similarly, individual traits of youth, alongside familial and environmental factors, impact their development and well-being positively or negatively. Just as trees progress through developmental stages from saplings to maturity, children traverse critical developmental phases that shape their future outcomes. Resilient youth are those who grow and thrive when supportive systems – familial and ecological – collaborate effectively, enhancing their capacity to overcome adversities and achieve healthy development.

Risk and adversity, by their very definition, conjure up thoughts of something bad, often being mentally correlated with the occurrence of negative outcomes when present. However, despite this, some theoretical approaches talk about the fact that a certain level of adversity, in moderate amounts, can lead to positive outcomes (Bunea, 2017, p. 41). Resilient people can cope more easily with stress and difficult situations in life. They can learn from unpleasant experiences, grow, and become more capable and stronger. Rather than simply bouncing back,

we are better prepared than we were before to face the challenges ahead (Barankin & Khanlou, 2014, p. 15).

The individual is a social being, and from birth develops within a specific social framework and historical context. For infants, the immediate social context is normally the family, and the family in turn is broadly influenced by the physical environment – , the community, and society in general (Papalia & Olds, 2000, p. 10). Nowadays, resilience is seen more as a process in which social and family variables intervene in addition to individual ones; therefore, we cannot say that resilience is only a characteristic of the individual (Bunea, 2017). However, it should be noted that there are generally a number of traits of resilient individuals. The identifying characteristics of resilient children and youth are summarized throughout the literature as: social competence, problem-solving skills, mastery, self-reliance, and a sense of purpose and future (Hanewald, 2011).

Strictly individual, psychological qualities and characteristics are a necessary but not sufficient category of protective factors. According to Cyrulnik (2005, p. 36), for example, even the intelligence of a resilient child is fundamentally relational. He emphasizes that individual characteristics alone are insufficient for resilience; the presence of supportive relationships is essential. Without people around the child, there is little motivation or context for the child to invest effort in learning and adaptation. This view emphasizes the essential role that social connections and the environment with which the individual interacts play in cultivating resilience, going beyond innate personal traits. A broader framework of resilience could include protective mechanisms (resources, competences, talents, and skills) that are found at the individual level (individual-level factors), within the family and peer network (social-level factors), and within the whole school and community environment (societal-level factors) (Olsson *et al.*, 2003).

Resilience is not just a personal characteristic, a property, or a sum of character attributes, since, in addition to individual factors, environmental factors are also involved in the formation of mental resilience and „a personality, however strong it may be, does not survive in a hostile environment" (Berndt, 2014, p. 60). Bunea (2017) also concludes, while emphasizing the importance of the environment in building resilience, that whatever qualities a person has, if they are in a totally hostile environment lacking resources and opportunities, those qualities fail to lead to resilience. It has been shown that a child can cope better in certain difficult situations if their creative spirit is nurtured, but in an environment that totally denies them the use of their imagination, this skill can be completely useless, even when properly implanted. When we think of resilience as a process, we are talking about an organism actively interacting with an environment (Southwick *et al.*, 2013).

### Conclusions

Theories that emphasize the exclusive abilities of the resilient individual have long been influential in the study of resilience, but a paradigm shift is now needed to place the individual in an environment where a mutually influential

relationship is created and where appropriate resources can be identified that can foster resilience.

Resilience is the outcome of the interaction between the environment and social and family relationships, to which personality and specific individual characteristics are added. I believe that these resources cannot exist independently of each other; only their prevalence may differ. Thus, a supportive environment does not guarantee the building of resilience, just as a strong personality does not guarantee balance and resilience if the environment is hostile. At the same time, the human resources involved in the life of any individual leave their mark depending on the circumstances in which the individual finds themselves, as well as on the individual themselves and their willingness to access them.

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# THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL DETERMINANTS ON LUNG DISEASE IN EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES. A NARRATIVE REVIEW[1]

## Oluwakemi Favour UWANGUE[2]

**Abstract:** Lung diseases represent a major global health challenge, currently affecting over 545 million individuals and causing nearly 4 million premature deaths every year. Social determinants of health, including where people are born, live, and work, significantly impact respiratory outcomes. While many pulmonary conditions are preventable, they remain disproportionately concentrated among vulnerable groups, thereby reinforcing health inequalities. This narrative review investigated the role of social factors in communicable and non-communicable respiratory illnesses, emphasizing tobacco use as a mediating risk factor and functional ability as an outcome. Data were analysed from the Eurostat Health Statistics Database and the Global Burden of Disease Study (2017–2021) for adults in EU-27 countries. Findings revealed marked social gradients, with pneumonia mortality almost twice as high in countries reporting lower education and higher overcrowding. Tobacco consumption was the leading modifiable risk factor, with Population Attributable Fractions exceeding 30% in high-burden countries. Smoking prevalence was highest in Eastern Europe, particularly among men and those with less education. Functional decline mediated the link between tobacco exposure and worse respiratory outcomes. Addressing these inequities requires comprehensive, equity-focused strategies, including tobacco control, improved access to healthcare, housing policy reform, and the integration of health across all public policies.

**Keywords:** Social determinants of health; respiratory diseases; tobacco control; health inequalities; functional decline; sustainable development goals; EU Member states.

**Résumé :** Les maladies pulmonaires constituent un problème de santé publique mondial majeur, touchant plus de 545 millions de personnes et causant près de 4 millions de décès prématurés chaque année. Les déterminants sociaux de la santé, tels que le lieu de naissance, de vie et de travail, influencent fortement la santé respiratoire. Bien que de nombreuses affections pulmonaires soient évitables, elles touchent de manière disproportionnée les groupes vulnérables et accentuent les inégalités en santé. Cette revue narrative a examiné l'impact des facteurs sociaux sur les maladies pulmonaires transmissibles et non transmissibles, en mettant l'accent sur le rôle médiateur du tabagisme

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et sur la capacité fonctionnelle comme critère de résultat. Les données d'Eurostat et du Global Burden of Disease Study (2017–2021) pour les adultes des pays de l'UE-27 ont été analysées. Les résultats révèlent de fortes disparités sociales, avec des taux de mortalité par pneumonie presque deux fois plus élevés dans les pays présentant une éducation plus faible et une surpopulation plus élevée. Le tabac est apparu comme le principal facteur de risque modifiable, représentant plus de 30% de l'attribution populationnelle dans les pays à forte charge. Le tabagisme reste particulièrement fréquent en Europe de l'Est, notamment chez les hommes et les personnes moins instruites. La détérioration fonctionnelle médie l'association entre l'exposition au tabac et les mauvais résultats respiratoires. Réduire ces inégalités exige des politiques axées sur l'équité, incluant la lutte antitabac, l'amélioration de l'accès aux soins, la réforme du logement et l'intégration de la santé dans toutes les politiques.

**Mots-clés :** Déterminants sociaux de la santé; maladies respiratoires; lutte antitabac; inégalités de santé; déclin fonctionnel; objectifs de développement durable; États membres de l'UE.

**Rezumat:** Bolile pulmonare rămân o problemă majoră de sănătate publică la nivel global, afectând peste 545 de milioane de persoane şi provocând aproape 4 milioane de decese premature anual. Determinanţii sociali ai sănătăţii, precum mediul în care oamenii se nasc, trăiesc şi muncesc, influenţează puternic starea respiratorie. Deşi numeroase afecţiuni pulmonare sunt prevenibile, acestea afectează disproporţionat grupurile vulnerabile, amplificând inegalităţile în sănătate. Această revizuire narativă a analizat rolul factorilor sociali asupra bolilor respiratorii transmisibile şi netransmisibile, subliniind fumatul ca factor de mediere şi capacitatea funcţională ca rezultat principal. Datele Eurostat şi Global Burden of Disease Study (2017–2021) pentru adulţii din ţările UE-27 au fost analizate. Rezultatele au arătat existenţa unor graniţe sociale clare, cu rate de mortalitate prin pneumonie aproape duble în statele cu educaţie scăzută şi supraaglomerare locativă ridicată. Consumul de tutun a apărut ca cel mai important factor de risc modificabil, contribuind cu peste 30% la mortalitatea prin pneumonie în ţările cu povară ridicată. Fumatul este mai frecvent în Europa de Est, în special la bărbaţi şi persoane cu nivel educaţional redus. Scăderea funcţională a mediat asocierea dintre expunerea la tutun şi agravarea rezultatelor respiratorii. Reducerea acestor inegalităţi impune politici centrate pe echitate: controlul fumatului, acces îmbunătăţit la servicii medicale, reforme privind locuinţele şi integrarea sănătăţii în toate politicile publice.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Determinanţi sociali ai sănătăţii; boli respiratorii; controlul tutunului; inegalităţi de sănătate; declin funcţional; obiective de dezvoltare durabilă; state membre UE.

## 1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Health extends beyond the traditional biomedical model, which focuses solely on the absence of disease. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as „a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (contained in the Preamble to its Constitution, 1948). This holistic view recognizes that optimal health arises from the complex interplay of individual characteristics and the social, economic, and environmental contexts in which individuals live. Well-being encompasses a broader spectrum of health, including emotional, social, and psychological

dimensions. Both health and well-being are essential for achieving a high quality of life, enabling individuals to function optimally despite challenges such as illness or socio-environmental constraints. While health and well-being are distinct concepts, they are closely interconnected; individuals in better health often report higher levels of overall well-being.

Social determinants of health (SDOH) are defined as the conditions in which individuals are born, grow, live, work, and age, as well as their access to power, money, and resources, that significantly influence health inequities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). These determinants create unfair and avoidable disparities in health status observed both within and between countries, with health and illness following a social gradient: individuals in lower socioeconomic positions tend to experience poorer health outcomes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025; World Health Organization, 2019).

The relationship between social determinants and health outcomes is particularly evident in the global burden of lung diseases. These conditions arise from the intersection of biological vulnerability, environmental exposures, and social disadvantage (Momtazmanesh *et al.*, 2023; Zhang *et al.*, 2024). Approximately 545 million individuals are affected by chronic respiratory conditions, accounting for 7,4% of the global population. Additionally, chronic respiratory diseases cause 4 million premature deaths annually worldwide (Momtazmanesh *et al.*, 2023). The economic burden is substantial, with approximately €380 billion allocated to the care of chronic respiratory disease patients in European Union member states in 2019 (Soriano *et al.*, 2020).

## 2. Scope and Significance

In our paper, we use a narrative review to examine lung diseases through the lens of social determinants of health, focusing on both communicable diseases (tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza) and non-communicable diseases (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma, and lung cancer). The analysis incorporates functional capacity as a critical outcome measure, recognizing that lung diseases impact not only mortality but also individuals' ability to perform daily activities and participate fully in society (da Silveira *et al.*, 2023). This review aims to inform evidence-based interventions that address both proximate and structural causes of lung disease burden. Understanding the influence of social determinants on respiratory health outcomes enables policymakers and health practitioners to design more effective and equitable interventions, supporting the World Health Organization's Sustainable Development Goal 3, which seeks to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. The Evolving Landscape of Lung Disease Research

The understanding of lung illnesses has transitioned from a biological focus on pathophysiology and therapy to recognizing social, environmental, and

behavioural variables (Agustí & Hogg, 2019). This alteration illustrates the evolution of public health perspectives towards emphasizing the fundamental factors that render certain populations more vulnerable while others exhibit greater resilience (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2008). Contemporary studies on pulmonary ailments recognize that respiratory health outcomes cannot be sufficiently addressed without accounting for the social conditions in which they arise (Abdelaal *et al.*, 2024). The elevated mortality and disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) in poor and low-middle SDI nations underscore the urgent necessity to enhance preventative, diagnostic, and therapeutic interventions immediately. To reduce the prevalence of chronic respiratory diseases, it is essential to implement global strategies for tobacco control, enhance air quality, mitigate workplace hazards, and promote the adoption of clean cooking fuels (Soriano *et al.*, 2020).

### 2.2. Lung Diseases: A Global Health Challenge.
###    Epidemiological Burden

Lung diseases are among the leading causes of global morbidity and mortality, affecting all demographic and geographic categories. Globally, 4 million people die prematurely from chronic respiratory disease, with the burden disproportionately impacting low- and middle-income countries and socially disadvantaged populations within high-income countries (Forum of International Respiratory Societies, 2017).

Recent Global Burden of Disease analyses reveal concerning trends. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), with 212.3 million prevalent cases, is the primary cause of deaths from chronic respiratory diseases, accounting for 3.3 million deaths (GBD 2019 Chronic Respiratory Disease Collaborators, 2020). Asthma, with 262.4 million prevalent cases, has the highest prevalence among chronic respiratory diseases (Soriano *et al.*, 2020). In the EU, respiratory diseases are a significant public health issue, accounting for 6.1% of all deaths in 2021 and representing the third most common cause of death overall. In 2019, asthma affected almost 6% of the EU population, with Finland having the highest prevalence. However, chronic respiratory diseases (CRDs), such as COPD, are often underdiagnosed, underestimated, and pose a growing global health challenge, with increased prevalence projected by 2050 (World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe, 2025). These statistics underscore the scale of respiratory disease burden and its impact on global health systems. The same specialist states that „This report shows that chronic respiratory diseases, which affect 81.7 million people in the WHO European Region, have long been overlooked due to insufficient policy focus and underfunding. This neglect has led to underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis and incomplete data, costing the Region an estimated $21 billion annually" declared Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, in a press release to the WHO. The same specialist states that „to change this, we must strengthen health systems by making care for chronic respiratory diseases a core part of broader strategies for addressing noncommunicable diseases.

Prevention is key – this means tackling risks such as smoking, air pollution and unsafe working conditions. We also need to boost research and innovation, set measurable targets, and invest in data and science."

## 2.3. Disease Categories and Characteristics

Communicable Lung Diseases include infectious conditions spread through airborne transmission, direct contact, or environmental contamination. Major communicable lung diseases include:

– **Tuberculosis:** In the EU/EEA, there was a significant increase in tuberculosis (TB) cases from 35,000 in 2022 to nearly 37,000 in 2023, though incidence remains much lower than the global and WHO European Region averages. A leading infectious disease killer, with approximately 10 million new cases and 1.6 million deaths annually (WHO, 2021).

– **Pneumonia:** The leading infectious cause of death, particularly affecting children under 5 and adults over 65 (WHO, 2020). In the EU, a 2016 report showed that 131,450 people died from pneumonia, accounting for nearly 3% of all deaths, with a standardized death rate of 26 per 100,000 people.

– **Influenza:** While overall mortality from influenza has fluctuated, the 2022-2023 season saw 3,857 deaths from Severe Acute Respiratory Infections (SARIs) among 41,097 hospitalized patients in nine reporting countries, with 4% testing positive for influenza. It causes annual epidemics resulting in 290,000-to 650,000 deaths globally (WHO, 2021).

– **COVID-19:** As of 20 May 2022, Europe was the most affected continent in the world. Has altered the respiratory disease landscape since 2020 (Zhou *et al.*, 2020).

Non-Communicable Lung Diseases include chronic conditions developing over time due to genetic factors, environmental exposures, and lifestyle behaviours (Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease, 2024). Key non-communicable lung diseases include:

– **COPD:** A progressive condition characterized by persistent airflow limitation (Rabe *et al.*, 2007). In 2025, the WHO reported that the global burden of COPD, a leading cause of chronic illness, is expected to rise, driven by factors like an aging population. Recent analyses indicate significant regional disparities, with high COPD prevalence in Western Europe but higher hospitalization and mortality rates in Eastern European countries. The number of COPD cases is projected to increase by 23% globally by 2050, a trend expected to impact the EU as well.

– **Asthma:** A chronic inflammatory airways disease causing episodic breathing difficulties (Global Initiative for Asthma, 2023). In 2019, asthma affected almost 6% of the EU population, a small increase compared with 2014 (+0.3 percentage points). Among EU countries, Finland stood at the top of the list, with 9% of the people reporting having asthma, followed by Germany and France (both 8%). In contrast, only 2% of people in both Romania and Bulgaria reported having this disease.

– **Lung Cancer:** The leading cause of cancer-related mortality worldwide (Jemal *et al.*, 2011), **Pulmonary Fibrosis:** Progressive scarring of lung tissue leading to respiratory failure and **Occupational Lung Diseases:** Including pneumoconiosis, asbestosis, and silicosis (Perez-Padilla *et al.*, 2010).

## 2.4. The Social Gradient in Lung Diseases

Lung diseases show a social gradient, with higher incidence, severity, and mortality rates among socially disadvantaged populations (Eisner *et al.*, 2011). This gradient reflects the unequal distribution of risk and protective factors across social groups.

*Risk Factor Distribution:* Social disadvantage increases exposure to risk factors for lung disease, including tobacco use, air pollution, occupational hazards, poor housing, and limited healthcare access (Gershon *et al.*, 2012). Lower socioeconomic groups experience higher smoking rates, live in polluted areas, work in hazardous occupations, and reside in substandard housing.

*Protective Factor Distribution*: Conversely, social advantage provides access to protective factors such as quality healthcare, health education, safe living environments, and resources for health-promoting behaviours (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). Higher socioeconomic groups have better access to smoking cessation programs, air filtration systems, occupational safety measures, and early disease detection services.

*Cumulative Disadvantage:* The clustering of risk factors and lack of protective factors among disadvantaged populations leads to cumulative health disadvantages that compound over time (Link & Phelan, 1995). This process helps explain why social gradients in lung disease often exceed expectations based solely on individual risk factor exposure.

## 2.5. The Paradox of Preventable Suffering

The burden of lung diseases is significant not only due to high prevalence but also because many cases are preventable. Most lung disease cases are attributable to modifiable risk factors such as tobacco use, air pollution, occupational exposures, and inadequate living conditions, which are linked to underlying social and economic inequities (Gakidou *et al.*, 2017). Consequently, populations with limited resources experience higher exposure to these risk factors and reduced access to prevention and treatment services. Limited access to clean drinking water and sanitation facilities contributes to the spread of respiratory infections (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention CDC, 2025). Food insecurity and malnutrition, common in poor communities, increase vulnerability to acute lower respiratory tract infections and tuberculosis, and are associated with more severe disease (Narasimhan *et al.*, 2013). These patterns illustrate how social determinants function as „fundamental causes" of disease, creating systematic disparities in health outcomes that persist over time and across different locations (Link & Phelan, 1995).

## 2.6. Social Determinants of Health. Conceptual Foundation

The social determinants of health framework provide the theoretical foundation for understanding how structural factors create and maintain health inequities. The World Health Organization released an operational framework for monitoring social determinants of health equity and actions addressing them, aimed at supporting countries in evidence-based policymaking to improve health equity (World Health Organization, 2019).

This framework recognizes five key domains that fundamentally shape health outcomes (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2020).

*1. Economic Stability:* Economic resources determine access to health-promoting resources and exposure to health-damaging conditions (Braveman *et al.*, 2011). Income level, employment security, and poverty status directly influence housing quality, neighborhood characteristics, healthcare access, and stress levels. For respiratory health, economic instability often translates to residence in areas with poor air quality, inability to afford smoking cessation interventions, and delayed healthcare seeking for respiratory symptoms (Adler & Stewart, 2010).

*2. Education Access and Quality:* Educational attainment serves as both a direct determinant of health literacy and an indirect pathway to better employment, income, and social status (Braveman & Gottlieb, 2014). Higher education levels are associated with greater knowledge of health risks, improved ability to navigate healthcare systems, and enhanced capacity for health-promoting behaviours. In the context of lung diseases, education influences understanding of tobacco risks, recognition of respiratory symptoms, and adherence to treatment regimens (Baker *et al.*, 2005).

*3. Healthcare Access and Quality:* The availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality of healthcare services fundamentally determine disease prevention, early detection, and treatment outcomes (Braveman *et al.*, 2011). Healthcare access includes financial barriers, geographic accessibility, cultural competency, and system responsiveness. For lung diseases, healthcare access affects the availability of smoking cessation programs, respiratory rehabilitation services, and timely treatment for acute exacerbations.

*4. Neighborhood and Built Environment:* The physical environment shapes respiratory health through air quality, housing conditions, and exposure to environmental hazards (Diez Roux, 2007). Neighborhood characteristics, including proximity to industrial facilities, traffic density, green space availability, and housing quality, create differential exposure to respiratory irritants and pathogens. The dynamics between social determinants of health, disproportionate environmental exposures, and differential health outcomes are often specific to microgeographic areas (CDC, 2025).

*5. Social and Community Context:* Social cohesion, discrimination, and community support networks influence health through stress pathways, social norms, and collective efficacy (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000). Strong social connections provide emotional support, practical assistance, and positive health

behaviour modelling, while discrimination and social isolation increase stress and limit access to resources. For respiratory health, social context influences smoking behaviours, healthcare-seeking patterns, and adherence to treatment recommendations.

The graphical representation can be seen in Figure 1.
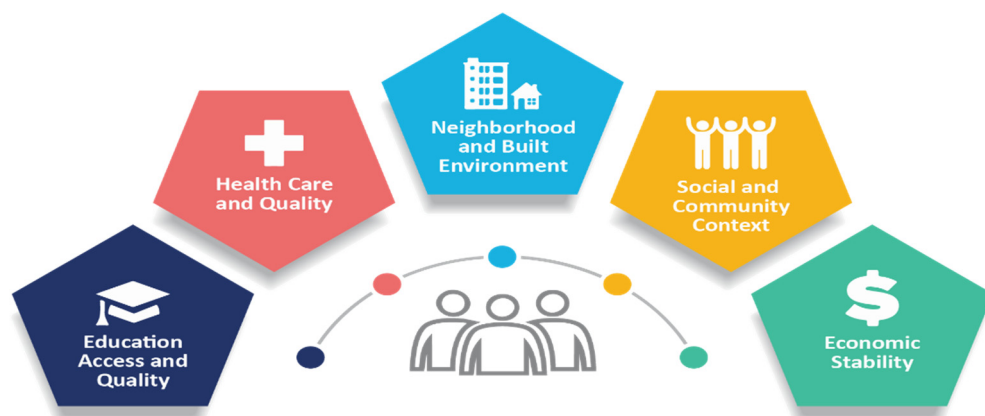


**Figure 1.** Key domains of social determinants of health
Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Healthy People 2030.

### Pathways and Mechanisms

Social determinants influence lung disease outcomes through interconnected pathways (Marmot *et al.*, 2008):

*Direct Environmental Pathways***:** Social position determines exposure to respiratory hazards such as air pollution, occupational dust and chemicals, secondhand smoke, and poor housing conditions with inadequate ventilation or mold (WHO, 2015).

*Behavioural Mediation Pathways:* Social determinants shape health behaviours, including tobacco use, physical activity, dietary patterns, and healthcare utilization (Hiscock *et al.*, 2012). These behaviours directly influence lung disease risk and progression.

*Psychosocial Stress Pathways:* Social disadvantage creates chronic stress that affects immune function, inflammatory responses, and health behaviours (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Chronic stress compromises respiratory defenses and may accelerate disease progression.

*Healthcare Access Pathways***:** Social determinants affect access to preventive services, early detection programs, quality treatment, and disease management support (Braveman *et al.*, 2011). Differential healthcare access creates disparities in disease outcomes even when exposure levels are similar.

*Life Course Accumulation:* The life course perspective posits that socioeconomic disadvantages originating in childhood accumulate across the lifespan, producing adverse health outcomes in later years, while sustained

socioeconomic advantages contribute to comparatively favorable health in old age. Social determinants operate across the lifespan, with early life disadvantages creating cumulative health risks that may remain latent before manifesting as chronic conditions, such as respiratory disease, in adulthood (Dodge *et al.*, 2012). This framework emphasizes both the developmental origins of disease and the social processes that influence susceptibility to, or protection against, illness. Life course theory incorporates the influence of social and material environments, income inequality, stress, nutrition, health-related behaviours, gene–environment interactions, public safety, and other contextual factors, conceptualizing them as interrelated pathways that shape health trajectories from birth through aging (Cockerham *et al.*, 2017).

### 2.7. WHO's Sustainable Development Goal 3: The Policy Context. Global Health Governance Framework

The World Health Organization's Sustainable Development Goal 3 – „Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" – provides the policy framework for addressing the lung disease burden (UN, 2015). This goal recognizes health as a fundamental human right and essential for sustainable development. SDG 3 includes specific targets relevant to lung disease prevention and control (WHO, 2024):

*Target 3.3: Fight Communicable Diseases*: „By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases, and other communicable diseases." This target addresses tuberculosis elimination and broader communicable disease control, acknowledging that infectious respiratory diseases pose major threats to global health security (WHO, 2021). Achieving this goal requires addressing both biomedical and social determinants of transmission and treatment outcomes.

*Target 3.4: Reduce Non-Communicable Disease Mortality*: „By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being." This target includes major non-communicable lung diseases such as COPD, asthma, and lung cancer (Thun *et al.*, 2013). Achieving it necessitates comprehensive approaches that address treatment access and the prevention of modifiable risk factors, particularly tobacco use.

*Target 3.5: Prevent and Treat Substance Abuse*: „Strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol." While not explicitly mentioning tobacco, this target encompasses prevention and treatment strategies relevant to tobacco use disorder and its respiratory health consequences.

*Target 3.8: Achieve Universal Health Coverage*: „Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services, and access to safe, effective, quality, and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all." Universal health coverage is crucial for ensuring equitable access to lung disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment services

(Braveman *et al.*, 2011). This target addresses healthcare access barriers that contribute to lung disease disparities.

***Target 3.A: Implement the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control:*** „Strengthen the implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in all countries, as appropriate." This target specifically addresses tobacco control as essential for global health promotion, recognizing tobacco use as the leading preventable cause of lung disease worldwide (WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, 2003).

## Alignment with Social Determinants Approach

SDG 3's emphasis on promoting well-being „for all" acknowledges that health improvements must be equitably distributed across populations. This universal approach aligns with social determinants thinking by recognizing that health is produced by conditions of daily life rather than merely healthcare services. The goal's integration with other SDGs – including poverty reduction (SDG 1), education (SDG 4), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), decent work (SDG 8), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), and climate action (SDG 13) – reflects the understanding that health outcomes are fundamentally shaped by social, economic, and environmental determinants.

### 2.8. Functional Capacity: A Critical but Underexplored Dimension. Conceptual Framework

Functional capacity is the ability to perform activities necessary for independent living and social participation (Spruit *et al.*, 2013). In the context of lung diseases, functional capacity encompasses respiratory function, physical endurance, cognitive performance, and social engagement capabilities. This multidimensional concept extends beyond traditional biomedical measures to include real-world functioning and quality of life (Langevin, 2024). Functional capacity is important as both an outcome measure and a mediating pathway between lung disease and mortality. Functional limitations often precede clinical diagnoses, making functional capacity assessment valuable for early intervention. Additionally, functional capacity decline may mediate the relationship between social determinants, lung disease, and adverse outcomes, including mortality.

### 2.9. Relevance to Social Determinants

Functional capacity serves as a pathway through which social determinants influence health outcomes. Social advantage provides resources for maintaining and improving functional capacity through access to rehabilitation services, assistive technologies, social support, and environmental modifications. Conversely, social disadvantage limits access to function-supporting resources and may accelerate functional decline through exposure to additional stressors and hazards.

### 3. Methodology

This study utilized two harmonized sources of secondary data:

– ***Eurostat Health Statistics Database*** – This database includes information on hospital discharges, causes of death, and social determinants such as housing, employment, and education.

– ***Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD)*** – This study provides standardized estimates of tobacco prevalence, second-hand smoke exposure, disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), and mortality by cause.

***Population of Interest:*** Adults (15+ years) in the EU-27 from 2017 to 2021.

*Key Variables*

Outcomes (Eurostat & GBD):

- Pneumonia mortality (Eurostat „Causes of Death" sheet; ICD-10 J12–J18)
- Respiratory mortality (Eurostat and GBD)
- Hospital discharges due to respiratory conditions (Eurostat „Hospital Discharges" sheet)
- Decline in functional capacity (proxied via GBD DALYs and Eurostat discharges)

Exposures (GBD):

- Tobacco use categorized as current smokers, former smokers, and never smokers
- Cumulative pack-years
- Second-hand smoke exposure
- Use of electronic cigarettes

Social Determinants (Eurostat):

- *Income & Education:* captured in „Treatable and Preventable Mortality" and socioeconomic stratifications
- *Housing Conditions:* Proportion of people living in unoccupied or overcrowded dwellings as indicated in „People living in unoccupied."
- *Healthcare access:* proxy via preventable hospitalizations and mortality ("Treatable and Preventable Mortality")

### 4. Results

### 4.1. Tobacco use and smoking patterns

Table 1 shows the percentage of daily cigarette smokers aged 15 and older by sex in each of the EU-27 countries. It shows that there are big differences between regions and genders. For example, Eastern and Southern European countries (like Bulgaria, Latvia, and Greece) have higher smoking rates, especially among men. In contrast, Northern European countries (like Sweden and Finland) have lower rates. This aligns with what we know about how people in Europe smoke.

**Table 1.** Percentage of daily smokers of cigarettes among persons
aged 15 and over, by sex

| Countries | Men (%) | Women (%) | Countries | Men (%) | Women (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bulgaria | 37.6 | 20.7 | Lithuania | 29.1 | 9.5 |
| Greece | 29.9 | 17.9 | Poland | 23.0 | 14.2 |
| Latvia | 34.4 | 12.1 | France | 20.5 | 15.4 |
| Germany | 25.4 | 18.6 | Slovenia | 18.4 | 14.8 |
| Croatia | 25.1 | 19.2 | Italy | 20.5 | 12.7 |
| Cyprus | 30.1 | 12.8 | Belgium | 17.6 | 11.8 |
| Slovakia | 26.1 | 15.1 | Netherlands | 16.4 | 12.8 |
| Austria | 23.1 | 17.5 | Ireland | 15.0 | 12.7 |
| Spain | 23.2 | 16.4 | Denmark | 11.7 | 11.8 |
| Malta | 21.9 | 16.8 | Portugal | 16.4 | 7.2 |
| Czechia | 23.2 | 15.7 | Luxembourg | 11.7 | 9.2 |
| Hungary | 21.5 | 17.3 | Finland | 12.1 | 7.8 |
| Estonia | 25.2 | 13.5 | Sweden | 5.9 | 6.8 |
| Romania | 30.6 | 7.5 | | | |

Table 2 shows how common cigarette smoking is based on how much education a person has. In almost all countries, people with only lower secondary education smoke more than people with higher education. This shows the socioeconomic gradient in smoking, which means that people with less education are more likely to smoke.

**Table 2.** Share of daily smokers of cigarettes among persons aged 15 and over, by educational attainment level

| Countries | At most, lower secondary education | Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education | Tertiary education |
|---|---|---|---|
| EU | 18.6 | 21.9 | 12.7 |
| Bulgaria | 23.5 | 33.7 | 23.5 |
| Greece | 19.3 | 29.7 | 20.2 |
| Latvia | 23.1 | 27.5 | 11.5 |
| Germany | 24.9 | 24.6 | 13.5 |
| Croatia | 14.9 | 26.9 | 17.3 |
| Cyprus | 16.5 | 25.0 | 20.0 |
| Slovakia | 22.5 | 23.6 | 10.0 |
| Austria | 20.4 | 23.8 | 14.1 |
| Spain | 20.8 | 22.5 | 15.8 |
| Malta | 22.6 | 21.2 | 12.1 |
| Czechia | 21.6 | 22.3 | 7.9 |
| Hungary | 25.3 | 22.4 | 8.6 |
| Estonia | 23.1 | 23.6 | 10.6 |
| Romania | 13.4 | 21.7 | 17.8 |
| Lithuania | 14.5 | 25.0 | 11.0 |
| Poland | 17.6 | 22.9 | 8.2 |
| France | 18.5 | 19.8 | 15.5 |

| Countries | At most, lower secondary education | Upper secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education | Tertiary education |
|---|---|---|---|
| Slovenia | 14.9 | 23.3 | 15.6 |
| Italy | 16.0 | 18.2 | 13.3 |
| Belgium | 17.2 | 18.4 | 9.4 |
| Netherlands | 19.2 | 17.3 | 6.8 |
| Ireland | 16.5 | 17.4 | 8.5 |
| Denmark | 15.0 | 14.8 | 7.6 |
| Portugal | 11.5 | 14.6 | 7.9 |
| Luxembourg | 13.8 | 12.9 | 7.2 |
| Finland | 10.7 | 13.0 | 5.4 |
| Sweden | 9.7 | 7.3 | 2.8 |

Table 3 puts smokers into groups based on how many cigarettes they smoke each day (<20 vs. ≥20). Countries such as Bulgaria and Croatia exhibit a greater prevalence of heavy smokers (≥20 cigarettes per day). This information is essential because higher consumption is linked to higher health risks.

**Table 3**. Share of daily smokers of cigarettes among persons aged 15 and over, by level of consumption

| Countries | Less than 20 cigarettes per day | 20 or more cigarettes per day |
|---|---|---|
| Bulgaria | 15.8 | 12.9 |
| Greece | 12.8 | 10.8 |
| Latvia | 14.9 | 7.2 |
| Germany | 14.1 | 7.8 |
| Croatia | 10.2 | 11.6 |
| Cyprus | 11.6 | 9.7 |
| Slovakia | 15.1 | 5.3 |
| Austria | 12.1 | 8.2 |
| Spain | 14.8 | 4.9 |
| Malta | 12.9 | 6.6 |
| Czechia | 13.9 | 5.4 |
| Hungary | 12.8 | 6.5 |
| Estonia | 13.5 | 5.4 |
| Romania | 13.3 | 5.4 |
| Lithuania | 13.2 | 5.2 |
| Poland | 9.8 | 8.6 |
| France | 13.8 | 4.1 |
| Slovenia | 10.7 | 5.9 |
| Italy | 11.8 | 4.7 |
| Belgium | 9.7 | 4.9 |
| Netherlands | 11.7 | 2.9 |
| Ireland | 9.8 | 4.1 |
| Denmark | 8.6 | 3.1 |
| Portugal | 7.5 | 4.0 |
| Luxembourg | 7.5 | 3.0 |
| Finland | 7.1 | 2.8 |
| Sweden | 5.3 | 1.0 |

Table 4 shows how often people use electronic cigarettes or other similar electronic devices. Daily use is still pretty low (less than 2% of the EU), but occasional and past use is more common, especially in Poland and France. This could mean that there are more options for people who want to quit smoking, but it also makes people wonder about the health effects and the possibility of using both.

**Table 4.** Percentage distribution of the frequency of use of electronic cigarettes or similar electronic devices among persons aged 15 and over

| Countries | Every day | Occasionally | Formerly |
|---|---|---|---|
| EU | 1.7 | 1.9 | 4.8 |
| Poland | 4.6 | 1.4 | 6.1 |
| France | 3.4 | 3.2 | 9.2 |
| Ireland | 3.3 | 1.2 | 1.8 |
| Czechia | 1.9 | 2.3 | 2.4 |
| Greece | 1.7 | 1.1 | 1.3 |
| Lithuania | 1.6 | 1.8 | 2.8 |
| Denmark | 1.5 | 1.7 | 5.4 |
| Estonia | 1.5 | 1.6 | 6.1 |
| Belgium | 1.4 | 2.7 | 11.5 |
| Germany | 1.3 | 2.0 | 5.6 |
| Italy | 1.3 | 1.8 | 3.6 |
| Slovakia | 1.2 | 1.7 | 3.2 |
| Cyprus | 1.1 | 1.2 | 3.3 |
| Latvia | 1.1 | 1.9 | 2.8 |
| Malta | 1.1 | 1.2 | 4.0 |
| Hungary | 1.0 | 1.0 | 2.3 |
| Netherlands | 0.9 | 5.0 | 4.2 |
| Portugal | 0.9 | 0.8 | 3.2 |
| Slovenia | 0.9 | 0.9 | 2.7 |
| Croatia | 0.8 | 1.1 | 1.5 |
| Finland | 0.8 | 1.0 | 5.4 |
| Austria | 0.7 | 1.9 | 4.6 |
| Bulgaria | 0.6 | 1.4 | 4.3 |
| Luxembourg | 0.6 | 1.2 | 2.3 |
| Spain | 0.5 | 0.5 | 1.5 |
| Sweden | 0.5 | 1.1 | 2.0 |
| Romania | 0.3 | 1.4 | 2.6 |

### 4.2. Exposure to tobacco smoke

Table 5 illustrates the distribution of exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke among adults, categorized by frequency and duration. The EU average shows that more than 10% of adults are exposed for one or more hours every day. In Croatia (26.1%) and Bulgaria (17.1%), the daily exposure is much higher. This

shows that passive smoking is still a problem and can cause breathing problems even in people who don't smoke.

**Table 5.** Distribution of the frequency of exposure to tobacco smoke among persons aged 15 and over

| Countries | One or more hours daily | Less than an hour daily | At least once a week | Less than once a week |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Croatia | 26.1 | 8.6 | 12.9 | 12.1 |
| Bulgaria | 17.1 | 12.2 | 10.5 | 15.0 |
| Greece | 19.4 | 8.6 | 16.6 | 17.8 |
| Cyprus | 16.9 | 6.8 | 7.4 | 11.3 |
| Romania | 11.8 | 8.7 | 10.2 | 17.6 |
| Poland | 14.5 | 5.8 | 5.0 | 10.1 |
| Malta | 12.4 | 7.0 | 4.9 | 7.2 |
| Italy | 10.7 | 5.4 | 8.1 | 8.0 |
| Slovakia | 8.8 | 5.1 | 10.3 | 15.1 |
| France | 7.8 | 5.7 | 7.9 | 8.1 |
| Latvia | 8.0 | 5.5 | 5.8 | 8.4 |
| Austria | 9.2 | 4.0 | 9.6 | 13.4 |
| Germany | 9.9 | 3.2 | 5.2 | 6.6 |
| Hungary | 8.4 | 4.2 | 3.9 | 10.3 |
| Lithuania | 5.7 | 4.5 | 6.2 | 11.9 |
| Czechia | 6.0 | 3.8 | 5.6 | 10.7 |
| Estonia | 4.8 | 5.0 | 4.1 | 8.9 |
| Luxembourg | 4.9 | 3.8 | 6.5 | 9.8 |
| Slovenia | 6.0 | 2.7 | 4.8 | 9.2 |
| Ireland | 6.3 | 2.0 | 2.6 | 3.4 |
| Denmark | 5.2 | 3.0 | 5.5 | 10.6 |
| Portugal | 3.7 | 4.0 | 8.7 | 10.8 |
| Spain | 5.1 | 2.4 | 2.9 | 3.1 |
| Sweden | 2.6 | 3.2 | 6.0 | 10.2 |
| Finland | 2.1 | 2.1 | 6.1 | 13.9 |

### 4.3. Mortality trends from pneumonia and respiratory diseases

The EU-27 had very different rates of death from pneumonia, with the highest rates in Eastern and Southern Europe (Eurostat „Causes of Death"). From 2017 to 2021, Table 6 shows the total number of pneumonia-related deaths by country. There is a lot of differences, with Poland, Romania, Germany, Italy, and France having the most people overall. The gradual rise in pneumonia deaths in some Eastern European countries, like Romania, over time is worrying.

**Table 6.** Total number of deaths caused by Pneumonia

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Belgium | 4,414 | 4,770 | 4,414 | 3,444 | 2,871 |
| Bulgaria | 1,410 | 1,294 | 1,468 | 2,973 | 3,553 |

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Czechia | 3,284 | 3,420 | 3,484 | 3,829 | 3,602 |
| Denmark | 1,813 | 1,950 | 1,663 | 1,496 | 1,482 |
| Germany | 19,609 | 20,259 | 18,548 | 15,927 | 14,119 |
| Estonia | 243 | 245 | 300 | 253 | 339 |
| Ireland | 1,088 | 1,058 | 1,004 | 759 | 709 |
| Greece | 1,188 | 1,154 | 1,163 | 1,115 | 1,048 |
| Spain | 10,222 | 10,415 | 9,384 | 8,768 | 6,799 |
| France | 13,936 | 14,335 | 14,545 | 11,572 | 10,424 |
| Croatia | 997 | 341 | 173 | 383 | 785 |
| Italy | 13,516 | 13,606 | 14,644 | 15,288 | 10,810 |
| Cyprus | 72 | 57 | 68 | 58 | 70 |
| Latvia | 399 | 453 | 380 | 362 | 426 |
| Lithuania | 575 | 648 | 539 | 595 | 550 |
| Luxembourg | 70 | 114 | 111 | 86 | 75 |
| Hungary | 1,125 | 1,066 | 1,101 | 1,100 | 1,187 |
| Malta | 120 | 123 | 170 | 167 | 145 |
| Netherlands | 3,546 | 3,729 | 3,374 | 2,730 | 2,597 |
| Austria | 1,300 | 1,307 | 1,148 | 906 | 712 |
| Poland | 15,988 | 17,917 | 18,269 | 19,794 | 18,361 |
| Portugal | 5,623 | 5,764 | 4,700 | 4,357 | 3,767 |
| Romania | 7,262 | 8,548 | 9,138 | 11,879 | 14,775 |
| Slovenia | 563 | 437 | 346 | 272 | 246 |
| Slovakia | 2,285 | 2,130 | 2,061 | 2,920 | 5,732 |
| Finland | 86 | 78 | 56 | 60 | 39 |
| Sweden | 1,842 | 1,920 | 1,713 | 1,349 | 1,174 |

Table 7 concentrates on pneumonia fatalities that are treatable and preventable, which act as indicators of the efficacy and accessibility of the health system. Countries with higher pneumonia death rates also have higher treatable mortality rates, which could mean that there are problems with access to or quality of healthcare.

**Table 7.** Treatable and Preventable Deaths from Pneumonia

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Belgium | 557 | 599 | 559 | 505 | 461 |
| Bulgaria | 686 | 628 | 804 | 1,591 | 1,824 |
| Czechia | 929 | 982 | 959 | 1,109 | 1,197 |
| Denmark | 262 | 296 | 229 | 235 | 236 |
| Germany | 2,911 | 3,083 | 2,760 | 2,540 | 2,505 |
| Estonia | 73 | 77 | 88 | 85 | 105 |
| Ireland | 112 | 148 | 136 | 115 | 112 |
| Greece | 170 | 180 | 153 | 184 | 213 |
| Spain | 1,125 | 1,233 | 1,122 | 1,144 | 896 |
| France | 1,403 | 1,506 | 1,545 | 1,411 | 1,349 |

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Croatia | 206 | 84 | 56 | 120 | 241 |
| Italy | 1,242 | 1,295 | 1,415 | 1,740 | 1,193 |
| Cyprus | 6 | 11 | 12 | 7 | 12 |
| Latvia | 189 | 185 | 174 | 156 | 216 |
| Lithuania | 235 | 269 | 268 | 305 | 277 |
| Luxembourg | 8 | 16 | 17 | 12 | 12 |
| Hungary | 404 | 343 | 363 | 436 | 488 |
| Malta | 13 | 20 | 33 | 30 | 20 |
| Netherlands | 403 | 454 | 390 | 345 | 385 |
| Austria | 156 | 160 | 121 | 102 | 76 |
| Poland | 4,605 | 5,566 | 6,208 | 6,977 | 6,870 |
| Portugal | 659 | 646 | 485 | 535 | 464 |
| Romania | 3,784 | 4,509 | 4,935 | 6,864 | 8,685 |
| Slovenia | 35 | 31 | 18 | 13 | 19 |
| Slovakia | 762 | 743 | 791 | 1,049 | 2,549 |
| Finland | 32 | 27 | 23 | 23 | 12 |
| Sweden | 208 | 260 | 248 | 200 | 180 |

Table 8 shows how many people died from respiratory diseases, such as pneumonia. Again, countries with a lot of people or a lot of problems, like Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland, and Romania, have the highest death rates. The data show that some Western European countries have been seeing fewer people since 2017, while some parts of Eastern Europe have seen numbers stay high or rise.

**Table 8.** Death caused by diseases of the respiratory system

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Belgium | 12,242 | 13,108 | 12,319 | 10,465 | 9,208 |
| Bulgaria | 4,580 | 4,883 | 4,205 | 6,008 | 6,827 |
| Czechia | 8,097 | 8,364 | 8,248 | 8,339 | 7,805 |
| Denmark | 6,350 | 6,776 | 6,107 | 5,661 | 5,982 |
| Germany | 68,500 | 71,821 | 67,141 | 61,426 | 57,383 |
| Estonia | 558 | 658 | 600 | 514 | 618 |
| Ireland | 4,059 | 4,051 | 3,930 | 3,271 | 3,202 |
| Greece | 13,847 | 12,668 | 13,591 | 12,576 | 13,079 |
| Spain | 51,615 | 53,687 | 47,681 | 42,423 | 35,543 |
| France | 44,823 | 45,183 | 45,590 | 38,765 | 36,398 |
| Croatia | 3,163 | 2,376 | 2,333 | 2,239 | 2,522 |
| Italy | 53,372 | 51,756 | 53,657 | 57,113 | 45,229 |
| Cyprus | 595 | 532 | 657 | 622 | 521 |
| Latvia | 844 | 922 | 781 | 715 | 780 |
| Lithuania | 1,340 | 1,384 | 1,202 | 1,204 | 1,063 |
| Luxembourg | 314 | 388 | 387 | 324 | 299 |
| Hungary | 8,148 | 8,113 | 8,315 | 7,161 | 6,737 |
| Malta | 385 | 391 | 461 | 431 | 450 |
| Netherlands | 12,997 | 14,084 | 12,657 | 10,524 | 10,151 |
| Austria | 5,341 | 5,590 | 5,347 | 4,884 | 4,043 |
| Poland | 26,333 | 27,601 | 27,259 | 28,764 | 28,175 |

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Portugal | 12,819 | 13,305 | 12,243 | 11,264 | 10,272 |
| Romania | 15,552 | 17,118 | 17,765 | 21,456 | 23,945 |
| Slovenia | 1,290 | 1,083 | 1,080 | 806 | 674 |
| Slovakia | 3,673 | 3,468 | 3,263 | 3,990 | 6,841 |
| Finland | 2,082 | 2,232 | 1,970 | 1,751 | 1,764 |
| Sweden | 6,705 | 6,980 | 6,178 | 5,554 | 5,079 |

## 4.4. Social determinants

Countries with high rates of overcrowding and low-income levels consistently had higher rates of pneumonia and respiratory deaths ("People living in unoccupied"). Table 9 shows how many people live in underoccupied homes based on their household type and income level. Countries in Northern and Western Europe (Ireland, Malta, Cyprus) have high percentages of people living in larger homes, while countries in Eastern Europe (Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary) have lower percentages, which means that the homes are too small or not in good condition. Because overcrowding is linked to respiratory infections, this helps explain why pneumonia rates are higher in these areas.

**Table 9.** Share of people living in underoccupied dwellings by household type and income quintile - , total population

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Belgium | 65.0 | 58.6 | 58.5 | 58.5 | 59.4 |
| Bulgaria | 11.1 | 11.5 | 11.5 | 12.1 | 11.8 |
| Czechia | 25.6 | 26.8 | 27.3 | 27.3 | 27.2 |
| Denmark | 43.6 | 41.9 | 42.6 | 42.9 | 42.5 |
| Germany | 35.4 | 36.0 | 35.3 | 35.3 | 34.2 |
| Estonia | 29.3 | 31.2 | 29.9 | 30.3 | 27.9 |
| Ireland | 69.6 | 71.4 | 68.8 | 70.6 | 69.8 |
| Greece | 10.3 | 10.4 | 10.7 | 10.9 | 11.8 |
| Spain | 55.9 | 56.3 | 55.4 | 53.8 | 58.5 |
| France | 43.2 | 43.6 | 43.8 | 42.2 | 41.8 |
| Croatia | 11.0 | 11.6 | 12.0 | 12.7 | 13.8 |
| Italy | 15.3 | 14.9 | 14.2 | 15.9 | 15.4 |
| Cyprus | 70.8 | 71.4 | 70.2 | 70.4 | 72.2 |
| Latvia | 10.2 | 9.9 | 9.6 | 10.3 | 10.1 |
| Lithuania | 23.0 | 24.3 | 24.5 | 27.5 | 21.8 |
| Luxembourg | 55.5 | 53.7 | 54.0 | 49.9 | 50.0 |
| Hungary | 9.1 | 25.0 | 23.9 | 24.5 | 26.3 |
| Malta | 72.1 | 73.4 | 72.6 | 72.5 | 71.8 |
| Netherlands | 52.9 | 53.9 | 53.4 | 53.0 | 61.7 |
| Austria | 31.2 | 31.0 | 29.9 | 31.5 | 31.1 |
| Poland | 14.6 | 14.4 | 15.0 | 15.9 | 16.2 |
| Portugal | 36.8 | 36.1 | 36.9 | 36.3 | 33.8 |
| Romania | 6.9 | 7.3 | 7.7 | 7.1 | 7.2 |
| Slovenia | 28.9 | 30.4 | 32.0 | 33.1 | 34.7 |

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Slovakia | 11.7 | 12.7 | 14.0 | 15.8 | 15.2 |
| Finland | 46.8 | 46.9 | 47.5 | 47.5 | 46.5 |
| Sweden | 38.5 | 37.5 | 37.6 | 37.5 | 38.4 |

### 4.5. Mediation effect

The decrease in functional capacity, assessed through Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) and hospital discharge trends (Eurostat), facilitated the correlation between tobacco consumption and mortality. Table 10 shows the number of people who leave the hospital with respiratory conditions for every 100,000 people. Countries with high discharge rates (Bulgaria, Lithuania, Romania) often have higher pneumonia death rates and worse social determinants, which shows how housing, healthcare access, disease burden, and outcomes are all connected.

**Table 10.** Hospital discharges by diagnosis, in-patients, per 100 000 inhabitants

| Countries | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Belgium | 311.2 | 322.8 | 320.8 | 506.3 | 463.1 |
| Bulgaria | 1,221.7 | 1,245.8 | 1,269.9 | 922.0 | 790.6 |
| Czechia | 280.6 | 297.7 | 291.1 | 456.9 | 869.1 |
| Denmark | : | : | : | : | : |
| Germany | 376.4 | 378.7 | 370.4 | 387.2 | 466.3 |
| Estonia | 320.0 | 323.8 | 332.1 | 293.6 | 804.8 |
| Ireland | 266.8 | 286.0 | 283.2 | 251.7 | 351.4 |
| Greece | : | : | : | : | : |
| Spain | 259.3 | 271.7 | 257.0 | 422.1 | 153.1 |
| France | 269.4 | 289.2 | 287.1 | 209.1 | 179.6 |
| Croatia | 337.1 | 324.2 | 350.4 | 452.9 | 756.6 |
| Italy | 241.7 | 250.9 | 255.3 | 182.0 | 139.7 |
| Cyprus | 90.1 | 87.8 | 88.0 | 49.0 | 587.3 |
| Latvia | 483.2 | 488.0 | 462.2 | 304.1 | 228.9 |
| Lithuania | 753.1 | 681.2 | 662.9 | 661.0 | 1,265.2 |
| Luxembourg | : | : | : | : | : |
| Hungary | 379.9 | 385.0 | 382.1 | 260.6 | 194.9 |
| Malta | 263.2 | 238.5 | 247.2 | 175.8 | : |
| Netherlands | 205.7 | 202.2 | 197.3 | 124.9 | 114.7 |
| Austria | 390.4 | 407.1 | 407.2 | 283.6 | 254.1 |
| Poland | 334.6 | 311.2 | 278.6 | 215.0 | 260.4 |
| Portugal | : | 394.7 | 376.9 | 282.2 | 217.2 |
| Romania | 627.7 | 647.4 | 625.2 | 895.9 | 1,061.4 |
| Slovenia | 429.1 | 412.0 | 440.6 | 507.8 | 805.8 |
| Slovakia | 356.1 | 354.7 | 361.8 | 363.9 | 840.5 |
| Finland | 699.1 | 665.7 | : | 453.0 | 413.3 |
| Sweden | 421.4 | 414.7 | 407.9 | 261.4 | 237.4 |

## 5. Conclusion

Social determinants profoundly influence respiratory health disparities throughout the EU Member States. Tobacco serves as a significant mediator, contributing to increased pneumonia mortality through functional deterioration. Addressing these inequities necessitates multi-tiered, equity-oriented policies that integrate preventative, social support, and targeted treatments in high-risk populations.

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# EXPLORING ARTISTIC POTENTIAL IN YOUNG PEOPLE WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER. EXPLORATORY STUDY

## Mihaela GRASU[1], Silvia POPOVICI[2]

**Abstract.** The study assesses the artistic potential of children and young people with autism spectrum disorders using an online questionnaire administered to 197 parents and professionals, respectively, their inclination for a certain type of artistic activity, and the benefits of art therapy. In addition to data related to the preferred artistic fields and the benefits of involvement in artistic activities, information was collected related to communication skills, verbal or motor imitation, memorization, or expression of emotions. Following the analysis of the results, it emerged that young people are primarily attracted to music and visual arts, and artistic activities contribute in particular to relaxation, improving self-esteem, and learning new things. Other benefits of artistic activities are: exploring the space around them, adapting to new situations, and increasing the degree of independence. Artistic activities would also help young people become aware of their emotions and express them appropriately. Parents and professionals believe that approximately one-third of young people with autism spectrum disorders have low verbal expression, memory, and imitation skills. For this reason, the artistic activities in which they can be involved should contain tasks of varying degrees of difficulty, from very simple to more complex tasks that involve creativity.

**Keywords**: young people with ASD, assessment of artistic potential, art therapy.

**Résumé :** L'étude évalue le potentiel artistique des enfants et des jeunes autistes à l'aide d'un questionnaire en ligne administré à 197 parents et professionnels, ainsi que leur intérêt pour un type d'activité artistique et les bienfaits de l'art-thérapie. Outre les données relatives aux domaines artistiques privilégiés et aux bénéfices de la participation à des activités artistiques, des informations ont été recueillies sur les compétences en communication, l'imitation verbale ou motrice, la mémorisation et l'expression des émotions. L'analyse des résultats a révélé que les jeunes sont principalement attirés par la musique et les arts visuels, et que les activités artistiques contribuent notamment à la relaxation, à l'amélioration de l'estime de soi et à l'apprentissage de nouvelles connaissances. Les activités artistiques offrent également d'autres avantages : l'exploration de l'espace qui les entoure, l'adaptation à de nouvelles situations et le développement de l'autonomie. Les activités artistiques aideraient également les jeunes à prendre conscience de leurs émotions et à les exprimer de manière appropriée. Les parents et les professionnels

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estiment qu'environ un tiers des jeunes autistes présentent des difficultés d'expression verbale, de mémoire et d'imitation. Pour cette raison, les activités artistiques dans lesquelles ils peuvent être impliqués devraient contenir des tâches de différents degrés de difficulté, allant des tâches très simples aux tâches plus complexes qui impliquent la créativité.

**Mots-clés** : jeunes avec TSA, évaluation du potentiel artistique, art-thérapie.

**Rezumat.** Studiul evaluează potenţialul artistic al copiilor şi tinerilor cu tulburări din spectrul autist utilizând un chestionar aplicat on-line la 197 de părinţi şi profesionişti, respectiv înclinaţia lor pentru un anumit tip de activitate artistică şi beneficiile art-terapiei. Pe lângă datele legate de domeniile artistice preferate şi beneficiile implicării în activităţile artistice, au fost culese informaţii legate de abilităţile de comunicare, de imitare verbală sau motorie, de memorare sau de exprimare a emoţiilor. În urma analizei rezultatelor a reieşit că tinerii sunt atraşi în primul rând de muzică şi arte vizuale, iar activităţile artistice contribuie în special la relaxarea, îmbunătăţirea stimei de sine şi învăţarea de lucruri noi. Alte beneficii ale activităţilor artistice sunt: explorarea spaţiului din jurul lor, adaptarea la situaţii noi şi creşterea gradului de independenţă. De asemenea, activităţile artistice i-ar ajuta pe tineri să devină conştienţi de emoţiile lor şi să le exprime în mod adecvat. Părinţii şi profesioniştii sunt de părere că aproximativ o treime dintre tinerii cu tulburări din spectrul autist au capacităţi scăzute de exprimare verbală, memorare şi imitare. Din acest motiv, activităţile artistice în care pot fi implicaţi trebuie să conţină sarcini cu diferite grade de dificultate, de la foarte simple, până la sarcini mai complexe, care implică creativitatea.

**Cuvinte cheie**: tineri cu TSA, evaluarea potenţialului artistic, art-terapie.

## 1. Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social relationships, communication, and the presence of repetitive and stereotyped behaviours or interests. Individuals with ASD are affected by changes in routine. They may exhibit many undesirable behaviours, such as self-harm, unmanageable mood swings, hyperactivity, aggression, reduced attention, temper tantrums, sleep problems, and obsessive-compulsive traits (Genovese & Butler, 2023). Another symptom that can affect individuals with ASD is sensory hypo- or hypersensitivity, which can impact light, sound, smell, taste, touch, balance, and body awareness (Christopher, 2019). Although individuals with ASD face many challenges, they have a variety of strengths, such as visual processing (Round *et al.*, 2017).

The increasing prevalence of ASD worldwide, estimated at 1 in 65 children (Zeidan *et al.*, 2022), justifies the interest in finding a treatment. In addition to widely accepted rehabilitation therapies, such as behavioural, speech, physical, and occupational therapy, and medication, there is a growing interest in alternative therapies, such as art therapy. These alternative therapies have great potential, both as viable alternatives and as complements to classical therapies (Martínez-Vérez *et al.*, 2024).

This research was conducted within an Erasmus+ project ”Art for Autism - Artistic methods and tools for empowering youth with autism spectrum disorders”, reference no. 2023-1-RO01- KA220-YOU-000151909 (Popovici *et al.*,

2024). The goal that we pursued in the research was to identify the artistic capacities of young people with ASD and to reveal the benefits that art therapy can bring. The collection of this information was necessary in order to improve the activities carried out with this target group.

The goal of our research was to identify the artistic potential of young people with ASD and to find the benefits that art therapy can bring. Gathering this information is necessary to improve the activities carried out with this target group.

We chose this age segment because most of the research and services offered focus on young children. Although a large part of people with ASD remain vulnerable in adolescence or as adults and would need support services, the chances of receiving help decrease with increasing age (Francileudo & Pereira, 2021, Ishler *et al.*, 2022; Płatos & Pisula, 2019).

From the specialized literature (Durrani, 2014; Farhana *et al.*, 2024; Deleon, 2024), it appears that art therapy is one of the most effective interventions that could provide benefits to people with ASD because it has a wide scope, uses a variety of materials, and employs a wide range of techniques. For this reason, art therapy can be adapted and individualized to the specific interests and preferences of people with ASD, as well as the difficulties they have. Being a nonverbal form of creative expression, art therapy helps people with ASD to communicate and express their feelings without using words, thus contributing to improving self-image and confidence.

Increasing social skills, relationships, and teamwork is achieved by conducting art therapy activities in a group. Given that art therapy activities can be conducted in a group, teamwork and social skills are enhanced. Since a wide range of artistic materials, with different colours and textures, can be used, art therapy can act as a way of sensory regulation for people with hyper- or hypo-sensitivity. Structured tasks, repetitive and rhythmic nature of art creation promote relaxation and inner balance, and artistic creation processes can be because they can be adapted to individual preferences for visual information. First, we will define art therapy, what its strengths are, and how it addresses the specific needs of autism.

## 2. Dimension of art therapy

Art therapy is defined by Francileudo and Pereira (2021) as the use of artistic materials and techniques in a controlled and positive environment to interact meaningfully with clients, both verbally and non-verbally. There are several types of therapy that use the arts to communicate and build a relationship, such as music therapy and dance therapy, visual arts therapy, drama therapy, creative writing, and photography.

Several studies have shown that expressive art therapies can be efficient in improving these conditions s and promoting positive behaviour. Martínez-Vérez *et al.* (2024) emphasize that art therapy directly addresses the key needs of people with ASD, acting on behaviour and communication, on balance, motor skills,

hand-eye coordination, as well as on cognitive and emotional skills. Vogel *et al.* (2024) conducted a meta-analysis indicating that art therapy in children and adolescents improves communication and interpersonal relationships, increases concentration and assertiveness, and develops fine motor skills, balance, and flexibility. Round *et al.* (2017) found that art therapy helps children with ASD to better communicate their feelings and emotions, thereby improving the quality of life for both them and their families. They also found that art therapy increases self-esteem and general well-being, reduces hyperactivity or inattention, contributes to sensory regulation, and leads to greater flexibility to change. Accordino *et al.* (2007) followed the positive effects on socialization and communication of people with ASD following music therapy. The authors showed an increase in social participation, reciprocal interactions, and eye contact, and a reduction in anxiety and aggression. Corbett *et al.* (2011) conducted an experiment in which 8 children with ASD were involved in a drama intervention program, alongside typically developing children, who acted as role models. This program aimed to improve socio-emotional functioning. Pre- and post-test neuropsychological, biological (cortisol and oxytocin), and behavioural measures showed improvements in social perception skills (face memory, expression of emotions) and adaptive functioning.

## 3. Methodology

The purpose of this research was to assess the artistic capabilities of children and young people with autism spectrum disorders, as well, their inclination for a certain form of art. At the same time, we aimed to identify the benefits of involvement in such activities. We also collected information related to communication skills, verbal or motor imitation, memorization, or expression of emotions, to increase the quality and variety of artistic activities for ASD young people.

To achieve these objectives, we designed a quantitative research approach, and the research subjects were both parents of young people with autism spectrum disorders aged between 13 and 20 years old and professionals (teachers, trainers involved in the education of ASD youth). The study included 197 respondents, selected from 5 European countries, Romania, Greece, Portugal, Italy, and Lithuania, through institutions and associations that provide artistic education services or pursue the social integration of disadvantaged people. The data were collected online through the Google platform. The proportion of respondents by country was as follows: 43% Romania, 18% Italy, 17% Portugal, 15% Greece, and 7% Lithuania.

The data collection instrument consisted of a 20-item questionnaire. Most questions involved choosing a single answer from several options, 5 items allowed multiple choice, while 9 items involved evaluation on a 4-point Likert scale, from „1 – low" to „4 – very high". The introduction described the purpose of the research and specified that they could withdraw from the research at any time if they wished.

## 4. Results

The analysis of the results revealed that young people with ASD are primarily attracted to music (32%) and visual arts (29%), drama (17%), dance (15%), and creative writing (6%). The artistic fields that help young people with ASD to express themselves creatively are music (25%), art (25%), and dance (21%). Parents and teachers believe that theatre can make a contribution of 16%, while writing and photography are chosen too little.

The most important artistic fields that benefit young people are considered to be music (31%), art (25%), and dance (10%). According to the opinions of parents and teachers, artistic activities bring young people a number of benefits, such as relaxation (22%), improving self-esteem (21%), acquiring new knowledge (20%), and increasing creativity (18%). In a smaller degree, these activities could lead them to make friends. Parents and support teachers (32%) believe that through art, young people with ASD develop and express a positive mental state (32%), creativity (29%), and artistic skills (26%). Almost half of parents and teachers (49%) believe that young people would dedicate between 1-3 hours per week to their favourite activity, while 39% believe that they would allocate between 3-5 hours, and 10% between 5-7 hours. Almost three-quarters of participants to the survey (72%) revealed that autistic youth have been involved in artistic activities in the past, with the most practiced being visual arts (26%), music (25%), dance (24%), and drama (17%). Almost 70% of young people currently practice an artistic activity. The most common reasons for stopping this activity are lack of time, financial difficulties, but also the fact that they no longer like it or do not want to go.

The communication skills of young people, necessary for teachers to know how to better involve young people in activities, are assessed as follows: 39% of young people have a good capacity for verbal expression, 41% understand and succeed to express their needs verbally, while 18% are able to express themselves predominantly non-verbally. Respondents assess that most (71%) of young people have a good and very good capacity for verbal imitation or replication of standard sentences, while 29% of them have a low and very low capacity.

The written expression capacity of young people was assessed by parents and professionals as low and very low (55%), while only 19% assessed it as very good. These results explain why creative writing is the artistic field very little preferred by the target group.

Autistic youth find it easier to imitate family members or friends (31%), video actions (21%), various sounds made with or without musical instruments (20%), and images (20%). In contrast, unknown people could be imitated by young people with ASD in only a proportion of 7%. Regarding the motor imitation capacity, which occurs in dance or pantomime activities, it is assessed as high and very high (68%) and low and very low in 38% of cases. The same results were obtained for the motor expression capacity/production of movements in a creative way, which are high and very high for 68%,

Parents or teachers assess that 59% of young people manage to express their negative feelings well and even very well, and 68% their positive ones.

Short-term memory is assessed as good and very good in 71% of cases, while 29% have a low and very low memory capacity, which means that they can be involved in simple tasks and need a visual prompt. Long-term memory is assessed as less efficient; in 67% of young people, it would be good and very good, and in 33% low and very low. Young people can most easily memorize melodies (24%) and various sounds (16%); on the other hand, they find it more difficult to memorize a written text (7%) or motor activities (8%).

### 5. Discussions

To our knowledge, this is the first study to assess the artistic potential of young people with ASD. Parents and professionals believe that autistic youth prefer music or visual arts activities because they involve non-verbal communication and visual elements. Writing or photography activities are less attractive because they require the ability to express themselves in writing, grammatical knowledge, imagination, and the ability to express emotions, which are more difficult to achieve by autistic youth. Photography involves the provision of equipment, technical knowledge, but also the ability to perceive expressiveness. One explanation for the fact that dance is not the preferred artistic activity is that young people with ASD have a low capacity for motor imitation. Also, difficulties in communication, expressing emotions, and verbal imitation make theatre a less. The most important benefits of involving young people with ASD in artistic activities would be the induction of a state of calm and relaxation, security and self-confidence, but also learning new things and increasing creativity.

Other research also confirms that autistic people are particularly attracted to music because they have innate musical abilities and simple instruments such as percussion or voice can be used (Martínez-Vérez *et al.*, 2024; Lipska & Leś, 2023; Accordino *et al.*, 2007). Music therapy has positive effects on the socialization and communication of autistic young people. It has been proven that this therapy increases social participation, mutual interactions, and eye contact, and reduces anxiety and aggression.

Other research (Martínez-Vérez *et al.*, 2024) has also found that visual arts therapy is a key intervention in ASD, helping to increase concentration, improve intellectual and linguistic skills. In contrast, other research shows that dance and movement are a second choice for people with ASD, after music therapy. Dance helps to reduce anxiety, increase relaxation, and increase body and self-awareness. The effects of art therapy on the ability to express feelings, achieve a state of relaxation, and improve self-esteem are consistent with other research. For example, Schweizer and colleagues (2017) interviewed art therapists who work with autistic youth. This research concludes that autistic young people become more flexible, more relaxed, express themselves easier and have improved abilities to discuss about their problems or frustrations. Art therapy also helps reduce children's behavioural problems and improve their self-image. These positive changes in behaviour are also transferred to other environments, for example, at home or at school. Bitan and Regev (2022) described how parent-child art therapy

helps children to express themselves better and learn new ways of relating to the outside world.

## 6. Conclusions

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex condition that requires a variety of approaches and treatment modalities to improve negative behaviours and symptoms. As it was observed that traditional treatments do not provide an important improvement, professionals in charge have begun to test alternative therapies and approaches, such as the use of creative arts as a form of treatment for this target group. Art therapy, being a multifocal intervention, acts on sensory, cognitive, and behavioural domains, which is why it is increasingly used.

We believe that it is important that, when implementing these therapies, individual and contextual factors are taken into account to maximize their effectiveness and accessibility. Consequently, art-based activities for autistic youth are recommended to include tasks with various degrees of difficulty. This approach accounts for the fact that roughly one-third of them demonstrate low capacities in areas like verbal expression, memorization, and imitation.

**Note:** The research was presented by the authors during the International Conference on Education in the Digital Era, Danubius International University, July 24, 2025 – July 25, 2025, under the title „Exploring Artistic Potential in Young People with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Quantitative Perspective".

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# AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THE REINTEGRATION OF INCARCERATED WOMEN VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

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**Abstract.** The challenges associated with the social reintegration of convicted women are intensified when they have simultaneously experienced the dual status of victim–offender within the context of domestic violence occurring in their own families, thereby deepening gender-based social inequities. The intersection between domestic violence and criminal history drastically reduces women's chances of successful reintegration after release, turning this process into a slow and uncertain path towards a new beginning. This paper presents an exploratory–theoretical study grounded in the author's professional experience, complemented by an in-depth analysis of national and international official documents, as well as the Romanian legal framework. The literature review adopts a thematic and critical approach, highlighting the specific challenges arising from domestic violence and the broader implications of gender inequality. The main objectives focus on analysing the impact of the victim–offender role reversal and identifying existing options for overcoming gender-based barriers in the reintegration process. The study's findings aim to encourage a non-discriminatory response from civil society and to promote the development of coherent professional practices among specialists working to prevent and address this complex social issue.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, post-release reintegration, female criminality, gender-responsive, recidivism

**Résumé :** Les défis liés à la réintégration sociale des femmes condamnées sont amplifiés lorsque celles-ci assument simultanément le double rôle de victime et d'agresseur dans un contexte de violence domestique au sein de leur propre famille, ce qui accentue les inégalités sociales entre les sexes. L'interaction entre la violence domestique et le passé criminel réduit considérablement les chances de réinsertion après la libération, rendant ce processus lent et difficile. Cette étude présente une recherche exploratoire et théorique fondée sur l'expérience professionnelle d'auteurs, complétée par l'analyse approfondie de documents officiels nationaux et internationaux, ainsi que du cadre législatif roumain. L'analyse thématique de la littérature met en évidence les défis rencontrés dans le contexte de la violence domestique et les effets négatifs des inégalités de genre. Les objectifs visent à examiner l'impact du changement de rôle victime–agresseur et les possibilités existantes pour surmonter les barrières liées au genre dans le processus de réintégration. Les résultats

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cherchent à promouvoir une réaction non discriminatoire de la société civile et à encourager une harmonisation des pratiques professionnelles afin de lutter contre ce phénomène complexe.

**Rezumat.** Provocările generate de reintegrarea socială a femeilor condamnate sunt amplificate odată cu manifestarea ca victimă-agresor într-un context de violenţă domestică desfăşurat în cadrul propriilor familii, fiind intensificată inechitatea socială între sexe. Întrepătrunderea fenomenelor de violenţă domestică şi trecut infracţional scad drastic şansele de reintegrare în societate, după liberare procesul fiind unul anevoios, fără şanse reale către un nou început. Prezentul studiu ilustrează o cercetare de tip exploratoriu-teoretică ancorată în experienţa profesională a autorilor completată de analiza în profunzime a documentelor oficiale naţionale şi internaţionale, precum şi a cadrului normativ din România. Analiză literaturii este de tip tematică cu aspecte critice, evidenţiind provocările întâlnite în contextul violenţei domestice coroborat cu aspectele negative ale inegalităţilor de gen. Obiectivele vizează o analiză asupra impactului schimbării de rol victimă-agresor, a opţiunilor existente pentru depăşirea barierelor şi condiţionărilor de gen întâlnite în cadrul procesului de reintegrare. Rezultatele studiului sunt menite să promoveze o reacţie nediscriminatorie din partea societăţii civile şi să dezvolte idei în vederea uniformizării modului de lucru al specialiştilor din domeniu în vederea combaterii fenomenului.

## 1. Introduction

In the current context, deprivation of liberty continues to be a measure ordered by courts based on final judgments, the application of which has severe indirect effects on convicted persons with a history of trauma due to past violent episodes and, implicitly, on their families. The commission of violent crimes is predominantly attributed to men due to their increased capacity to cause harm. Studies show that not only do statistical data confirm this inequality as a certainty, but social perception also anticipates this trait specific to the male segment. (Hamby, Finkelhor & Turner, 2013). Such a perception intensifies the shock to the family, the community, and even an entire society when a victim becomes an aggressor. The outrage and blame directed at the victim, which is much more intense than when a man commits the act, reflects existing stereotypes and gender imbalance. This research aims to analyze gender inequalities among female victim-aggressors during the process of social reintegration after release.

The analysis of recidivism rates in Romania shows a favourable percentage, but one that is high enough to remain on the public policy agenda, with the average monthly percentage of recidivists in prisons at the end of 2024 standing at 36.9 percent (36.9%) (ANP, 2024). The development of national strategies for the prevention of recidivism contributes to reducing the problem and is a priority at the national level.

The data suggest that there is ongoing interest in the reintegration of convicted women and the prevention of their recidivism, and the present analysis nuances the above from the perspective of equal treatment facilitated by the social environment.

## 2. Conceptual framework

The balance of power between women and men is the main underlying characteristic of people's perception that assigns different rights to women and men in the context of crime. However, contextual delimitation of this balance leads to the creation of stereotypes and reduces the chances of reintegration into society. The intensity of violence has led many theorists to describe domestic violence by emphasizing the balance of power, a fact officially recognized in the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which emphasizes that considering it to be „a manifestation of the historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of women's full advancement" (Council of Europe, 2011).

We do not dispute the differentiated needs regarding the standard of living in prisons, but the Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT) highlights gender-related vulnerabilities, such as specific risks and needs that are not addressed due to the lack of gender-differentiated policies. The low number of women in prisons globally, representing 5% of the prison population, leads to a violation of fundamental rights through general regulations and norms (Association for the Prevention of Torture, 2024).

The low ratio of female to male prisoners leads to a reduced inclination to investigate female crime, requiring an analysis of the circumstances and the entire system of factors. Numerous studies, hypotheses, and explanations have led to the conclusion that there are differential factors that determine the commission of serious crimes by women, most often based on accumulated trauma (Pascaru-Goncear, 2019).

In the same vein, during the shift in the victim-aggressor role, we encounter the concept of victim blaming, defined and addressed by European states for behavioural analysis of the victim, shifting the focus away from the aggressor and structural causes. (UN Women, ESCWA, n.d.)

A report by the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) contributes to the description of victim blaming, adding the names of institutions that may use this practice, emphasizing the implications of institutions involved in the process of preventing violence (hospitals, police, social services, courts), the media, the family, or even the community (GREVIO, 2022).

Thus, through the above conceptual definition, the issue of social reintegration of victims of domestic violence who have been convicted of criminal offenses can be addressed in a complex manner, highlighting the importance of gender equality and the manifestation of behaviours that respect it.

### 3. Applicability and legislative changes

Recent legislative developments reflect global efforts to recognize the needs of women prisoners during their sentence and after release.

Of the two essential roles of the criminal justice system, researchers draw attention to the purpose of prison, which is to punish offenders and place them in locations where they cannot harm anyone, while they are prepared for release and subsequent reintegration into society. Studies show that in most member states of the Council of Europe, prison does not achieve its second objective, as a large number of former prisoners return from freedom to detention (Spătaru and Falcă, 2011).

Despite the stigma of leaving prison, serious human rights violations in terms of violent acts were officially recognized internationally in 1993 through the United Nations General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. (UN, 1993). This was followed in 1994 by the first comprehensive federal law during the Clinton administration, including the necessary funding and development of social services for victims of domestic violence, expressly naming women as the main beneficiaries (United States, Public Law, 103-322, 1994).

In the same vein, the drafting of the Istanbul Convention (Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence) draws attention to the seriousness of the issue at the European level, which is revolutionary in nature. Human rights experts and others emphasize the uniqueness of the treaty in its understanding of gender-based violence (Alcalde & Birladeanu, 2021).

The subsequent critical aspects that specialists attribute to traditionalists, such as „narrow and stereotypical conceptions” described as arguments against ratification, extracted and analysed from the decisions of the constitutional courts of some countries, represented the opposition, the non-signatory countries (Georgiev, 2018).

Approximately ten years after the international implementation of legal provisions, Romania also recognised the need to protect women against domestic violence through Law 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence. Initially, with limited provisions and reduced applicability, subsequent changes represented real progress, with amendments being made in 2012, 2018, and 2020-2022 (Romanian Parliament, 2020).

The ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence) in our country in March 2016 through Law No. 304/2016 is considered by researchers in the field to be „a historic moment in the fight against gender-based violence in Romania” (Neag, 2022).

The Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), as the official body responsible for evaluating the implementation of the convention, acknowledges the steps taken and legislative changes made in this area over time, while also pointing out existing shortcomings. Two of the most relevant and worrying gaps are the systematic collection of data and the insufficiency of financial resources and support services, to

which can be added: the training of professionals and the legal response in terms of carefully investigating the differences between acceptance and abuse (GREVIO, 2022).

Alongside national and international recognition of women's rights, the principle of gender separation is also being recognized and implemented among the female prison population in Romania, reinforced by Law No. 23 of November 18, 1969 (on the enforcement of sentences) and subsequently by Law No. 254/2013 (current) (Romanian Parliament, 2013).

Part of Romania's success in aligning itself with international standards (the Bangkok Rules) is due to the adoption and improvement of the legislative framework by ensuring gender separation, respect for maternity in prisons, and working conditions adapted to pregnant women prisoners. This has shaped the image of a criminal justice system that integrates a gender perspective and respects the fundamental rights of women and their children.

Although the legislative reforms mentioned above demonstrate undeniable progress, efforts seem to be insufficient, as women who have been victims of violence in the past and who return to society after release face major systemic deficiencies in post-penal assistance. „The major challenge in reintegrating women prisoners lies in the disconnect between prison programs and community resources. When they are released, they find no bridge connecting them to safe housing and anti-violence services" (Vrabie, 2019).

## 4. Analysis of the phenomenon

After analyzing studies and reports on the issue of reintegration of women deprived of their liberty, we have identified three relevant explanatory constructs that define barriers that are significantly more complex than those experienced by men.

The first aspect relates to the high prevalence of trauma and mental health problems to which women have been exposed, particularly as a result of sexual and psychological abuse. Carrie A. Pettus highlights the needs identified following an analysis of women's experiences in the context of detention: „These experiences can significantly affect the reintegration process and require trauma-sensitive approaches to support their recovery and reintegration into society" (Pettus, 2023).

The rate of such situations, according to European studies to which Romania contributes through official reports, suggests that approximately 25 percent (25%) of female prisoners reported psychotic episodes compared to men, who have an average of 15 percent (15%). (OECD & Council of Europe, n.d.). According to the Gender Equality Index, 3 percent (3%) of women in the European Union reported experiences of physical and/or sexual violence in the last 12 months. Romania has the highest prevalence in the EU, with 9 percent (9%), compared to 2-5 percent (2-5%) in other Member States (EIGE, 2024).

The second explanation is the need for gender-responsive policies and programs, as required by the Bangkok Rules, to recognize gender differences in detention and provide specialized services tailored to women (UN, 2010). The need to initiate and implement such programs is due to several findings of need, following statements that „Women involved in the justice system are more likely

than men to report extensive histories of trauma, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood" (Covington & Bloom, 2015).

The third obstacle is based on stigmatizing attitudes, the importance of family contact, and gender barriers encountered in professional and social activities. Certain writers and institutions attribute a negative connotation to rehabilitation methods involving social attitudes and difficulties in subsequent reintegration, which are seen as more problematic than the risk of remaining in society (Penal Reform International, 2019).

I chose to address the magnitude of the problem based on the data collected and their intersection, coming from national institutions that corroborate the two sides of the issue. According to the report of the Prosecutor's Office attached to the High Court of Cassation and Justice, Human Resources and Documentation Section, during 2024, 1,147 people were prosecuted for acts of domestic violence, and in 717 of these cases, the acts of violence were recorded between cohabitants/spouses (Public Ministry, 2024).

As the entire analysis reflects gender differences, the following figure shows the gender distribution of victims of domestic violence, as reported by the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men (ANES).
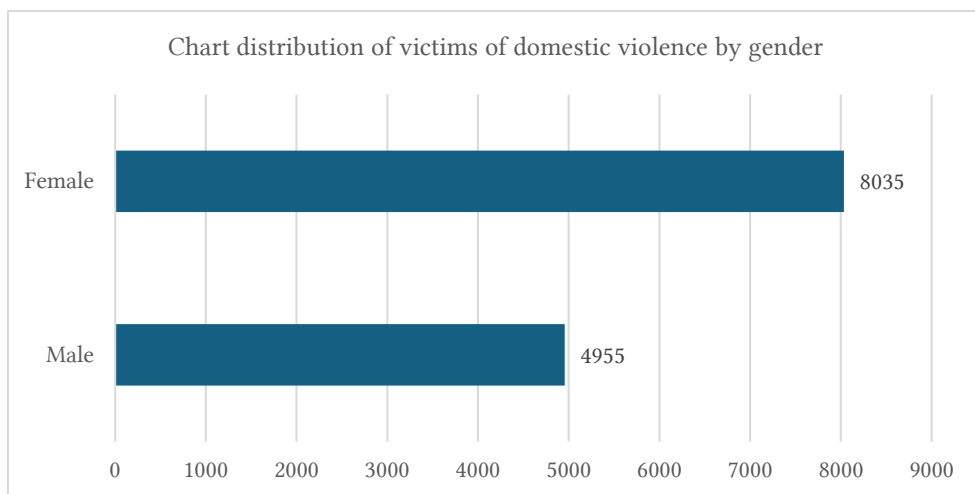


**Figure 1.** Authors' graphic based on data from the National Study on Domestic Violence, National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men – ANES (2024).

The distribution of victims by gender for 2024 is the argument underlying the need for gender-differentiated intervention among convicted women who have been victims of domestic violence in the past. Statistical data on perpetrators indicate that 2,629 (38.27%) are female and 4,240 (61.73%) are male out of a total of 6,869 perpetrators (ANES, 2024). In line with the increased number of victims, there is still a considerable percentage of women who resort to acts of violence. Relevant

research in this area would be to find out the percentage of convicted women who were victims of violence before their criminality.

At present, our country does not have measurable data in this regard; the conclusive option being to analyze separately areas such as domestic violence, gender equality in reintegration after release, convicted women who have suffered trauma, as well as the recidivism rate and the development of predictive data.

Official reports from the National Prison Administration (ANP), although there is no strict recidivism rate for men as a separate group (since the overall rate of 36 percent (36%)–38.4 percent (38.4%) is close to the rate for men), emphasize that women account for a significantly lower proportion of total recidivists. A good understanding of the figures is determined by the gender ratio in the prison system, reported for 2023, approximately 95.7 percent (95.7%) of the total were male, and approximately 4.3 percent (4.3%) of the total were female.

Of the total population, 42.24% committed crimes against persons, 32.1% committed crimes against property, 0.78% crimes against authority, 11.69 percent (11.69%) crimes affecting activities of public interest or other activities regulated by law, 0.24 percent (0.24%) committed crimes of forgery, 1.11 percent (1.11%) committed crimes affecting social coexistence, and 11.84 percent (11.84%) committed crimes provided for by special laws (ANP, 2025).

A relevant indicator is the proportion of legislative provisions in force aimed at prevention and their actual application, from the perspective of issuing protection orders, in the first two months of 2024, out of a total of 2,025 protection instruments (protection orders), of which only 206 cases ordered the measure „requiring the aggressor to wear an electronic monitoring device at all times," representing 10 percent (10%) of the total protection orders issued. The ineffectiveness of protection measures is evident from the violation of protection orders, with 4,848 offences of non-compliance with the measure committed in the first 11 months of 2024 (General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police, 2025).

## 5. Conclusions

The present analysis indicates a double challenge among women who have served a custodial sentence and have previously experienced violence, generated by the intersection of trauma accentuated by society's discriminatory reaction and the implications of criminality, as a result of violating legislative norms resulting in deprivation of liberty. The research and studies presented capture the accumulation of traumas that these women experience throughout their lives and the inequality that society confers on them, initially through the lack of measures to protect them from violence, and subsequently through the cumbersome process of reintegration into the community after serving their sentence, which occurred as a result of the activation of personal defense mechanisms.

The limited applicability of legislative norms and international recommendations is caused by the lack of coherent monitoring and implementation mechanisms. Romania's international image, based on the legislation it has enacted and its openness to implementing post-detention

assistance programs, is overshadowed by the reality of a lack of cooperation between state institutions and civil society, ineffective sanctioning and protection mechanisms, and harsh reactions based on gender differences.

The establishment of intervention tools, the focused implementation of post-detention programs, and social, psychological, or even occupational support are key elements in effective social reintegration, substantially reducing the risk of recidivism.

Furthermore, the public representation of guilt and the social reintegration of women who have served a custodial sentence are aspects that can be shaped through public education, the media, and non-governmental organizations, an approach that also contributes to reducing gender disparities in society.

In conclusion, the social reintegration of women survivors of violence who have served a custodial sentence is a priority and should be considered a form of social justice. Their fair reintegration without relapse requires effective coordination between public institutions, private organizations, the community, and academia, as well as a gender-sensitive perspective.

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# A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF FINANCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH RELATIONSHIP

## Liliana CERNAVCA[1]

**Abstract:** The relationship between financial development and economic growth represents a very well-investigated research topic by a large number of studies, encompassing both theoretical and empirical approaches. Nevertheless, research conclusions are ambiguous, and it is necessary to clarify them. In this context, the main purpose of our study is to analyze, through content analysis, as a tool of qualitative research, the relationship between financial development and economic growth. Therefore, using a sample of 25 representative articles, we apply content analysis to determine the presence, sign, and direction of the aforementioned relationship. The results obtained indicate that, although the literature emphasizes both a positive and negative impact of financial development on economic growth, the positive impact is more frequently reflected. Moreover, the research demonstrates that, despite the specialized literature addressing all three possible hypotheses regarding the direction of the relationship, the prevailing evidence supports the direction from financial development to economic growth to a greater extent. (JEL classification**:** E44; G21; O11; O16; O43)

**Keywords:** Financial development; Economic growth; Causality; Content analysis.

**Résumé** : La relation entre votre secteur financier et votre région économique représente le sujet de ce travail pour l'enquête d'un nombre d'étudiants, et vous avez abordé la théorie, c'est l'empire. Avec tout cela, les conclusions sont ambiguës et il est nécessaire de clarifier la situation. Dans ce contexte, l'objectif principal de nos études est d'utiliser et d'analyser en continu un instrument de certification de qualité, en relation avec votre tension financière et votre croissance économique. En principe, en utilisant l'article 25 du représentant de l'article, l'analyse continue pour une présentation déterminée, symbolique et la direction relative mentionnée antérieurement. Cela indique clairement que la littérature spécialisée a un impact positif, c'est-à-dire un impact négatif sur les tensions financières en termes de croissance économique, l'impact positif est le plus souvent reflété. Mais il est certain que, dans une ville où la littérature spécialisée est abordée, il y a trois possibilités de direction privée par rapport à la région, il faut maintenir une position prédominante dans la plus grande direction financière du secteur financier de la zone économique.

**Mots clés** : Développement financier ; Croissance économique ; Causalité ; Analyse de contenu.

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**Rezumat**: Relaţia dintre dezvoltarea financiară şi creşterea economică reprezintă o temă de cercetare foarte bine investigată de un număr mare de studii, cuprinzând atât abordări teoretice, cât şi empirice. Cu toate acestea, concluziile cercetării sunt ambigue şi este necesară clarificarea lor. În acest context, scopul principal al studiului nostru este de a analiza utilizând analiza de conţinut ca instrument de cercetare calitativă, relaţia dintre dezvoltarea financiară şi creşterea economică. Prin urmare, utilizând un eşantion de 25 de articole reprezentative, aplicăm analiza de conţinut pentru a determina prezenţa, semnul şi direcţia relaţiei menţionate anterior. Rezultatele obţinute indică faptul că, deşi literatura de specialitate subliniază atât un impact pozitiv, cât şi unul negativ al dezvoltării financiare asupra creşterii economice, impactul pozitiv este reflectat mai frecvent. Mai mult, cercetarea demonstrează că, în ciuda faptului că literatura de specialitate abordează toate cele trei ipoteze posibile privind direcţia relaţiei, dovezile predominante susţin într-o măsură mai mare direcţia de la dezvoltarea financiară la creşterea economică.

**Cuvinte cheie**: Dezvoltare financiară; Creştere economică; Cauzalitate; Analiza de conţinut.

## 1. Introduction

It is well known that a higher standard of living can not be reached without economic growth. A lot of empirical and theoretical studies have shown that financial development is one of the main determinants of economic growth. Therefore, the institutional framework of the financial system, as well as its performance, can be considered a major stimulus of macroeconomic performance.

Upon analyzing the specialized literature, we observe a substantial number of studies, including works by notable researchers as Lucas (1988), King and Levine (1993), Beck *et al.* (2000), Méon *et al.* (2010), Ito *et al.* (2018), Ferreira (2021), Afonso and Blanco-Arana (2022), Wen *et al.* (2022), and Thi An *et al.* (2023). These studies encompassing both qualitative and quantitative methodologies are dedicated to elucidating the existence, sign, and direction of the relationship between financial development and economic growth. Furthermore, these investigations employ a diverse range of research methods, tools, variables, as well as varied samples and time periods. Despite this huge amount of research, a consensus regarding the existence of a causal relationship and its implications remains elusive.

Even if the widespread assumption that financial development generally has a positive impact on economic growth, it is crucial to acknowledge that the development of financial intermediation, when reaching certain levels, can expose global economies to significant threats. This phenomenon may lead to irrational risk-taking, the amplification of macroeconomic volatility, and the emergence of boom-recession turbulences. In the past, within the context of traditional banking, the impact of financial intermediation development on macroeconomic performance was consistently viewed as positive. However, with the evolution and exposure of the financial sector to financial derivatives, negative effects have also emerged, as evidenced by recent international financial crises. Specialized studies, such as those by Arcand *et al.* (2015), Asteriou and Spanos (2019), Cecchetti and Kharroubi (2019), and Thi An *et al.* (2023), highlight that the expansion of the financial sector to certain levels can limit real economic growth.

Numerous research articles highlight the ambivalent nature of this impact. Furthermore, a broad spectrum of research, including studies by Demetriades and Hussein (1996), Greenwood and Smith (1997), Esso (2010), Hassan *et al.* (2011), Pradhan *et al.* (2014), and Čižo *et al.* (2020), emphasizes not only the causality from financial development to economic growth but also vice versa, from economic growth to financial development. Some even suggest the manifestation of a two-way relationship.

Consequently, the main purpose of our research is to examine, through content analysis, as a qualitative research method, on the one hand, the sign of the link between financial development and economic growth, and on the other hand, the direction of this relationship.

With specific reference to the scientific and practical relevance of the research, we emphasize the significance of the proposed subject for analysis. This relevance stems from the crucial role that financial intermediation plays in the economy, involving the mobilization of savings and the efficient allocation of capital. Even though the relationship between financial development and economic growth is a topic investigated by a large number of studies for several no consensus has been reached yet. Therefore, further research is required to provide explanations for these contradictory results.

The motivation behind employing content analysis lies in its potential to contribute new evidence to the specialized literature. It is acknowledged for its value in uncovering replicable and valid inferences from a body of text, including words, phrases, and language. This analysis aims to shed light on the number of articles in which the development of financial intermediation either propels economic growth or, conversely, exerts a negative impact, particularly beyond a certain threshold.

It is worth noting that the significance of studying the relationships between financial development and macroeconomic performance arises from the potential for detecting disruptions in the financial sector of the economy. Such disturbances could exert significant and lasting influences on the real economy, as evidenced by the international financial crisis of 2007 and the subsequent public debt crises.

Therefore, this research might be of interest to decision-makers in banks and regulatory bodies. These stakeholders should recognize the importance of adopting measures to enhance the quality of financial intermediation. For instance, redirecting credit flows toward efficient, sustainable, and environmentally friendly investments, as well as improving the quality of financial intermediaries' assets, can contribute to enhancing macroeconomic performance.

To achieve the primary objective of the research, our paper is structured as follows: the second section is dedicated to a description of the methodology, the third section axes on the results and discussions, and the last includes some conclusions.

## 2. Methodology

The present research is based on a *sample* of *25 representative articles* aiming to address the issue of the causal relationship between financial development and economic growth. These articles were extracted from the *Web of Science database (Clarivate), the Scopus database,* and identified through the *Google Scholar search engine.* In the process of selecting items, we applied the following filters: 1. *Keywords* (e.g., „financial development," „economic growth," „causal relationship"); 2. *Relevance* (considering factors such as the number of citations, the reputation of the author, and the journal's impact factor); 3. *Format* (Adobe Acrobat PDF).

From the multitude of articles identified through the keyword search, we selected the 25 most representative articles for our study. Many of them were not available in Adobe Acrobat PDF format and were deleted from the sample. At the end of the selection process, our sample contained ten articles (De Gregorio, 1995; Levine, 2000; Arestis, 2001; Khan, 2001; Hassan, 2011; Pradhan, 2014; Durusu-Ciftci, 2017; Prochniak, 2017; Čižo, 2020; Afonso, 2022) that met the aforementioned conditions. It's noteworthy that the chosen qualitative research method is content analysis**.** This method allows the reduction of phenomena or events into well-defined categories for easier analysis, interpretation of results, and formulation of conclusions.

The motivation for using content analysis lies in its capability to code text, classify these codes, and conduct analyses based on them to formulate conclusions about the content of articles, communications, or interviews (Harris, 1996, p. 458; Collis and Hussey, 2003; Harwood and Garry, 2003, p. 480). Relational content analysis was specifically employed to investigate relationships between concepts, aligning with the objectives of our study—analyzing the sign and direction of the relationship between financial development and economic growth.

In terms of the actual analysis, we used NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software, because of its ability to organize and analyze text through the coding process of qualitative data. Furthermore, this software is the most cited solution for analysing qualitative data in the specialized literature.

In the following, we will outline the specific steps we took in conducting the content analysis:

1. Upload items to the NVivo software: The sample, consisting of ten representative articles addressing the relationship between financial development and economic growth, was imported into NVivo.
2. Define the level of analysis as a group of words.
3. Define the code set as follows:
   - Financial development determines economic growth.
   - Economic growth determines financial development.
   - Two-way relationship.
   - Positive impact.
   - Negative impact.

4. We decided to code both the presence of the code and the frequency of occurrence.

5. Decide the level of generalization to be word family and synonyms. It's worth noting that for positive/negative impact, explicit coding was chosen. Regarding the direction of the relationship (financial development determines economic growth; economic growth determined by financial development; two-way relationship), we opted for encoding both explicitly and implicitly.

6. Establish coding rules:
   - For positive/negative impact, code the group of words explicitly.
   - For the direction of the impact, code the text fragment explicitly and implicitly.

After completing the above steps, we extracted the outputs from the NVivo software and conducted an analysis of the results, which will be presented in detail in the following section.

## 3. Results and discussion

Following the steps outlined in the methodology section, we used the NVivo software to generate a word cloud representing the most frequently used words in the articles within the sample. **Figure 1** illustrates that the most commonly found words in the analysed text are: growth, economic, development, financial, variables, countries, banking, financial market, positive, mediation, and relationship. This fact highlights that the term „positive relationship" has a higher frequency of occurrence compared to its negative counterpart. This is visually represented in the word cloud, where the word „negative" appears written with smaller characters than the word „positive".



**Figure 1.** The word cloud that reflects the content of the articles in the analysed sample
*Source: Own processing using the NVivo software.*

The conclusions presented in the previous paragraph are also supported by Table 1, which highlights the word frequency in the analysed text. Specifically, the word „positive" appears in the articles with a frequency of 772 occurrences and a weight percentage of 0.44, whereas the term „negative" indicates an occurrence frequency of only 157, corresponding to a weight percentage of 0.15. Consequently, the results suggest that although specialized literature confesses both positive and negative impacts, the positive ones reflect a more significant weight in the text of the articles.

**Table 1.** The word's frequency

| Words | Frequency | Weight percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Positive | 772 | 0,44 |
| Negative | 157 | 0,15 |
| Unidirectional | 11 | 0,01 |
| Bidirectional | 9 | 0,01 |

*Source: Own processing using the NVivo software.*

Regarding the other terms highlighted in **Table 1**, it is noteworthy that the term „unidirectional" is mentioned 11 times, with a weight percentage of 0.01, while the word „bidirectional" is outlined 9 times, with a weight percentage of 0.01 in the analysed text. Therefore, we can conclude that even though both directions of the relationship between financial development and economic growth are highlighted by the analysed sample, the unidirectional impact holds a more considerable weight in the analysed text.

Focusing on the analysis of the codes, we can highlight Table 2, which reflects their frequency. The „positive impact" code was identified in eight files, with 91 references in the analysed text and a weight percentage of 15.15. On the other hand, the „negative impact" code appears in seven files, with 44 references, and a weight percentage of 5.02. Therefore, it can be affirmed that although the articles in the sample highlight both positive and negative impacts, the weight given to the former is substantially higher. Consequently, the studies predominantly reveal a positive impact of financial development on economic growth.

**Table 2**. The Code's frequency

| Codes | No. of files | No. of references | Weight percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| Positive impact | 8 | 91 | 15.15 |
| Negative impact | 7 | 44 | 5.02 |
| Financial development causes economic growth | 10 | 88 | 12.79 |
| Economic growth causes financial development | 6 | 15 | 2.27 |
| Bi-directional relationship | 8 | 31 | 4.05 |

*Source: Own processing using the NVivo software.*

Regarding the second objective of our research – analyzing the direction of the relationship between financial development and economic growth – we remark that according to Table 2, the code „*financial development causes economic growth*" is found in all ten files, with 88 references in the analysed text and a weight percentage of 12.79. Focusing on the code „*economic growth causes financial development*", we specify that it was found in only six files, with 15 references, and a weight percentage in the analysed text of 2.27. Strictly referring to the code that reflects the *bidirectional relationship* between financial development and economic growth, it was found in eight articles, with a total of 31 references in the analysed text, reflecting a weight percentage of 4.05.

The results highlighted in the previous paragraphs are also reflected in Figure 2, which provides a graphical representation of the articles containing the „positive impact" and „negative impact" codes. The figure indicates that the positive impact of financial development on economic growth is emphasized in eight articles, while the negative impact is addressed in only seven articles. It is noteworthy that the study by Levine *et al.* (2000) reflects only a positive influence of financial development on economic growth, while all seven other articles discuss both signs of the impact. Additionally, it is important to specify that two articles (Khan, 2001; Pradhan *et al.*, 2014) did not address the issue of the sign of the relationship, focusing solely on its existence and direction.
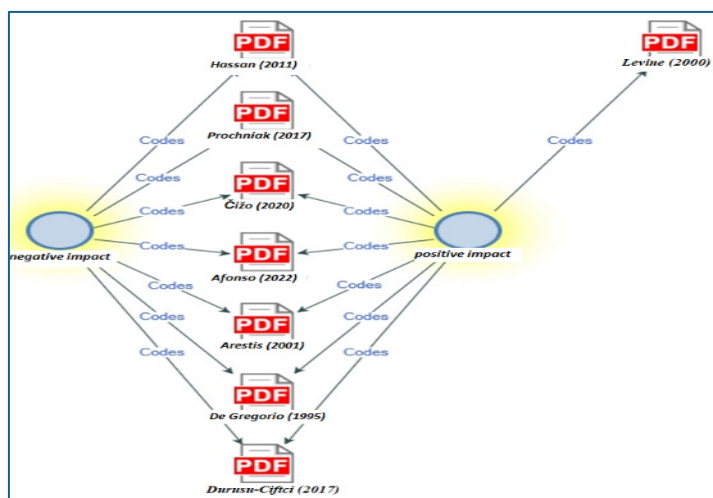


**Figure 2.** A Graphic representation of the articles comprising the codes „positive impact" and „negative impact".
*Source: Own processing using the NVivo software.*

Focusing on analyzing the direction of the relationship between financial intermediation and economic growth, we highlight **Figure 3**, which provides a graphical representation of the articles containing the codes „financial development causes economic growth" and „economic growth causes financial development".
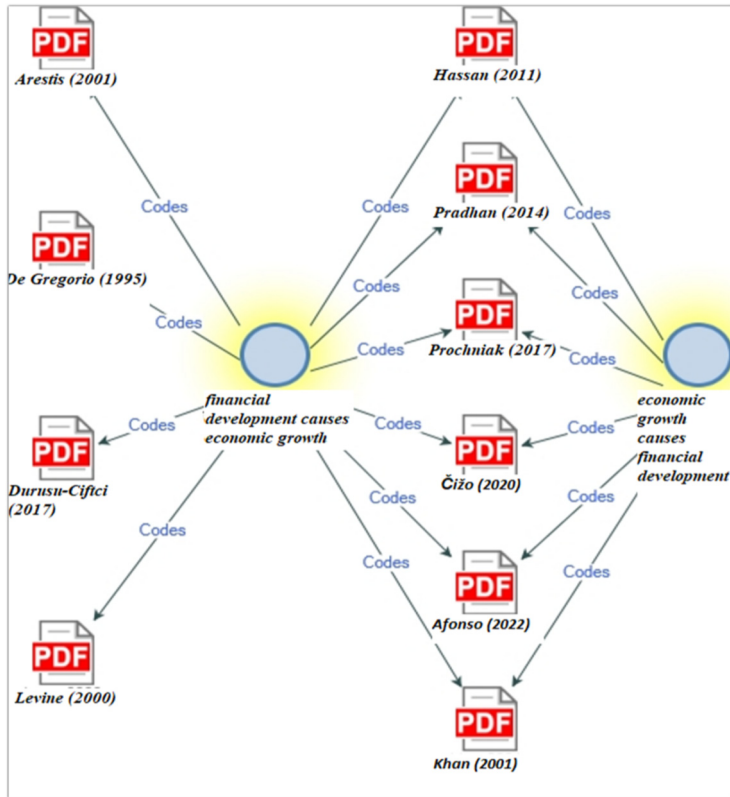
**Figure 3.** A graphic representation of the articles comprising the codes
„financial development causes economic growth" and
„economic growth causes financial development"
*Source: Own processing using the NVivo software.*

**Figure 3** reveals that the code „economic growth causes financial development" is present in six analysed articles, while the code „financial development causes economic growth" is emphasized in all ten articles. Therefore, we can conclude that the unidirectional meaning from financial development to economic growth carries more significant weight in the analysed text, corroborating the results revealed in previous paragraphs.

Considering the aspects detailed above, we can conclude that the specialized literature analysed underlines both the existence of a unidirectional impact from financial development to economic growth and the presence of the reverse link, unidirectional influence from economic growth to financial development. It is also worth noting that the bidirectional relationship is noted. However, the direction of influence from *financial development to economic growth is emphasized with greater weight*, as unanimously agreed upon by all the analysed articles.

**Conclusion**

The relationship between financial development and economic growth has been a subject of investigation for a considerable period and by an impressive number of studies, encompassing both theoretical and empirical approaches. Despite this extensive research, the conclusions drawn by researchers remain somewhat unclear, necessitating further inquiry. Moreover, the profound implications of recent international crises on both the financial system and the real economy have reignited researchers' interest in examining the relationship between financial development and economic growth.

In this context, our present study aims to analyze, using content analysis as a qualitative research method, both the direction of the link between financial development and economic growth and the significance of this relationship. To achieve these objectives, the work proceeded by selecting items for inclusion in the analysed sample, uploading them into the NVivo software, defining coding rules, conducting the actual coding, and reviewing the results.

Focusing on the first objective of investigating the sign of the link between financial development and economic growth through content analysis, it is worth noting that the results indicate that, although the items in the sample reflect both positive and negative impacts, the weight of the positive impact is substantially higher. Consequently, the studies predominantly reveal a positive impact of financial development on economic growth. These findings are reflected in both the analysis of the frequencies of the words „positive" and „negative" and the examination of the frequency and weighting of the „positive impact" and „negative impact" codes.

Regarding the second objective outlined in the present study, which involves investigating the direction of the link between financial development and economic growth through content analysis, we conclude that the direction of the relationship from financial development towards economic growth is evident in a greater number of articles and is raised more frequently compared to the reverse direction- from economic growth to financial development. Despite this, the examined articles also indicate the possibility of the existence of causality from the economic growth side towards financial development and a bidirectional relationship.

In summarizing our findings, we emphasize that our research has demonstrated that studies predominantly reveal a positive impact of financial development on economic growth. Furthermore, the study highlights that the direction of the relationship from financial development to economic growth is reflected in a greater number of articles and with higher frequency compared to the opposite direction-from economic growth to financial development.

The current analysis of the finance development-economic growth nexus literature has limitations and should be enhanced with future research efforts. It is worth mentioning that future literature reviews could expand the analysis to a larger number of articles. Additionally, future research could implement content

analysis to highlight the context in which the impact of financial development on economic growth would have a positive or negative connotation.

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# INNOVATION MANAGEMENT IN HUMAN RESOURCES: TRENDS IN CREATIVE PRACTICES. A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

## Oana GALBEN[1]

**Abstract.** Driven by rapid change and fierce global competition, organisations are embracing innovative human resource management (HRM). Through a comprehensive bibliometric study, this paper explores the evolution of creative and innovative HRM, identifying major trends, pivotal contributions, and emerging themes that impact the role of HRM in fostering creativity and innovation. The research reveals a notable integration of technology and data analytics into talent strategies, as well as a growing emphasis on agility. As globalisation and digital transformation intensify, it becomes increasingly important to strike a balance between conventional and innovative HR methods. In recent years, there has been significant growth in research focused on digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI), and talent-related innovation. The bibliometric analysis highlights how HRM practices are adapting to cultivate organisational agility and creativity within a dynamic technological environment. The findings provide valuable benchmarks for future research and practical applications, reinforcing the need for flexible, forward-thinking HR policies that champion innovation and reaffirming the overarching significance of creativity and innovation in modern HRM.

**Keywords:** human resources management, human resources, creativity, innovation, organizational culture

**Résumé** : Poussées par des changements rapides et une concurrence mondiale féroce, les organisations adoptent une gestion des ressources humaines (GRH) innovante. À travers une étude bibliométrique, cet article explore l'évolution d'une GRH créative et innovante, identifiant les principales tendances, les contributions essentielles et les thèmes émergents qui influencent son rôle dans la promotion de la créativité et de l'innovation. La recherche révèle une intégration notable des technologies et de l'analyse de données dans les stratégies de gestion des talents, ainsi qu'une importance croissante accordée à l'agilité. Face à l'intensification de la mondialisation et de la transformation numérique, il devient de plus en plus important de trouver un équilibre entre méthodes RH conventionnelles et innovantes. Ces dernières années, les recherches axées sur la transformation numérique, l'intelligence artificielle (IA) et l'innovation liée aux talents ont connu un essor significatif. L'analyse bibliométrique met en évidence l'adaptation des pratiques de GRH pour cultiver l'agilité et la créativité organisationnelle dans un environnement technologique dynamique. Les résultats fournissent des repères précieux pour les recherches futures et les applications pratiques, renforçant la nécessité de politiques RH flexibles et avant-gardistes qui favorisent

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l'innovation et réaffirmant l'importance primordiale de la créativité et de l'innovation dans la GRH moderne.

**Mots-clés** : gestion des ressources humaines, ressources humaines, créativité, innovation, culture organisationnelle

**Rezumat**. Impulsionate de schimbările rapide și de concurența globală acerbă, organizațiile adoptă un management inovator al resurselor umane (HRM). Printr-un studiu bibliometric, acest articol explorează evoluția HRM-ului creativ și inovator, identificând tendințele majore, contribuțiile esențiale și temele emergente care au impact asupra rolului HRM în promovarea creativității și inovării. Cercetarea relevă o integrare notabilă a tehnologiei și a analizei datelor în strategiile de gestionare a talentelor, precum și un accent tot mai mare pus pe agilitate. Pe măsură ce globalizarea și transformarea digitală se intensifică, devine din ce în ce mai important să se găsească un echilibru între metodele de resurse umane convenționale și cele inovatoare. În ultimii ani, s-a înregistrat o creștere semnificativă a cercetării axate pe transformarea digitală, inteligența artificială (IA) și inovația legată de talente. Analiza bibliometrică evidențiază modul în care practicile HRM se adaptează pentru a cultiva agilitatea și creativitatea organizațională într-un mediu tehnologic dinamic. Constatările oferă repere valoroase pentru cercetări viitoare și aplicații practice, consolidând necesitatea unor politici de resurse umane flexibile și orientate spre viitor, care să promoveze inovația și reafirmând importanța generală a creativității și inovării în HRM-ul modern.

**Cuvinte cheie**: managementul resurselor umane, resurse umane, creativitate, inovație, cultură organizațională

### Introduction

Organizations today face a real challenge in the management of their labor force which impacts on their capacity to retain competitive advantage in the labour market. Employees must not be seen as simply numbers or resources - they are human beings with passion, talent and creativity. If we lose sight of this fact, we lose any realistic hope of economic progress. Therefore, a topic as „Creative and Innovative Human Resource Management" is relevant and timely, and through a comprehensive research project, it can provide practical contributions to human capital management, offering concrete solutions for organizational environments aiming to enhance employee engagement and performance.

When the labor market changes so rapidly, organizations must be able to adapt and manage human capital in an agile manner. Re-engineering human resource management practices has to become the order of the day for companies looking to beat the competition and achieve long-term growth. Organizations are moving beyond traditional cost and performance criteria, turning to creativity and innovation in HR to ensure their success. The main issue we started with (based on long-term experience) is the lack of innovative and creative strategies in human resource management, even in multinational organizations that usually have the necessary resources. In many cases, human resource management remains rooted in traditional practices that are not aligned with the current needs of employees and the labor market. This can lead to decreased employee motivation, poor talent

retention, and ultimately, a lack of the desired level of performance set by the organization.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive and nuanced review of the current state of knowledge concerning creative and innovative approaches to human resource management. It will identify existing knowledge gaps and suggest areas for future research.

### Defining concepts

Human resource management (HRM) is an essential area of organizational practice that focuses on managing human capital within an organization. This concept refers to the processes by which an organisation attracts, develops, motivates and retains employees in order to create a favourable working environment and encourage performance. Human resource management covers a wide range of activities, including recruitment and selection, training and professional development, performance appraisal, labour relations management and compensation policy development. These strategies are essential for ensuring the organisation runs smoothly, directly impacting employee well-being, productivity and, ultimately, organisational success.

In a study analysing the factors that influence creativity in the organisational environment, including the social and cultural context, Amabile (1996) presents a model that emphasises the importance of organisational culture and climate in stimulating employee creativity. This is essential for innovation in human resource management. In other words, recruiters and human resource specialists face a dual challenge: they must be creative in their recruitment procedures and encourage creativity in their recruits. Therefore, let us see how we can define creativity in the context of human resources.

**Creativity** in human resource management (HR) refers to an organization's ability to generate original ideas and innovative solutions in managing human capital. This means more than just divergent thinking; it also means approaching employee challenges, internal processes, and development strategies in ways that improve employee performance and satisfaction. Here are some of the most relevant ways creativity can be integrated into HR practices:

a. **Innovative recruitment and selection strategies:** using unusual methods to attract talent, such as recruitment campaigns on unconventional platforms, online games or challenges, collaborations with influencers to promote jobs or recruitment on social media, and organizing interactive virtual events.

b. **Creating a stimulating and flexible working environment:** implementing flexible working policies (e.g., teleworking, flexible hours), creative workspaces, or unusual team-building activities that encourage collaboration, free thinking, and support work-life balance, contributing to increased employee satisfaction.

c.  **Individual professional development programs:** creating training and development programs tailored to the individual needs of employees, using interactive methods such as virtual simulations, educational games, or reverse mentoring, which support collaborative learning and the use of modern technologies.

d.  **Innovative recognition and reward policies:** developing new and personalized ways to recognize employee achievements, such as experience-based reward programs (e.g., extra days off, unique experiences) and real-time feedback, so that employees feel appreciated and motivated.

e.  **Innovative assessment systems:** creating performance assessment models based on continuous feedback and employee recognition through creative methods, using gamification platforms to motivate teams and improve assessment efficiency.

f.  **Managing organizational change:** creatively approaching change by involving employees in the transformation process, using participatory and interactive techniques to reduce resistance to change and increase commitment.

g.  **Promoting diversity and inclusion:** implementing creative initiatives that support cultural, gender, and thought diversity, and that value the unique perspectives of each employee, contributing to the formation of an inclusive and dynamic organizational culture.

Creativity in human resource management goes beyond simply coming up with new ideas. It involves breaking away from traditional methods and trying something new to inspire innovation, cooperation and increased employee output.

The renowned author, Armstrong (2014), discusses innovation as a key component of human resource management strategy. In his work, he explains how HR can use modern technology and methods to enhance recruitment, performance evaluation and professional development processes. For instance, he discusses the use of data analytics and digital platforms to attract talent and customise development programmes. He also suggests ways to implement innovative HR strategies, such as assessing employee, training and development needs. Armstrong's work significantly contributes to our understanding of the role of creativity and innovation in HR, emphasising that these aspects improve organisational performance and support the development of an adaptable and innovative culture, essential for long-term organisational success.

**Innovation** in human resource management (HRM) can be defined as the process of developing and implementing new and effective practices, technologies, and strategies that improve talent management, work processes, and organizational culture. It focuses on introducing fundamental changes that bring tangible benefits to both employees and the organization. Key Aspects of HR Innovation:

a. **Advanced HR technologies:** implementation of technological solutions such as artificial intelligence for talent recruitment, automation of human resources processes, and the utilization of data-driven performance management platforms such as predictive analytics tools for talent management.

b. **Innovative recruitment and selection processes:** introducing new ways of identifying and attracting talent, including the use of video interviews, competency-based assessments, and games and simulations to test candidates' skills.

c. **Employee experience:** developing innovative programs that enhance the employee experience, including personalized onboarding, tailored benefits packages, and fostering an organizational culture that promotes flexibility and diversity.

d. **Training and professional development:** developing continuous and adaptive learning programs using technologies such as microlearning, interactive online learning, and reverse mentoring to ensure that employees' skills develop at the pace of technological and economic change.

e. **Flexible working policies:** the way work is organized can be adapted to facilitate remote working, flexible working schedules, and coworking spaces that meet the current needs of employees and contribute to a better work-life balance.

f. **Managing organizational change and transitions:** introducing innovative ways to manage change within organizations, including the use of agile methodologies in HR, managing transition with personalized coaching, and involving employees in the decision-making process.

Creativity and innovation in human resource management are distinct yet interconnected concepts. Creativity involves generating new and original ideas in human capital management, encouraging free thinking and non-traditional approaches. Innovation, on the other hand, involves turning these ideas into effective practices and strategies that improve HR processes and organisational culture. While creativity can generate innovative solutions, it is innovation that turns these solutions into reality, directly impacting the organisation's performance. Together, creativity and innovation create an adaptable and dynamic work environment that can respond to employee needs and support the organisation's sustainable development.

**Creativity and innovation in human resources.**
**Bibliographic references**

Several sources of literature highlight the importance of innovation and creativity in human resource management as key factors in organisational success.

In addition to the aforementioned (Amabile and Armstrong), Rainey, Fernandez and Malatesta (2021) analyse the importance of innovation in HR

strategy and the integration of creative skills into employee professional development. Creative management in HR is presented as a solution to address the challenges of modern organizations. Other authors [Ulrich & Dulebohn (2015)] provide a detailed analysis of the evolution of the role of HR in organizations and the need to adopt innovative methods. The authors emphasize that HR must become a strategic player, integrating innovation into human resource development to support organizational performance. Starting from the idea of the link between human resource management and employee engagement, Guest (2017) emphasized the importance of implementing innovative HR practices to increase employee engagement, a crucial aspect for creative and innovative management.

An important aspect of creativity analysis in HR relates to comparative analyses of HR practices in different cultures. It is already well established that HR strategies are clearly contextual, requiring adaptation to the local context (especially in the case of companies with geographically dispersed divisions). Thus, Hofstede (2018) and Brewster, Chung & Sparrow (2016) analysed the issue of adapting HR strategies to different organizational cultures, emphasizing innovation as a central element in human capital management in international markets.

Another study I would like to mention here refers to how innovative HR strategies, such as providing continuous feedback and personal development planning, can improve employee engagement and organizational performance (Alfes *et al.*, 2013).

The authors pose a challenge: what is the role of MRU in influencing employee behaviour? The study concluded that organizations that cultivate a climate of reciprocity will have positive results in terms of employee attitudes and behaviours. However, the authors' warning is firm: employees take into account their experiences in the field of MRU, to which they add the organizational environment and their daily lives. Only by understanding these things can managers and HR specialists act holistically. In this context, much research is focused on identifying those practices that can lead to increased organizational performance.

An important source of information comes from Patricia Buhler's research (2015), according to which we must use our own creativity in the HR profession, but also be aware of the limits of this process. When we talk about creativity, the first thought is that in any human resource management issue, says Buhler, there are always several possible solutions, and choosing the right one would highlight our creativity. Beyond these clarifications, we should ask ourselves a series of questions to decide whether we are creative in terms of human resource management: Are we able to push the limits or boundaries? Are we open-minded and adaptable to change? Do we take risks? Can we overcome fear? The author adds: „Our ability to innovate affects the performance of our organizations, regardless of company or industry. A survey found that 98% of respondents said innovation is either important or very important to their company's future success.

Furthermore, those companies that are open to change and focus on innovation tend to be market leaders" (p. 3).

There are also some novel perspectives on the subject. Zhou & George (2001) show that work dissatisfaction can lead to creativity among employees in general, including human resources specialists. This is a sign, say the authors, that employees are not giving up and want to remain in the organisation/company. These employees need to perceive that their creative performance has the potential to be effective. In this context, organisational support must be consistent and visible.

We also have Romanian authors who have written on the topic of creativity and innovation in HR and who highlight modern HR strategies that facilitate the development of a stimulating and adaptable work environment. Popescu (2007), for example, examines essential aspects of HR, including recruitment, selection, and performance evaluation strategies. He pays special attention to creativity and innovation in HR processes, emphasizing that successful organizations must take a proactive approach to talent management. He argues that investing in the development of employees' creative skills not only improves productivity but also contributes to the creation of a positive and stimulating work environment, which is essential for adapting to contemporary challenges.

In his work, Păcurar (2012) analyses the impact of innovation on human capital management. He discusses recruitment, selection, training and professional development processes, as well as how organisations can use creativity in HR processes to improve their internal structures and respond to market challenges. He believes that HR should not be limited to administrative activities, but should become a strategic partner within organisations, focusing on developing human capital as a valuable competitive resource.

Popescu (2011) also points out the importance of creative and innovative practices in effective human resource management. He argues that, in a competitive environment, organizations need to adopt innovative HR strategies that support the continuous development of employees and promote a stimulating work environment. He highlights that creativity not only improves the recruitment and selection process but also facilitates rapid adaptation to market changes. By implementing innovative methods such as real-time feedback and personalised training programmes, organisations can maximise their employees' potential, thereby contributing to the company's overall success.

Facing contemporary challenges such as digitization and rapid market changes, organizations are forced to rethink their human resource management practices to remain competitive. Creativity and innovation are becoming important not only for attracting and retaining talent, but also for building an organizational culture that promotes employee engagement and satisfaction. Therefore, according to the literature, human resource management must constantly evolve to reflect the needs of both companies and employees in order to contribute to the long-term success of organizations.

### Methodology – Bibliometric analysis

In order to identify developments, thematic trends, and relevant scientific contributions in the field of creative and innovative human resource management, we conducted a bibliometric analysis to provide a solid and contextualized foundation for the research presented in this thesis.

The methodological approach is based on the use of *R-Studio Bibliometrix* bibliometric software and the results of a search in the *SCOPUS* international database, where we selected articles in the field of human resource management, creativity, and innovation from the last ten years, i.e., 2015-2025. This resulted in 67 documents (articles, papers presented at scientific conferences, etc.) that were analysed, allowing us to observe the evolution of creative and innovative human resource management between 2015-2025 from the following perspectives: *thematic evolution*, cluster analysis based on two concepts: centrality and density (Callon *et al.*, 1991), *co-occurrence network*, an approach that facilitates the understanding and visualization of the structure of different text elements and their content (Puerta *et al.*, 2020) *and thematic maps*, which are a spatial representation of the relationships between disciplines, fields, and documents or authors.
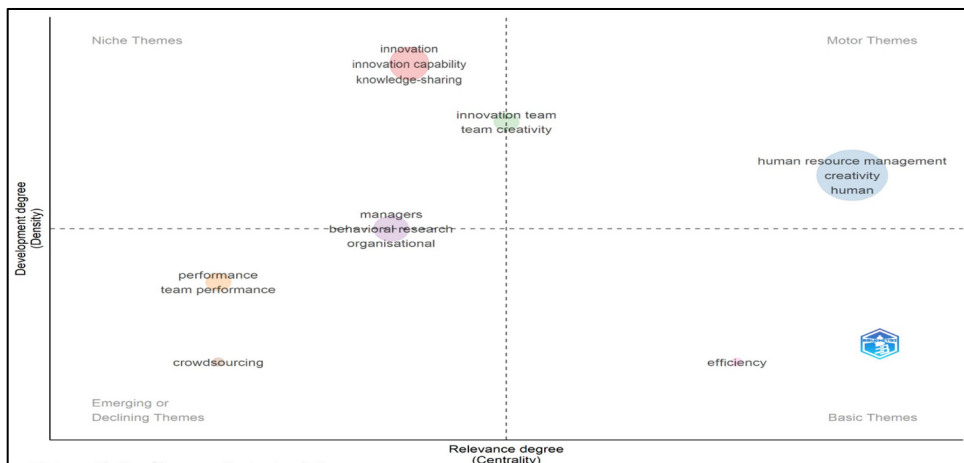


**Figure 1.** Thematic map – strategic diagram
Own processing of source authors in R-Stata Bibliometrix

This image in Figure 1 represents a thematic map, a strategic diagram that serves to highlight the structure and evolution of research topics in a particular field, in this case, creative and innovative human resource management. The map is divided into four quadrants, based on two dimensions: the *X-axis (horizontal)*, which represents the degree of relevance or centrality (themes further to the right are better connected to other themes, and therefore more central to the field) and the *Y-axis (vertical)*, which represents the degree of development or density (the themes above are better developed internally).

*Quadrant 1* (top right) – Motor Themes. These are central and well-developed themes that drive research in the field, and our identified themes are: human resource management, creativity, and human resources. These are essential to my research topic, creative and innovative human resource management, and are well represented in the literature. The keywords confirm the importance of creativity in HR and can form the backbone of the literature to be reviewed.

*Quadrant 2* (top left) – Niche Topics. Well-developed topics but less connected to the rest of the field: innovation, innovation capacity, and knowledge sharing. These are deeply developed but niche topics. They can add value through a specific approach, such as studying innovation capability or knowledge sharing in HR teams. Useful, for example, for exploring more sophisticated perspectives within the thesis.

*Transition zone* (top center). Developed themes, but with medium centrality: innovation team, creativity in teams. They are relevant to the theme and show the current direction of research on creativity in innovation teams. These could become driving themes in the future, so they deserve special attention.

*Quadrant 3* (bottom left) – Emerging or declining topics. Weakly developed and marginal topics: crowdsourcing, team performance, and performance. These may be either declining themes or emerging topics that have not yet been thoroughly studied. Crowdsourcing may be relevant in the context of digital and innovative HR, but it requires solid reasoning to be relevant to the research topic.

*Quadrant 4* (bottom right) – Basic themes. Central themes, but poorly developed: efficiency. This is a central theme in HR and management, but relatively little is addressed in relation to creativity and innovation. It may constitute an interesting research niche, for example: how is efficiency maintained in innovative teams?

In conclusion, the central themes of my research are creativity, human resource management, and innovation, for which I propose to explore the connections between them to build a solid theoretical basis. Complementary and emerging themes: innovation capacity, knowledge sharing, and team creativity can represent and bring elements of originality to the research, based on which hypotheses can be built regarding team dynamics and the impact of innovative management on creative performance, for example. And the underrepresented themes, crowdsourcing and efficiency, can be mentioned, but only with clear reasoning and contextualization.

This second image represents a co-occurrence map of keywords, frequently used in bibliometric analysis to highlight thematic relationships between concepts in the literature. *The nodes* (words) are connected by links that indicate the frequency with which they appear together in scientific articles. *The size of the nodes* indicates the frequency with which the term appears in the analysed literature. *The color of the clusters* indicates cohesive thematic groups (topics that are researched together). *The thickness of the lines* represents the strength of the association between terms (their frequent co-occurrence).
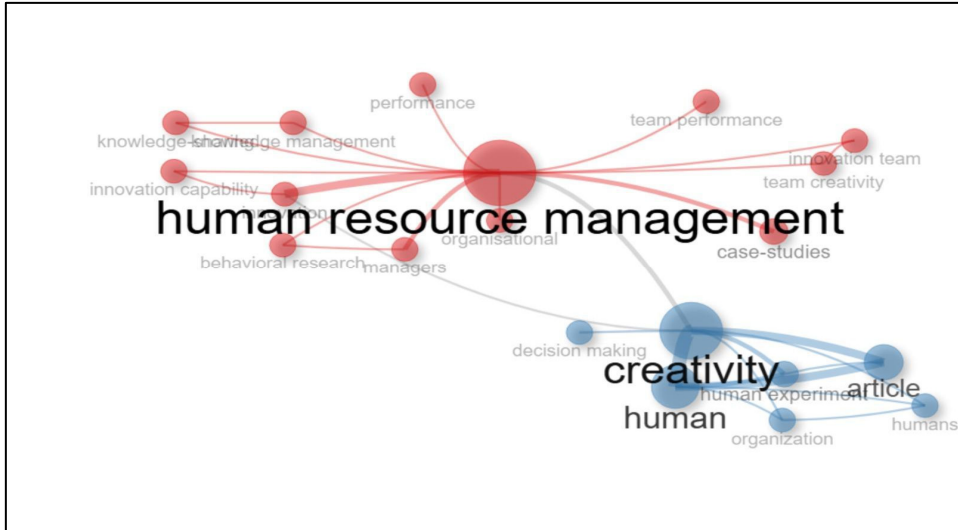
**Figure 2.** Co-occurrence map of keywords
Own processing of source authors in R-Stata Bibliometrix

*The red cluster* focuses on human resource management, with the following key nodes: HRM (central and dominant), performance, knowledge management, innovation capacity, team creativity, innovation team, organizational, behavioural research, and managers. This cluster reflects the practical and applied side of human resource management research. Major themes associated with HRM include: team performance, innovation capacity, knowledge exchange and management, creative teams, and case studies. This cluster captures the relevance of research through solid empirical support for how creativity and innovation fit into HRM. It shows how these concepts are integrated into organizational, behavioural, and performance management studies.

*The blue cluster* focuses on creativity and human resources, with the following key nodes: creativity, human resources, decision-making, article, and organization. This cluster indicates a more theoretical approach and a psychological perspective on creativity in an organizational context: human creativity and decision-making, organization, and scientific studies. It supports the integration of cognitive and experimental perspectives in research on employee creativity or HR teams. This approach can form part of the theoretical framework of the topic, possibly in contrast to the practical approach in the red cluster.

There are clear connections between human resource management and creativity, as evidenced by the fact that literature frequently links these two topics, thus providing a solid theoretical basis for the research topic. The term human resource appears as a pivotal node between the two worlds (practical and theoretical), emphasizing the importance of human resources as a connecting point. Areas for further exploration: we can investigate how human resource

management supports the development of creativity through knowledge sharing, innovative teams, creative leadership, etc.
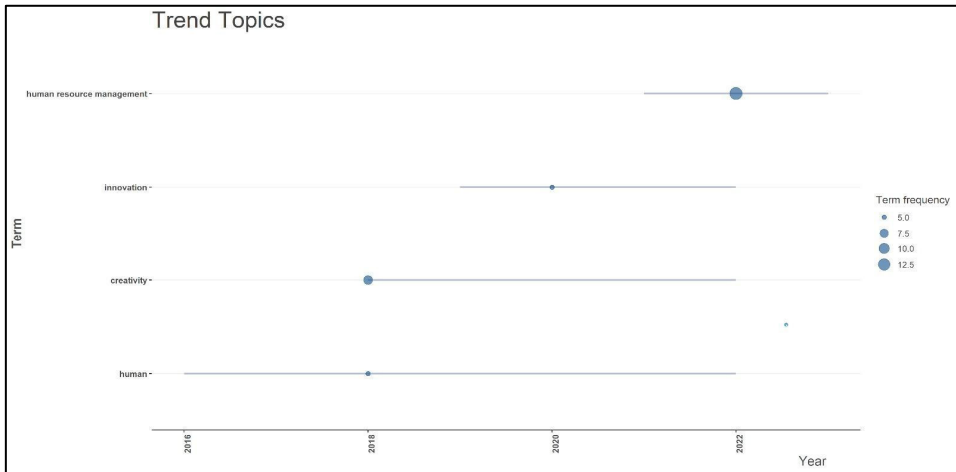


**Figure 3**. Map with temporal trends of keywords
Own processing of source authors in R-Stata Bibliometrix

This image, from Figure 3, represents an analysis of temporal trends in key terms in scientific literature. It is a temporal map showing the evolution of researchers' interest in concepts relevant to research topics, in this case, creative and innovative human resource management.

*The X-axis* indicates the years of publication, i.e., the selected period, 2015–2025, and on *the Y-axis*, we find the analysed keywords: human resource management, innovation, creativity, and human resources. *The size of the bubble* represents the frequency of the term's appearance in academic literature, and *the length of the horizontal line* represents the time period during which the term was present in the literature.

For the keyword *HRM*, the active period is predominantly between 2020–2023, with a high frequency, it is the term with the largest bubble → the most frequently used theme in the analysed corpus. HRM is a topical and growing subject in recent years. Its relevance to innovation and creativity in contemporary management is confirmed by this upward trend, supporting the choice of this concept as the theoretical core of the thesis.

*Innovation,* active period, 2019–2023, with average frequency, the bubble is smaller, but the term is stable over time, being a consistent and emerging theme in literature. It appears mainly in connection with HRM, performance management, and creativity, thus supporting the integration of innovation as a central component of modern human resource management.

*Creativity,* active period 2017–2022, with good frequency, was very present in the period 2018–2021. It was a topic of great interest, but has been declining slightly in recent years. This may indicate saturation or integration into broader

themes such as HRM or innovation. For the research theme, this supports the positioning of creativity as a variable mediated/moderated by HRM or as a driver of innovation.

*Human resources,* active since 2016, with low but persistent frequency.

A generic term used in broad contexts, it is not a main theme in itself, but serves as a supporting term for other concepts, for example: human behaviour, human capital, and human creativity.

The graph shows that all key research concepts are bibliometrically validated, meaning they are terms that appear multiple times in recent literature. Human resource management is the most prominent and current topic. Creativity and innovation are connected to HRM, but must be approached dynamically: creativity as a precursor to innovation, and HRM as a facilitator of both.
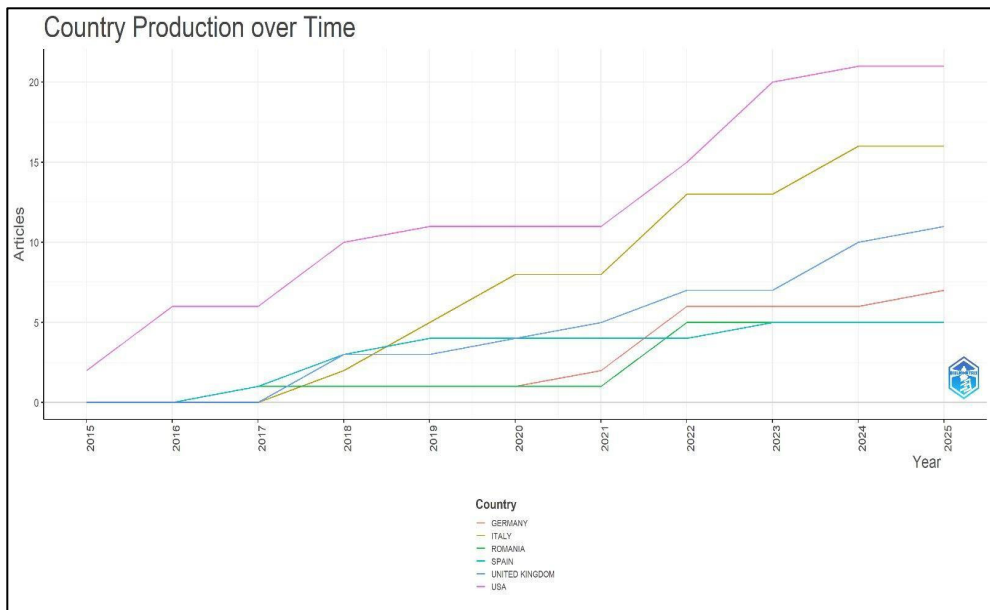


**Figure 4.** Time series chart of scientific output by country
Own processing of source authors in R-Stata Bibliometrics

The graph above shows that the US and Italy are leaders in scientific production on creative and innovative human resource management, with steady growth in recent years, while Romania has had an emerging but stable presence since 2017.

The *conclusion* of the bibliometric analysis highlights a significant increase in academic interest in the topics of human resource management, innovation, and creativity, reflecting the growing interdependence between human resource management practices and the stimulation of creativity in organizations. There is also a dominant scientific contribution from the United States and European countries such as Italy and the United Kingdom, confirming the global and dynamic

nature of research in this field, which validates the relevance and timeliness of the topic addressed in the thesis.

### Research Gaps and Future Directions

To improve understanding of creative and innovative human resource management (HRM), this study identifies several significant research gaps requiring further academic investigation.

*Contextualized HRM strategies:* there is a significant lack of understanding regarding how HRM strategies can be adapted to suit different cultural and economic environments. Future research should consider the complexities of implementing creative HRM approaches in emerging markets such as Romania, bearing in mind the unique challenges and opportunities that these settings present.

The *impact of digitalisation and AI* on employee creativity remains underexplored. Further research is required to determine how technological advancements can be integrated into HR processes to encourage innovation while maintaining a human-centred work environment.

*Employee-level dimensions of creativity:* In order to identify the factors that encourage or inhibit innovative thinking, it is necessary to investigate the specific dimensions of employee creativity. This knowledge is essential for formulating strategies that enhance creativity among employees.

*Measuring the impact of creative HRM*: there is an urgent need for more rigorous methodologies with which to assess the impact of creative HRM on organisational performance. Future research should focus on developing metrics that can capture the tangible outcomes of these practices, such as increased employee engagement, improved talent retention and greater organisational innovation.

*The role of leadership:* although transformational leadership is known to influence the adoption of creative human resource management (HRM) strategies, there is a lack of empirical research addressing how these leadership styles can effectively implement such strategies. Therefore, in-depth studies are required to understand the role of leadership in promoting creative HRM in the unique cultural and economic context of Romania.

In conclusion, this research has the potential to significantly contribute to the field of human resource management by providing a foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between creativity, innovation and talent management. The study aims to bridge existing gaps and enrich the theoretical frameworks and practical applications of creative HRM practices in diverse organizational settings by formulating recommendations for future research.

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# SOCIAL VALUES – CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ROMANIAN-AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS' WEBSITES

## Luciana ANASTASOAIE[1]

**Abstract**. Diaspora communities are formed based on various interests, such as economic, religious, or ethnic interests, and they play a role in providing support and assistance to newcomers. They facilitate integration and assimilation and help to redefine identity. However, communication with those in their countries of origin is both necessary for emigrants and facilitated by new technologies.

The paper below presents an analysis of research carried out within a doctoral programme on 'The dynamics of social values in Romanian communities in the United States of America'. Social values indicated in online communities were tracked using Rezohazy, Roshon, and Boudon's approaches to social values, and Massey's unified theory of migration. This qualitative, online research exclusively focuses on diaspora community websites and tracks the social values indicated in their missions, declared values, and announced activities. The analysis indicates the presence of values that support the development of both the host society and the place of origin, suggesting the formation of balanced social ties.

**Keywords**: Social values, Diaspora, Communities, Relationships, Websites

**Résumé** : Les communautés de la diaspora se forment autour d'intérêts divers, notamment économiques, religieux ou ethniques, et jouent un rôle de soutien et d'assistance aux nouveaux arrivants. Elles facilitent l'intégration et l'assimilation et contribuent à la redéfinition identitaire. Cependant, la communication avec les personnes de leur pays d'origine est à la fois nécessaire pour les émigrants et facilitée par les nouvelles technologies.

L'article ci-dessous présente une analyse d'une recherche menée dans le cadre d'un programme doctoral sur « La dynamique des valeurs sociales dans les communautés roumaines aux États-Unis ». Les valeurs sociales exprimées dans les communautés en ligne ont été analysées à l'aide des approches des valeurs sociales de Rezohazy, Roshon et Boudon, ainsi que de la théorie unifiée de la migration de Massey. Cette recherche qualitative en ligne se concentre exclusivement sur les sites web des communautés de la diaspora et analyse les valeurs sociales exprimées dans leurs missions, leurs valeurs déclarées et leurs activités annoncées. L'analyse révèle la présence de valeurs qui soutiennent le développement de la société d'accueil et du pays d'origine, suggérant la formation de liens sociaux équilibrés.

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**Rezumat**. Comunitățile din diaspora se formează pe baza unor interese diverse, precum cele economice, religioase sau etnice, și joacă un rol în oferirea de sprijin și asistență noilor veniți. Acestea facilitează integrarea și asimilarea și ajută la redefinirea identității. Cu toate acestea, comunicarea cu cei din țările lor de origine este atât necesară pentru emigranți, cât și facilitată de noile tehnologii. Lucrarea de mai jos prezintă o analiză a cercetării efectuate în cadrul unui program de doctorat despre „Dinamica valorilor sociale în comunitățile românești din Statele Unite ale Americii". Valorile sociale indicate în comunitățile online au fost urmărite folosind abordările lui Rezohazy, Roshon și Boudon asupra valorilor sociale și teoria unificată a migrației a lui Massey. Această cercetare calitativă, online, se concentrează exclusiv pe site-urile web ale comunităților din diaspora și urmărește valorile sociale indicate în misiunile, valorile declarate și activitățile anunțate ale acestora. Analiza indică prezența valorilor care susțin dezvoltarea atât a societății gazdă, cât și a locului de origine, sugerând formarea unor legături sociale echilibrate.

## 1. Introduction

The theme of the proposed analysis for this paper is the Analysis of the dynamics of social values in Romanian communities in the United States of America. This section includes the analysis conducted on the websites of Romanian-American Organizations registered on the Romanian Embassy's website in the USA (Romanian Community - Romanian-American Organizations in the USA) between 2023 and 2024.

The phenomenon of migration offers the context for tracking the change of values , but also for understanding the dynamics of social values between distinct cultural spaces as a need for adaptation and/or change. By studying the social values pursued in the Romanian emigrant communities in the United States of America, we can observe more clearly the mechanisms of change of social values and what happens to individual and social values when the economic and socio-cultural context changes, especially since it takes place in a fairly short period of time. Thus, „the culture carried by emigrants is set in motion" (Rochon, 1998), experiencing several stages of transition towards assimilation, change and stabilization in less than one generation (approx. 30 years).

## 2. Theoretical framework

In the study of social values, I have found several approaches and paradigms that complement each other in relation to the dynamics of social values. I will mention three of the directions of analysis that I consider the most relevant for the analysis of social value change, and that complement each other and help us understand the mechanism of dynamics, especially in migration

First of all, Rezsohazy (2008) helps us to understand the causes of change given by problems/crises, which is followed by the illustration of change from the „weight of arguments" and the purpose of action in Boudon's *transformational*

*values theory* (2013) offers us a direction of analysis from philosophy to pragmatism. Second, by following the functional aspects that are specific to the postmodern value change analysts, Inglehart (2016) and Rochon (1998), we can see how changes come from the socialization of individuals and the experience of being exposed to new and different ideas.

The analysis also has a third perspective that follows the values from the perspective of the *unified theory of migration* proposed by Massey *et al.* (1993). This supports the empirical testing of the characteristics of the international migration phenomenon by following the indicators: previously formed relationships, the use of common languages, the development of trade relations, and transport and (tele)communication networks" (Massey *et al.*, 1993, Haruța, 2018).

Rochon (1998) is the one who offers an understanding of the process of changing values in the event of a problem or crisis and propagates from the community level to the institutions as a need for change (see Figure 1). Following the migrant communities from this perspective, the change in social values propagates from the level of cultural evaluation standards through the dialectic between „surviving" and „thriving" to problematize continuity, remodelling, and adaptation at the identity level.

This stage of problematization actually includes the construction and formulation of new arguments regarding the fundamental values and necessary actions referred to in Raymond Boudon's *transformational values theory*. Thus, immigrants from the United States of America are challenged to (re)evaluate their own culture as the only resource through which they can ensure its continuity, but also to promote its unique aspects that define and support it. Change at the social level occurs from the socialization of individuals and the experience of their exposure to new and different ideas, which leads to changes not only in the ideas, perceptions, or beliefs of a single individual but also influences the change of values within the community of which they are a part at the social level (Rochon, 1998).

On the other hand, Reszohazy (2008) argues that radical changes in values occur especially when, at the level of society, there are: „disruptions, imbalances, disorientation, impasses, despair, feelings of injustice, suffering, dissatisfaction, frustration" (p. 33). Thus, the value system goes through several phases, showing its ability to define the problem and suggest solutions. The dynamics of values are given by the level of coverage of the network of values, namely:

a) the way of thinking, feelings, reasonings vs. reality that forms the „security of cultural identity";

b) the ability to understand the situation and conceive a project by „constraining, diminishing or eliminating values;

c) the recomposition through which new values are integrated either forcibly or through re-signification so that they correspond to intimate aspirations (p. 36-38).

Reszohazy's perspective (2008, p. 72) helps us in the online analysis of associations to track through the analysis grid what the declared values are, who the value revealers and who the actors involved are to understand the context and

the network of Values. It also shows us how to track the ability to define the problem and suggest solutions from the discussions and problematizations presented on the websites. In addition, Rozhon's perspective helps us understand the process of changing values and how it propagates from the community level through these institutions as a need for change towards both countries, the one of origin and the one of destination. Thus, from the values declared by the Romanian-American associations and organizations, the declared goals and missions that seek to solve existing problems, and the concerns from the events presented on the websites show us indicators that reveal the dynamics of values.
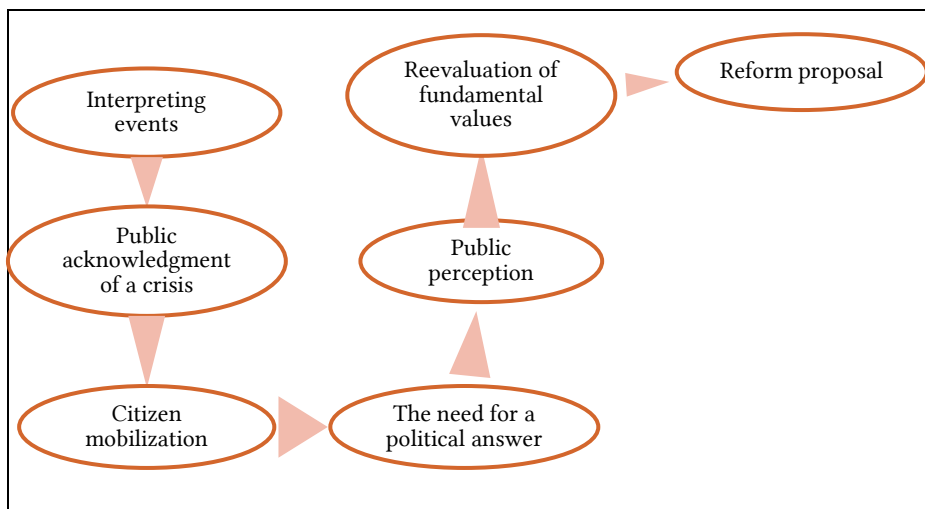


**Figure 1**. Stages of a change in mentalities and laws according to Rochon's model of societal needs
Apud Rochon, T. R. (1998). *Culture Moves. Ideas, Activism, and Changing Values.* Princeton University Press.

### 3. Objectives and questions of the study

The present study, conducted on the online websites of Romanian emigrants in the United States of America, aimed to answer the following questions:

− What are the dynamics of the values of emigrants who are part of the Romanian-American associations and organizations studied?

− What are the characteristics of this dynamic?

− Which values are preserved, re-signified, and/or radically changed, and in what way?

To outline their value profile, I aimed to identify the central values shared by the members of the communities; highlight the specifics of the communities in the dynamics given by immigration and the relationship with the host country; evaluate the level at which the value profile of the communities relates to the need

for change and highlight the dynamics of values between the values preserved vs. borrowed from the communities.

## 4. Method

Accessing online sources was done starting with 2020 to 2025. A first stage was for information on communities (2020) and for contact details (2020-2022). The second stage, between 2021-2023, was to extract data related to Romanian-American associations and organizations and analyse the values promoted and the activities presented. In 2024 and 2025, we re-accessed online sources to make a final review of the data. Of the over 70 Romanian-American associations and organizations that appear on the website of the Romanian Embassy in the United States of America, we accessed and analysed between 2020 and 2023, 47 of them because they had an active web page and/or a Facebook page. From the date of initial access for analysis (2022) until the review stage in 2024, we found eight websites that were not functioning, and another 15 that did not have links to the web pages registered on the Embassy website. We also found content on one online page that no longer belonged to the association registered on the embassy website.

The analysis carried out on the websites of Romanian-American Associations and organizations does not include the websites of churches that entered the qualitative analysis through interviews. The delimitation was necessary to be able to follow the concerns of those who are part of organizations other than religious ones, but also to compare the two perspectives. Online sources have many shortcomings to be able to carry out a complete analysis, but we found interesting information from which we were able to make a qualitative analysis that, over a longer period of time, can complement the quantitative data from the World Value Survey and European Value Survey.

## 5. Data analysis

The dynamics of social values were followed from the content analysis of the information present on the website during the period 2020-2024 by extracting the values, categorizing them, and comparing those declared with those indicated in the concerns of the promoted events. A first stage of identifying social values from the information found on the site was done by extracting from the purpose and mission statements of the association/organization, but also from the values of the association/organization declared, which were organized into categories and subcategories. The next stage followed the events announced on the websites in the period 2020-2023, from which the frequency of the themes present, but also the actions that supported a declared social value, could be seen. Last but not least, from the pictures appearing as avatars on the websites, the symbols used and their correlation with the declared goals could be identified.

The analysis of qualitative data started from the content analysis of the information as text, pictures, and titles by applying a series of questions, grid type:

– What are the named values?
– What are the revealers and/or indicators of values?
– Who are the actors involved?
– Are there revealers of hierarchy intensity? What are they?
– What is the place of values within the purpose, mission, and events?

We also followed the values of the frequency of the themes announced in the purpose and mission statements, from which they indicated the needs, function, and role of the values expressed and supported. We subsequently proposed a comparison between the declared social values, the values reflected in the purpose and mission of the associations and organizations, the themes of the events, and the symbols appearing in the avatar pictures, the pictures through content analysis – what are the elements that were repeated? We established the connection with the declared values from the action verbs, the event titles, and the names of the associations.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Identification of social values from the information found on the site

If for respondents from religious communities the Romanian language was one of the first values mentioned as important for them, at an individual level, on the websites of Romanian-American associations and organizations, the language in which the information is presented is predominantly English.

### 1.a) Language

The language used in these online sources monitored is in more than half of them in English (27 of the websites), only 5 in Romanian, and another 15 in Romanian and English out of the 47 active and analysed websites. The usual use of the language in an association or organization can indicate directions regarding the level of integration and assimilation of the community in the host culture. Those who use only the language of the country of origin can be understood as those who are poorly assimilated, or a young community that does not yet consider it necessary to frequently use the mother tongue in the ethnic associations to which they belong. These communities are much more culturally linked to the country of origin, which offers them identity security. On the other hand, the orientation towards the host country is indicated by the frequent use of the language of the country they are in, and indicates a need for alignment with the new context. In this case, the need for identity security and support is given by the cultural aspects of the country of origin promoted in the events.

A third of the monitored websites use both languages (Ro+Engl), which indicates an intermediate stage of assimilation but also an orientation towards both the country of origin and the host country. This shows the importance of the double link, both between cultures and partnerships between the two countries at the economic and political levels. Also, the orientation on the one hand towards

conservation and on the other hand towards innovation (orientations that seem to be opposed in the classical paradigm), are visible in the purpose and mission of these associations (see Table 1). These clarify the fact that it is a specificity of the host country, of the „American Dream", through which the pursuit of economic and social well-being, the evolution of society and man is done using both resources tested in the cultures of origin, as well as the motivation for innovation and the curiosity to make the world a better place.

### 1.b) Avatars and symbols

The display of the combination of Romanian and American flags in the most creative ways on the websites of associations and organizations shows the interpenetration of both symbols and the attachment of emigrants to both countries. These are implicit values representative of the two nations through which their new identity is built and are maintained by emigrants through values that complement each other in both American and Romanian culture (cultural and economic, identity and material). The marking of the combination of the two cultures is also found in the symbols that previously delimited the nations, but which now show us the re-signification of national values or the construction of a new identity from the combination of the previous ones, which could be from the need for balance, but also from the desire for evolution.

### 1.c) Year declared by the foundation

In most cases, the year of foundation of the foundation or association does not correspond to the year in which its website was created. However, the declared data regarding the year of foundation of Romanian-American organizations indicates a dynamic of the online appearances of those organizations that have an affinity and alignment with the new technology. The new generations of emigrants use the new technology more to be visible in the online environment. Quantitatively, after the year of founding, the situation is as shown in the following graphic:
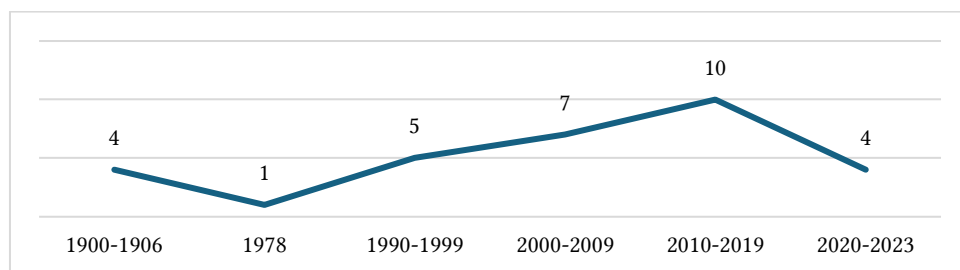


**Figure 2**. Variation in the number of Romanian-American associations/organizations by year of foundation (declared on the website)

### 6.2. Declared values

The organization into categories of the values appearing in the *Values* section of the Romanian-American organization on the monitored websites

highlighted four important aspects for the lives of emigrants: identity, material situation, humanitarian support, and the need for knowledge. These are part of the central values of the analysed emigrant communities.

**Table 1**. Categories of declared values of the associations/organizations analysed

| Top | Declared Values of the Associations | Number |
|-----|-------------------------------------|--------|
| 1 | Culture & Heritage | 26 |
| 2 | Economic | 23 |
| 3 | Support & Humanitarian Aid | 22 |
| 4 | Education & information | 16 |

## 6.3. Value indicators from goals and missions

From the 132 value indicators resulting from the analysis of the Goals and missions of the analysed Associations and Organizations, eight categories emerged that follow important aspects for the community: Support, Cultural Identity, Creating Connections, Promotion, Business Partnerships, The Need for Change, Community, and Emigrant. These categories of values indicated in the Goals and Missions of the organizations maintain the same area of interest that is also found in their declared values, thus indicating at least a declarative coherence visible on the websites.
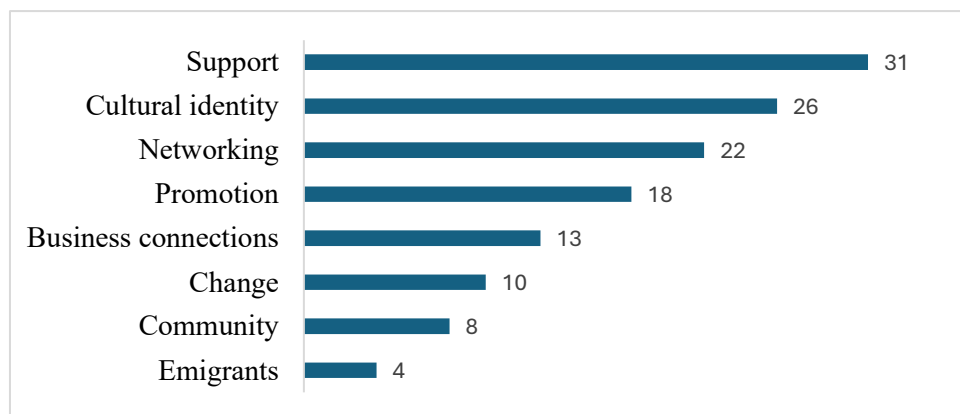


**Figure 3**. Categories of social values resulting from the analysis of the goals and missions of Romanian-American Organizations and Associations (132 value indicators)

We will detail the categories shown in the graph above:

*Support.* Financial, medical, social, educational, cultural, and professional support through mentoring and religious support are found in organizations as mission and purpose statements. All these statements express to us the humanitarian value as a fundamental value within the communities in which these organizations and associations have developed. It also indicates to us that their manifestation comes from a recognized need, which requires mobilization and actions that would balance both the lives of those targeted and the extended ethnic

community of which they are part. The assumption of humanitarian support by the associations gives us indications about the position of the individual and the community, from survival to evolution and progress.

*Cultural identity*. Social values related to cultural identity encountered in the goals and missions are part of the values in the category of preserving and transmitting as a need in preserving and protecting identity. The role of the cultural aspects presented are identified from the words: „preservation", „conservation", „maintenance", „perpetuation", „promotion", „support", „affirmation", „education of young generations", „history research" along with „tradition", „national culture", „history", „language" and indicate the mechanism for preserving values that concern both the individual and the social. These are not seen as fixed, static or frozen values but are reference values (azimuth), seen as essential in identity security, which offer uniqueness, individuality, and recognition in a multiethnic context. Thus, values, often understood as conservative, for members of Romanian-American associations, have an „inspirational" role in the new context and have an „influential" presence in the lives of emigrants, which indicates the re-evaluation of identity-cultural values and which influence the evolution of another culture.

*Creating connections*. The value indicators that have gathered in this category indicate the importance of relationships in three directions, namely: the relationship of Romanian emigrants among themselves in America, the relationship with those in the country, and the relationship between America and Romania in all areas. This way, we understand the mechanism of values that have changed and have become more significant due to the new relationships, and which are important in maintaining the continuity of communication between the two states, culture, and identity. Therefore, „alignment with the values inherent in American society and culture" (see Appendix 3) is a necessity to the same extent that collaboration with one's own compatriots, whether they are in the States or in Romania, leads to prosperity and evolution for both states.

If the first three categories of value indicators refer to *Social values* in the community sphere and aim to resolve internal shortcomings: humanitarian, identity, and relational, the following three categories are oriented towards the destination country: promotion, business, and evolution. The Value System formed by these categories shows us the dynamics from within the community to the outside. Basically, these organizations and associations are formed by communities of people for people who believe in their ability to change things for the better in both countries (destination and origin). The means of influencing change are visible, as we will see below, in the themes of the events present on the websites, thus maintaining a coherence between intention and action.

Recognition and presentation of one's own culture is encouraged by American culture, but at the same time, it is also recognized as a need to express confidence in one's own ethnic identity. Thus, the promotion of one's own culture is given by the recognition of a positive sense towards an evolution and the existence of a gain for both parties (communities/countries).

## 6.4. Value indicators from the topics and themes of the events

Of the 47 websites tracked, only 27 of them had events registered between 2020 and 2023. The descriptive statistic is in the next table:

**Table 2.** Events registered on 27 websites between 2020 – 2023

| Year | No. of websites | No. of events |
|------|-----------------|---------------|
| 2020 | 13 | 79 |
| 2021 | 16 | 66 |
| 2022 | 22 | 154 |
| 2023 | 20 | 154 |

Following the analysis of the 453 events recorded on the websites of Romanian organizations and associations in the US between 2020 and 2023, seven categories and 42 subcategories of value indicators were identified in the announced themes (Table 3). This allows us to track the concerns of emigrants, through which they primarily promote their cultural values.

**Table 3**. Categories and subcategories of value indicators in events

| Categories | Sub-categories | No of events | Total events |
|------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|
| **Celebrations / Galas** | Culinary | 16 | 82 |
| | Seasonal events | 16 | |
| | Festivals – promotional | 13 | |
| | Anniversaries | 11 | |
| | National Day | 8 | |
| | Christmas | 6 | |
| | Political & Economic | 6 | |
| | Regional | 6 | |
| **Business / Lobby** | Lobby | 15 | 52 |
| | Collaborations and partnerships | 11 | |
| | Taxes / Financial | 10 | |
| | Entrepreneurship | 6 | |
| | Support | 5 | |
| | Trade fairs / Trade exchanges | 3 | |
| | Other | 2 | |
| **Traditions** | Gastronomy | 11 | 45 |
| | Traditions and Customs | 11 | |

| Categories | Sub-categories | No of events | Total events |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Folk Costumes | 9 | |
| | Martisor | 8 | |
| | Folklore | 6 | |
| **Politics** | Meetings with delegations | 21 | 50 |
| | Senators / Secretary of State | 11 | |
| | Ambassadors / Governors | 9 | |
| | Elections | 7 | |
| | Prime Ministers | 2 | |
| **Educational** | Romanian | 12 | 42 |
| | Collaboration/Exchange of experience | 7 | |
| | Study centers | 7 | |
| | Admission to university | 7 | |
| | History | 5 | |
| | Activities for children | 4 | |
| **Social / Humanities** | Announcements for meetings and events, Administrative/Internal | 15 | 38 |
| | Fundraising for charitable foundations | 13 | |
| | Fundraising for Romania | 5 | |
| | Support for Easter and Christmas holidays | 5 | |

The thematic content of the events in question is indicative of values associated with ethnic and identity belonging. It has been observed that a specific form of assistance is available to those within the nation who seek to present their artistic creations to a foreign audience. The purpose of this assistance is to facilitate the promotion of national culture, to enhance the visibility of these creations, and to provide a platform for the expression of cultural identity.

## 6.5. Analysis of subcategories of cultural and artistic aspects

Looking at the themes of the events published on the websites, the following can be observed: First, the most popular cultural and artistic events are those in the field of cinema. Romanian film screenings and discussions with directors appear most often in the list of events from 2020 to 2023. It is worth noting that at least one Romanian Film Festival takes place every year. From the titles, one can see the interest in watching films from the country of origin and promoting them through discussions and invitations to artists from the country. Secondly, literature and discussions on literary themes are also a frequent theme of cultural and artistic events. Whether the guests are Romanians from Romania or Americans

of Romanian origin, the themes of the meetings converge on the life of emigrants ("Dor: Un mod în traducere" [Longing: A Way in Translation]). Last but not least, music and stand-up comedy events are as present in the themes of the events as those related to literature. We also find the promotion of Romanian artists and performers in this sector.
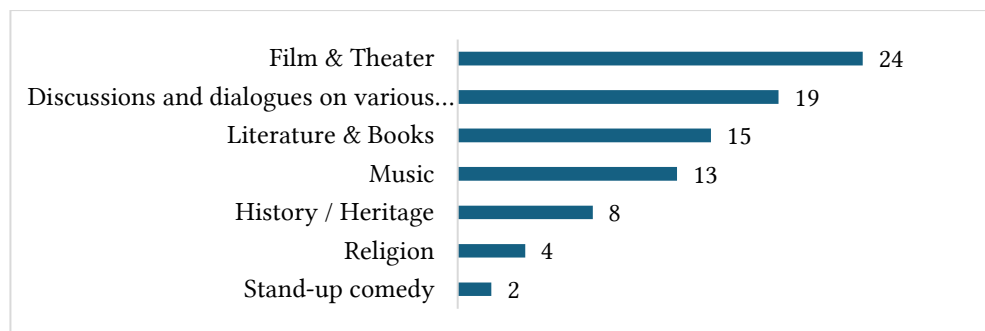


**Figure 4**. Subcategories of cultural and artistic value indicators (number of events)

The majority of published events are classified under the visual arts subcategory, *film & theater*. The primary focus of these initiatives is the preservation of cultural heritage, achieved through the mediums of film and discussion forums concerning Romanian heritage. Additionally, community engagement is fostered through direct discourse and question-and-answer sessions. A key objective of these initiatives is the promotion of diversity, achieved by presenting a variety of narratives from Eastern Europe. A distinctive feature of this approach is its emphasis on education and awareness-raising, particularly through virtual cinema and international tours. These initiatives are designed to encourage dialogue around historical and contemporary issues within the community.

The events and activities in the *literature and books* subcategory are indicative of social values such as the promotion of Romanian-American cultural exchanges through literature and art, the encouragement of reading and cultural awareness through various book launches and presentations, and the promotion of community involvement and connection through storytelling sessions for children. The events under discussion also encompass appreciation of the heritage and experiences of immigrants, highlighting diverse backgrounds and journeys, and emphasizing the literary contributions of authors of Romanian origin, supporting their work and narratives.

The events in the *Cultural-Artistic* category and subcategory *Music* demonstrate the significance of community involvement, cultural exchange, and artistic expression. The provision of opportunities for social interaction, the enjoyment of music, and the celebration of traditions has been identified as a means of promoting social cohesion and appreciation of diverse talents. The emphasis on

local artists and the provision of online accessibility serve to underscore support for emerging talent and inclusivity.

Following the above events helped me identify the mechanisms used in the dynamics (preservation, re-symbolization, and change) of the important social values indicated. Two mechanisms are of particular note: firstly, dialogue, encompassing discussions and questions, and secondly, relationships with individuals in the American community, as well as with individuals in the country as a whole. The dynamics of change or balance in the value system for emigrants are discussed, recognised, and validated/invalidated by their relationship with others in their country.

### 6.6. Analysis of subcategories of aspects Gala/Celebrations/ Events/Festivals

A second category with a significant number of events is those announcing events organized by Romanian communities: galas, celebrations, festivals, and anniversary events. Such events are of great significance to the Romanian community, as they provide a valuable opportunity to commemorate special occasions through social celebrations. These events not only serve to highlight the strengths and values of the community but also facilitate the expression of collective joy among its members. These celebrations facilitate a sense of connection, reflection, and expression of gratitude among the Romanian community at the local level.
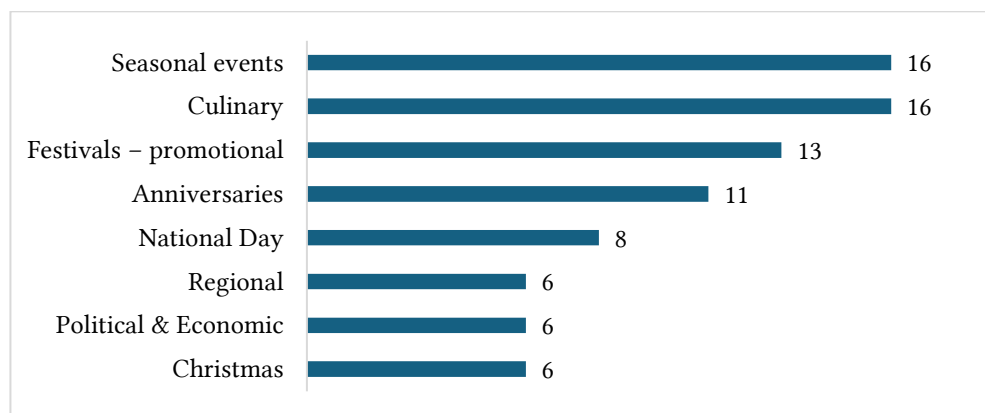


**Figure 5**. Subcategories of value indicators: Holidays / Galas (number of events)

The most prevalent festivals are those with a culinary theme, including the Romanian Food Festival - Dracula Fest, the Romanian Food Festival, the Romanian Taste Festival, the Romanian Gastronomy and Folklore Festival, and several others. The consumption of traditional food in the context of celebration serves as a marker of both national belonging and identity.

In addition, the events category encompasses international festivals, as well as those specific to certain seasons. Several events have been scheduled,

including the *RACC-LA Octoberfest Mixer*, the *Romanian Harvest Festival*, *International Children's Day and Romanian Blouse Day*, and the *International Children's Friendship Festival*. Events boasting a rich cultural heritage are of significant importance, as they serve to encourage community involvement and the celebration of diversity. These events underscore the significance of traditions, including Romanian festivals, as well as fostering international friendships and providing a platform for significant global sporting events, such as the World Cup. Furthermore, the emphasis on seasonal celebrations and special occasions dedicated to children and unity serves to highlight the value placed on family, cultural pride, and collective joy.

Those who have emigrated to the United States can live in the present, are integrated into society, and adopt behaviours that are consistent with American society. In other words, they align themselves with the context.

The festivals and events catalogued in the Culinary subcategory underscore the significance of cultural heritage, community gatherings, and culinary traditions in Romanian society. The organisation places significant emphasis on the commemoration of historical anniversaries, seasonal festivities, and culinary traditions through shared activities such as picnics and dinners, both in person and virtually.

The promotion of festival events is indicative of significant social values, including cultural celebration, community involvement, inclusivity, and transparency. The Romanian Blues Gala, festivals, and open-door events underscore the significance of cultural exchange, fostering connections with others, and fostering a sense of belonging and unity.

The Anniversaries subcategory encompasses events that underscore values such as the celebration of historical and strategic partnerships (e.g., the RACC event), the recognition of longevity and tradition (e.g., picnics and anniversary dinners), the promotion of community involvement and unity (e.g., the Romanian Community Summit), the support of cultural exchanges and contributions (e.g., gala events), and the promotion of academic and professional achievements (e.g., the LSRS Gala). Collectively, these events are indicative of a commitment to strengthening ties, „honouring the legacy," and promoting development within the community.

*Romanian National Days* represent a discrete subcategory, the focus of which is the celebration of community identity, cultural pride, and the significance of tradition. This is achieved through a variety of events held to commemorate Romania's National Day. These events encompass festivals, community gatherings, and international celebrations, thereby exemplifying the unity, national identity, and cultural heritage of Romanians.

Events associated with the winter holidays have been categorised within the Christmas subcategory. These values encompass inclusivity, community support, cultural celebration, and the significance attributed to winter festivities. The primary emphasis of these events is on fostering solidarity with social causes,

acknowledging achievements, and facilitating connections between members and supporters.

In summary, the collective celebration of cultural identities within a community, or the active engagement in a variety of cultural festivals that are unique to both cultures, signifies the ongoing process of re-symbolization of these identities. The cultural values that are observable in these events are indicative of ethnic identity, and the support for national culture and the promotion of the culture of each immigrant group is a cultural trait that is unique to America. In essence, the preservation of the cultural subject remains paramount, whilst the manner of its presentation and promotion is contingent upon contemporary means and novel techniques. Consequently, the dynamics of cultural values are undergoing a process of re-signification, whereby they retain the symbolism of the original culture to a certain extent, while adapting to their usefulness in the new context and modern technologies. The relationship between culture and technology is thus characterised by collaboration, thereby enabling each emigrant to participate in the movement of the entire society through modern means of presentation, as well as through the echoes of their country of origin.

### 6.7. Analysis of subcategories of Business/Lobby and Political aspects

Events in the Business category encompass a broad spectrum of subjects, including: Collaboration and Partnerships, Finance and Tax, Lobbying, Trade, Entrepreneurship, and Support. The majority of events are hosted by Mic & Asociații. A statistic with the number of events is presented in the next graph:
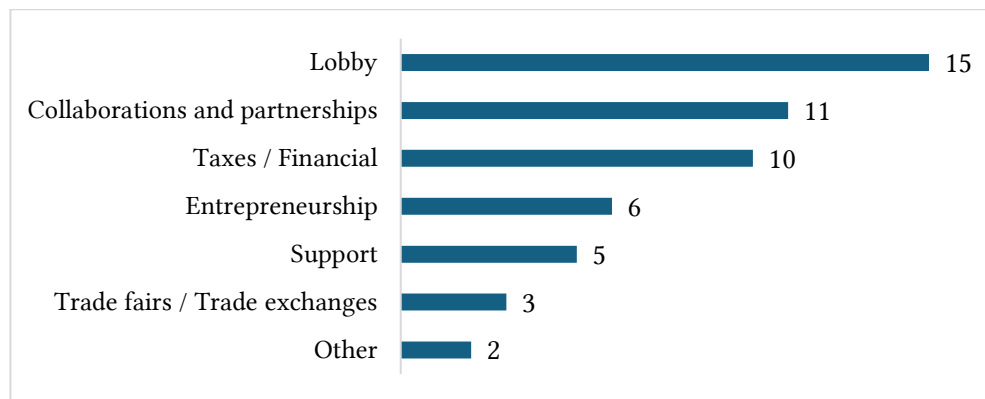


**Figure 6**. Subcategories of Business / Lobby value indicators (number of events)

These events serve to underscore the importance of historical and strategic partnerships, as well as the necessity for economic, financial, and innovation cooperation. The relationship between the two nations is supported not only at the diplomatic level, but also at the political level. Economic, commercial, and financial interests are being promoted through organisations and associations that propose

strategic and promotional meetings. In these meetings, support is requested from both their countries of origin and Romanian communities in America.
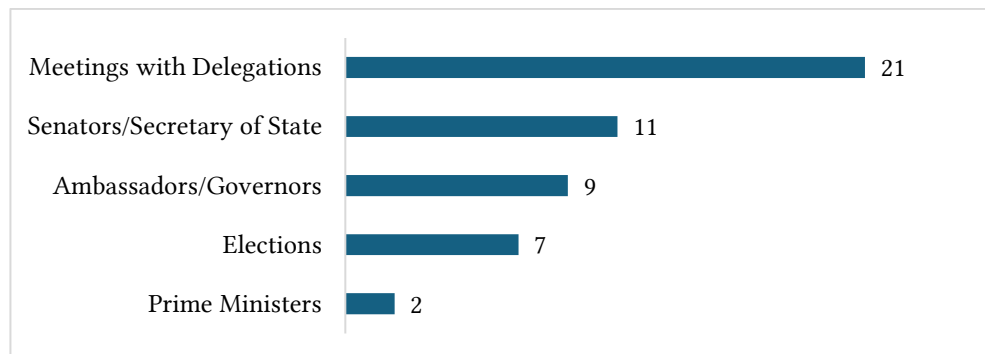


**Figure 7**. Subcategories of value indicators – politics (number of events)

A range of interactions with notable individuals and political leaders, encompassing both virtual and in-person gatherings, have been observed. The significance of these events is underscored by their role in the proposal stage of reforms by political leaders and economic actors.

### 7. Conclusion & Discussion

In the analysis of social values presented above, a concern and a dialectic between preserving values brought from the country of origin (especially specific to immigrant communities) and proposing new, innovative values, especially for the country of origin, was noticed (the dynamics of confrontation, construction, and formation of arguments emphasized by Boudon's theory). This dialectic emerges from the relationship with the country of origin, concurrent with the relationship with the country of destination (Massey's unified theory of migration). This gives rise to three issues that are clearly visible: the preservation of aspects related to identity and security; the need to find sustainable solutions to political and economic problems in the country of origin; and the need for economic innovation in both the country of origin and the destination country. The relationship is suggested by these reports, and the frequency and consistency of the values across the different categories analysed have indicated these three factors, which require a dynamic balance of values at the level of associations and organisations and, implicitly, of emigrants in relation to their country.

A thorough analysis of the websites of Romanian communities in the US reveals their stated goals and values, as well as the themes of the events they promote, the dynamics of the (re)evaluation of the cultural standards of their country of origin, and the need for dialogue for political and economic innovation between the two countries. This underscores the pivotal role played by Romanian cultural traditions and experiences in the consolidation and evolution of American culture.

A close examination of the three areas analysed (values, goals and missions, and events) reveals a consistent pattern across all three, thus highlighting culture as a core value. This finding serves to confirm the community's identity-based profile. The subsequent development of community agreements (goals and missions) was informed by these findings. To the same extent, humanitarian aid and support can be considered to be values that indicate their existence at a latent level. These values were activated during the pandemic, and, above all, remain a current concern within these organisations to support both the country of origin and known social cases.

The mechanisms employed in this study, including dialogue, relationships, technology, and proposals for innovation, are indicative of the dynamics of the social values encountered. They are important in finding a result for the evaluation of the values held by emigrants in a new context and, to the same extent, contribute to the image of changing values.

To ascertain the aforementioned information, further research is required. The following research question was posed: „Which values are preserved, which values are reinterpreted, and/or which social values are radically changing and in what way?"

To answer this question, the three theoretical lenses were superimposed on emigrant communities and analysed from their perspective. The present study commenced with Massey's theory (1993), whereby specific values declared on emigrant community websites were tracked. This approach yielded a bidirectional inclination of interest for them both in space and time. It is evident that through constant and simultaneous reporting to both their society of origin and their destination society, these communities support and continue to develop transnational socio-economic, cultural-political, and technological networks. Secondly, from the perspectives of Rezsohazy (2008), Boudon (2013), and Rochon (1998), research has focused more specifically on analysing the values underlying declared actions and encounters. These have indicated not only the initial problems and crises that triggered the emigration, but also the situations that gave rise to the arguments and the need for innovative solutions. Finally, the re-evaluation of living standards, encompassing identity and cultural dimensions, underscores the necessity for an equilibrium between identity and society. This is indicated by the presence of values that support both the development of the society they have reached and their place of origin, indicating the development of balanced social ties.

The novelty of this study lies in the integration of theoretical perspectives and analysis to understand the factors and dynamics of values within immigrant communities through the exploration of online networks. Furthermore, it provides a foundation for future research on the process of repositioning the initial social values of immigrant communities and social balance in the context of migration for the survival of social and cultural identity.

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# FITNESS AND BODY IDENTITY: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract**: In modern times, body image has become a criterion for social validation, and the fitness industry and social networks contribute to the formation of body identity and the shaping of ideal body patterns. The body has become a symbol of discipline, work, and even social status. In addition, fitness can be seen as a form of social differentiation or resistance to gender stereotypes, especially among women, who choose not to conform to traditional clichés of „femininity". In turn, the fitspiration phenomenon gives a digital dimension to identity construction, as a motivating factor and as a mechanism of social pressure and comparison. The present study critically synthesizes the existing literature, integrating sociological and cultural perspectives, with a focus on identity, fitness, body image, gender differences, and social networks. We conducted a comprehensive search based on the PRISMA model on PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate, and JSTOR to find relevant articles published in the last 10 years. 44 articles were included in the study, meeting the eligibility criteria. Content analysis in this case proves useful for theoretical clarifications and for the field application of various sociological research techniques.

**Keywords**: Fitness, body image, identity, physical activity, fitspiration.

**Résumé :** À l'époque moderne, l'image corporelle est devenue un critère de validation sociale. L'industrie du fitness et les réseaux sociaux contribuent à la formation de l'identité corporelle et à la définition de modèles corporels idéaux. Le corps est devenu un symbole de discipline, de travail et même de statut social. De plus, le fitness peut être perçu comme une forme de différenciation sociale ou de résistance aux stéréotypes de genre, notamment chez les femmes qui choisissent de ne pas se conformer aux clichés traditionnels de la « féminité ». De son côté, le phénomène de fitspiration confère une dimension numérique à la construction identitaire, en tant que facteur de motivation et mécanisme de pression sociale et de comparaison.
La présente étude synthétise de manière critique la littérature existante, intégrant des perspectives sociologiques et culturelles, en se concentrant sur l'identité, le fitness, l'image corporelle, les différences de genre et les réseaux sociaux. Nous avons mené une recherche exhaustive basée sur le modèle PRISMA sur PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate et JSTOR afin d'identifier les articles pertinents publiés au cours des dix dernières années. 44 articles ont été inclus dans l'étude, répondant aux critères d'éligibilité. L'analyse de contenu s'avère ici utile pour des clarifications théoriques et pour l'application concrète de diverses techniques de recherche sociologique.

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**Rezumat:** In modernitate**,** imaginea corporală a devenit un criteriu de validare socială, iar industria fitness şi reţelele de socializare contribuie la formarea identităţii corporale şi la conturarea unor tipare corporale ideale. Corpul a devenit un simbol al disciplinei, muncii şi chiar al statutului social. În plus, fitnessul poate fi privit ca o formă de diferenţiere socială sau de rezistenţă la stereotipurile de gen, în special în rândul femeilor, care aleg să nu se conformeze clişeelor tradiţionale ale „feminităţii". La rândul lui, fenomenul fitspiration conferă o dimensiunea digitală a construirii identităţii, ca factor motivator şi ca mecanism de presiune şi comparaţie socială.
Studiul de faţă sintetizează critic literatura existentă, integrând perspective sociologice şi culturale, cu accent pe identitate, fitness, imaginea corporală, diferenţe de gen şi reţele de socializare. Am realizat o căutare cuprinzătoare pe baza modelului PRISMA pe PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate şi JSTOR pentru a găsi articole relevante publicate în ultimii 10 ani. Au fost incluse în studiu 44 de articole, îndeplinind criteriile de eligibilitate. Analiza de conţinut in acest caz se dovedeşte utila pentru clarificări teoretice şi pentru aplicarea in teren a diverse tehnici de cercetare sociologica.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Fitness, imaginea corporală, identitate, activitate fizică, fitspiration.

## Introduction

Exposure to images in the media, whether traditional sources such as television and magazines or social networks, has long been investigated, particularly in the field of body image, with a negative impact observed on people's perception of their own bodies. Dissatisfaction with one's own body leads to disorders such as bulimia, obesity, depression, and low self-esteem, and can even lead to suicide (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2021). Studies have shown that young people are generally more affected by body image disorders than older people, people with higher incomes, and people who are not part of ethnic minorities. In terms of gender, women seem to be more affected by body image disorders than men (Botta, 2003). A major impact of the emergence of these body image disorders is the fitness subculture, which is increasingly present on social media and affects the image of masculinity or femininity and beauty ideals for both sexes (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

## 1. Theoretical framework

The fitness subculture can be better understood by analyzing sociological concepts and theories about the body as a project of identity and social capital.

### 1.1. The social dimension of fitness and bodily capital – Pierre Bourdieu

The body is seen by Turner (1996) as a „place of power" or an „instrument of social control," arguing that to understand society, we must analyze the body as a cultural, social, and political object.

Individuals end up consuming all kinds of products to improve their image, products for health, beauty, rejuvenation, fitness, and building an identity that

transcends that of the group. P. Bourdieu theorizes that if someone belongs to a certain group with which they identify, then they will make choices as a consumer that reflect the habitus of that group, also called class habitus (Bourdieu, 1994). These choices are most often made with the conviction that they are personal, „natural," and derived from the uniqueness of the individual. Bourdieu analyses the relationship between the body and sport and argues that the care given to the body through sport and healthy eating varies according to the social class to which the individual belongs. In the same vein, he suggests that the sports practiced may vary according to class, with the working class being more oriented towards soccer, boxing, and bodybuilding, while the upper classes appreciate golf or polo. The choice of these sports again highlights the instrumental relationship that the working class has with its own body, choosing sports where physical activity is more intense in an attempt to create a distinctive body. The working class's view of the body is instrumental, considering it a means to an end. Meanwhile, the upper class views the body as an end in itself, an identity project (Bourdieu, 1994).

Bodybuilding has been researched in this regard, and it has been found that excessive physical masculinity denotes discipline and self-control. Bourdieu suggests that strength is the demand of the working class, which can be satisfied through sports such as boxing and bodybuilding, while the bourgeois class is more oriented towards having a healthy body, a demand that can be satisfied through athletics, swimming, or gymnastics (Fayaz, n.d.).

This gives rise to the concept of „body capital," introduced by Bourdieu to describe how the body becomes an instrument of social distinction. Individuals invest in their bodies through clothing style, physical training, diets, or cosmetic surgery, thus expressing their social status or belonging (Fayaz, 1991).

Shilling (1993) argued that modernity has led to an „individualization" of the body, which has become a source of symbolic capital in consumer society, as Bourdieu called it (Bourdieu, 1986).

From this perspective, the body can be seen as physical capital because athletes can earn income from „sculpting" it. Shilling also offers another example of treating the body as physical capital, referring to prostitution (Shilling, 1997), to which newer industries such as OnlyFans and Videochat can be added, where people use their bodies for material gain.

## 1.2. Anthony Giddens and the body as an identity project

Anthony Giddens' theory (1991) approaches the body as an „identity project" for individuals who shape their own lifestyle through physical exercise or clothing.

Giddens considers the body „increasingly less an extrinsic given, functioning outside the internal reference systems of modernity, becoming itself reflexively mobilized." Our body expresses who we are, becoming „the means of expressing our individuality and aspirations, as well as our group affiliations" (Giddens, 1991). Giddens sees body cultivation as a profound concern with

constructing and controlling the body, and not just as a tendency to cultivate bodily appearance.

By focusing on our bodies and working on them for competitions that focus on physical appearance, such as beauty pageants or bodybuilding and fitness competitions, we turn our bodies into our own „projects" (Nettleton, 1998).

There is a growing concern with building healthy bodies, as evidenced by the large sums people pay for gym memberships, dietary supplements, diet plans, and healthy food. Chris Shilling points out that in a global world that increasingly threatens individual health through various dietary practices, pollution, and other destructive factors, maintaining health and taking responsibility for caring for one's own body is the only solution to protect it (Shilling, 1997). At the same time, individuals are not only concerned with their physical health but also with their mental health, with feeling good in their own bodies both in relation to themselves and to others. Body maintenance projects „can be seen as a way for individuals to express themselves, feel good, and gain some control over their lives" (Shilling, 1997). Although we consider ourselves free in terms of our own bodies, the influence of our society or culture unconsciously limits our freedom.

Body maintenance projects could also be seen as a way to express one's individuality and overcome societal ideas of the „ideal body" or „normal body." Individuals try to overcome these barriers and prejudices by celebrating their uniqueness through a series of body modifications, such as bodybuilding, tattoos, or piercings (Holland, 2004). Aesthetic procedures, fitness training, and diets are „social decisions related to the desire to bring individual bodies as close as possible to the social and cultural standards, norms, and expectations of the moment" (Vlăsceanu, 2011).

According to data provided by the American Society for Plastic Surgery, the number of cosmetic procedures increased by 10%. Thus, in 2023, 1,561,385 procedures were recorded, of which 93.4% were performed on women and 6.6% on men. The most common procedures among women were liposuction, tummy tucks, breast augmentation, and eyelid surgery, while the most common procedures among men were gynecomastia treatment, chin augmentation, and rhinoplasty. The highest number of procedures was recorded among people aged 35-50 (40%). The results show differences in procedure preferences depending on the age of the individuals. Breast augmentation is the preferred procedure for people aged 18-34, while liposuction is the most common procedure among people over 35 (Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2023).

Body projects give meaning to physical activity and can be seen as a form of expression for individuals who do not wish to conform to society's standards of what a „normal body" should look like. Thus, bodybuilding can be seen as a way to overcome these stereotypes, especially among women who do not conform to ideals of „femininity, as stated by a female bodybuilder: „When I look in the mirror, I see someone who has found herself, who has said once and for all that it doesn't really matter what role society has said I should play" (Rosen, 1983, cited in Shilling, 1997, p. 71). Shilling (1993) considers bodybuilding to be a true example of

the body as an identity project because the size and quality of the muscles achieved by athletes is different from what society considers normal and natural for both sexes.

## 2. Methodology

The systematic review was conducted using the PRISMA (Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) method, a guide for authors to conduct systematic, appropriate, and comprehensive reviews. The PRISMA method involves a checklist of 27 items, which has been approved by health science organizations and journals and is applied in systematic analyses.

The search was conducted on several platforms, such as PubMed, Frontiers, ResearchGate, and JSTOR, and 128 articles in English were identified. To be included in the analysis, the articles had to analyze one of the research subtopics: fitness - social and identity capital, body image and mental health, identity related to physical exercise and gender differences, social networks, and Fitspiration. Opinion articles and studies without empirical data were excluded (n=75). We removed duplicates (n=9), then read the abstracts of the articles, and following this analysis, 44 empirical studies were included in the research. This review includes studies from many countries because we wanted to gain a global understanding of the fitness subculture and the formation of body identity. We present in Table 1 a sample of our analysis.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Fitness – social resource and identity capital

Membership in a fitness club, training group, or other types of sports communities can generate social capital through the relationships that form within them or the opportunities that may arise for athletes. In this way, through sports networks and communities, fitness can become a source of social capital. In general, practicing fitness, the associated discipline, physical condition, and developed musculature are socially valued, functioning as forms of symbolic and identity capital. Musculature has been identified as a versatile form of identity capital that can influence other types of identities, such as occupation or status of athletes. For example, weight training has been considered a tool for self-promotion and personal development among fitness trainers (Cranswick *et al.*, 2024). Fitness thus becomes a resource for validating and defining the self.

**Table 1.** Samples from a thematic analysis.

| No | Author(s) Year | Objective/purpose | Methodology | Sample/Participants | Main results |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | II. | Fitness and identity capital | |
| 1 | Cranswick, I., *et al.* (2024) | Exploring the role of muscularity and weight training as capital in people's identities in various contexts. | Qualitative | 11 fitness trainers | Weight training was considered a tool for self-promotion and personal development among fitness trainers. |
| 2 | Golaszewski, *et al.* (2022) | Exploring how positive relationships in exercise groups can represent forms of social support—informational, emotional, validation, companionship, and identity. | Quantitative | 506 adults | Membership in an exercise group is associated by individuals with forms of social support that reinforce exercise identity, emotional support ($\beta = 0.36$), informational support, validation ($\beta = 0.25$), and friendship. |
| 3 | Skilbred A, Strandbu A, Loland S. (2024) | The study explores athletes' presentations of athletic identity. | Qualitative | 24 young | Athletes justify practicing sports and achieving performance through the need to distinguish themselves within their group. "Personal and cultural values surrounding uniqueness play a significant role in athletes' presentations regarding their athletic identity". |

| No | Author(s) Year | Objective/purpose | Methodology | Sample/ Participants | Main results |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *II. Identity related to physical exercise and gender/age differences* | | | |
| 4 | Geary, *et al.,* (2025) | Exploring important athletic transitions in the formation and development of athletic identity in elite athletes. | Quali- tative | 9 elite athletes | Initiation and mentoring in sport play an important role in athletic identity formation. The formation and development of athletic identity is influenced by associated external validation, perceived competence, and personal commitment. |
| 5. | Zhang R., *et al.,* (2024) | The study analyses the correlation between body image, physical activity, and the feeling of achieving an athletic physique, as well as the feeling of adapting to social norms. | Quantita- tive | 835 students | The study showed that physical activity determines the feeling of achieving an athletic physique among students, while also contributing to the feeling of social adaptation. |
| | | *III. Body image* | | | |
| 6. | Rojo-Ramos J, *et al.* (2022) | Identifying potential associations between self-perceived physical fitness and body image, and analyzing possible gender differences. | Quantita- tive | 278 students | The study highlighted a correlation between perceived physical fitness and body image, with clear differences between genders. |
| 7 | Sánchez, C., *et al.* (2024) | Exploring how body image concerns and emerging disorders, such as muscle dysmorphia ("bigorexia"), are presented in online discussions. | Content analysis | 46 Reddit forums | Online communities dedicated to diet and fitness Express negative emotions and toxicity, while communities focused on muscular ideals express less negativity and more motivation. |

| No | Author(s) Year | Objective/purpose | Methodology | Sample/ Participants | Main results |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *IV. Social media and Fitspiration* | | | |
| 8 | Easton S, *et al.* (2018) | Exploring how individuals perceive fitspiration posts. | Quali-tative | 20 adults | Subjects identified negative effects of consuming fitspiration content, such as promoting unrealistic and unattainable ideals, frustration, guilt, but also positive effects, such as motivation or promoting health. |
| 9 | Limniou M, Mahoney C, Knox M. (2021) | Exploring the effects of viewing fitspiration photos on body image and the internalization of body ideals. | Quantita-tive | 109 British students | Exposure to fitspiration content on social media resulted in a significant reduction in self-esteem and internalization of body ideals (with men showing a greater proportion). Even a small amount of exposure can negatively influence self-esteem. |

Practicing sports and achieving performance has been justified by athletes' need to distinguish themselves within their group. The need for uniqueness is a powerful motivator in the context of sports, where „personal and cultural values surrounding uniqueness play a significant role in athletes' presentations of their athletic identity" (Skilbred *et al.*, 2024).

The identities that athletes form allow them to define themselves, influencing the behaviours they adopt based on their established identity (Traugutt, *et al.*, 2018). The formation and development of athletic identity depends on several factors, such as the importance of the sport in the individual's life, the perceived level of performance that contributes to increased self-esteem, the culture of the sports club, the environment, the characteristics of the sport, initiation and mentoring in sport, and the expectations of others, associated external validation, and personal commitment (Geary *et al.*, 2025; Traugutt *et al.*, 2018; Verkooijen, Bruijn, 2013). Shaping an identity related to fitness also includes less positive aspects such as social comparison, internalization of ideal patterns, or excessive fitness training regimes (Greyling, Naudé, 2023).

Fitness is valued for its benefits to physical and mental health, relaxation, socialization, and personal identity formation (Greyling, Naudé, 2023). Powerlifting has been seen as an act of rebellion against gender stereotypes and norms, rejecting body ideals and the objectification of women (Kell *et al.*, 2022).

### 3.2. Identity related to physical exercise and gender/ age differences

Building identity involves the continuous construction of self-awareness and adaptation to the obstacles and opportunities that arise in their ever-changing social life (Côté, 2016).

The body has become a place for „producing and displaying the self" and an important aspect of identity and self-expression (Erikson, 1968). Fitness is a sport in which individuals can „work" their bodies and muscles as part of building bodily identities.

Changing or improving body aesthetics through weight training is „body work" (Shilling, 1993), which becomes part of a body project (Giddens, 1991).

Identity can be seen as „a modifiable target for behaviour change interventions that can support long-term behaviour change" (Caldwell *et al.*, 2024). Exercise-related identity has been considered both a result of personal behaviour and sustained behaviour (Husband *et al.*, 2019).

A growing number of studies have claimed that physical activity promotes physical, mental (Zartaloudi *et al.*, 2023), and spiritual (Luo *et al.*, 2003) well-being, body image, and has a positive effect on reducing loneliness (Zhou *et al.*, 2025).

Strength training has been associated with significant improvements in several areas such as body image, self-esteem, quality of life, health, satisfaction, and comfort (Seguin, 2015; Yao *et al.*, 2021).

Studies have shown that belonging to an exercise group is positively associated with self-esteem (O'Connell, n.d.) and with social support, emotional

support, informational support, validation, and friendship, reinforcing one's identity with exercise (Golaszewski *et al.*, 2022). Exercise identity has been positively correlated with self-assessment of body image, with no association with anxiety caused by external evaluations by other individuals (Liardi *et al.*, 2022).

### 3.3. Body image

Body image refers to individuals' perceptions, evaluations, and emotions about their own bodies, which are determined by several social, psychological, and cultural factors (Zhou, 2025). Studies have shown that physical activity can improve body image by increasing individuals' satisfaction with their physical appearance, along with weight loss, muscle mass gain, or muscle toning. The results reveal that body image also influences involvement in physical activities, with individuals with a negative self-image having certain reservations about going to the gym, while a positive body image has been associated with self-esteem, physical and emotional well-being, quality of life, and lower rates of anxiety and depression (Slevec, Tiggemann, 2011).

Significant differences were identified between actual and ideal body shapes in individuals who do not exercise, while in individuals who engage in resistance or strength training, this difference was not significant, showing that exercise can increase satisfaction with one's body image (Rica *et al.*, 2018).

However, some studies have not identified a correlation between self-esteem and body image dissatisfaction (Schmidt, 2014; Asanoh, 2024). Instead, self-esteem generated by men's concern about how their physical appearance is judged by others leads to dissatisfaction with their own bodies (Schmidt, 2014). Negative body image perception occurs when there is a discrepancy between the body image perceived by the individual and the one they consider ideal (Tey, 2024).

### 3.4. Social media and Fitspiration

In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter have been analysed in several studies to determine their impact on body image and personal identity. Social media is increasingly being used by influencers, athletes, and fitness trainers to inspire people to lead a healthy lifestyle through content created in the form of images and motivational messages. This type of content is called „fitspiration" (Alberga, 2018).

More and more researchers have analysed fitspiration content on social media, finding that posts focus more on appearance and attractiveness than on health. An analysis found that women showed more of their bodies in the photos they posted (Carrotte *et al.*, 2017). Another study identified gender differences in the influence of fitspiration on the self, as women seem to be much more concerned with attractiveness, while men evaluated their bodies more positively (Kamps, Berman, 2011).

Individuals seem to be aware of the negative effects of consuming fitspiration content, including the promotion of unrealistic and unattainable ideals, frustration, guilt (Easton *et al.*, 2018), eating disorders (Christensen *et al.*, 2021), a

significant reduction in self-esteem, and the internalization of body ideals (Limniou *et al.*, 2021). Exposure to content promoting diets and weight loss methods has been associated with negative physical appearance ratings and eating disorders. (Reilly *et al.*, 2023). The results indicate that both content creators and users experience these positive and negative feelings as a result of fitspiration images, with content users and women registering a higher proportion (DiBisceglie, Arigo, 2021), while men internalize the body ideals present in the media to a greater extent (Limniou *et al.*, 2021). Even a small amount of exposure to fitspiration content is enough to negatively influence an individual's self-esteem (viewing just five fitspiration images) (Limniou *et al.*, 2021).

Online communities dedicated to dieting and fitness were perceived as toxic by individuals, while communities focused on muscular ideals were associated with less negativity and more motivation (Sánchez *et al.*, 2024).

Some studies have linked time spent on social media to body image and eating disorders (Holland, Tiggemann, 2017), while other studies have shown that there is no correlation between time spent and a negative body image; on the contrary, more time spent on Twitter has been associated with increased motivation to exercise (McColgan, Paradis, 2022).

## 4. Discussions

This section aims to present the convergences and contradictions identified in the systematic review, proposing further directions for future research on fitness and body identity. The purpose of this systematic review was to explore how physical activity and fitness contribute to the formation of body identity. The study critically reviewed the existing literature, integrating sociological and cultural perspectives, with a focus on identity, body image, physical activity, self-esteem, gender differences, and social networks.

The results reveal that fitness can contribute to personal development and the construction of bodily identity, representing a form of symbolic capital, but also a subtle mechanism of social control. Strength training and muscle mass growth represent tangible capital that empowers individuals and increases their intangible capital—independence, self-confidence, and a positive body image—facilitating performance across multiple identities (Enverga, 2025; Seguin, 2015; Yao *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have identified the negative effects of fitness on identity formation, such as social comparison, internalization of ideal patterns, or excessive strength training regimens (Greyling, Naudé, 2023). This contradiction may arise due to the way fitness is approached, as a sport that promotes health or as a sport practiced to improve body image. Fitness cannot be reduced to a simple sport, but must be analysed as a social, cultural, and ideological phenomenon.

Body identity is not seen as a static construct, but as a dynamic process of modelling based on social and cultural interactions, experience, and individual work. The body is seen as a „means of communication and symbolization of masculinity and a form of physical capital that embodies the skills and abilities to establish and validate masculine identities and their value" (Cranswick, 2024).

The results indicate gender differences in body identity and approach to fitness. Among women, strength training induces a sense of liberation and empowerment to challenge essentialist and oppressive feminine ideals (Kell *et al.*, 2022; Enverga, 2025). By overcoming limitations of the body and muscle strength, women can renegotiate and redefine the body „as a personal process rather than a social object" (Enverga, 2025), while men internalize body ideals more, associating muscle with status and power of control.

The phenomenon of fitspiration adds a digital dimension to identity construction, playing both a motivational and a negative role. Contradictions have been identified regarding the influence of fitspiration on body image and identity, as some studies have indicated that exposure to „fitspiration" content increases dissatisfaction with one's own body and comparisons between an individual's physical appearance and the idealized bodies conveyed in the media, especially among young people (Limniou *et al.*, 2021; Jerónimo, 2017; Christensen *et al.*, 2021). Viewing fitspiration images on social media has been associated with a high degree of internalization of physical ideals, which increases the tendency to make body comparisons (Jeronimo, 2017), and some studies have associated fitspiration with motivation (McColgan, Paradis, 2022; Sánchez *et al.*, 2024).

## 5. Limitations and future research directions

This review has several limitations. Firstly, very few empirical studies address fitness from a social perspective; or this reason, most of the studies found analyze the role of physical activity in general in shaping identity. Secondly, there is also a relatively small number of qualitative studies on this topic, and most of them have a sample consisting of women or students. Thirdly, only English-language publications were included, which may have led to a language bias. We have identified a need for critical gender studies addressing masculinity and body image, or for longitudinal studies to identify the effects of fitspiration on body identity formation.

Future research could explore generational and cultural differences in body identity formation or analyze how the fitness industry's discourses on health and discipline conceal toxic positivity language.

## 6. Conclusions

This research highlighted the need to approach fitness from a social, cultural, and identity perspective.

In today's society, where physical appearance is super important, the body has become a symbol of discipline, hard work, and even status. From Bourdieu's perspective, doing physical activity, strength training, and being part of sports communities can be seen as forms of symbolic and identity capital. However, there is a tension between autonomy and conformity in the construction and redefinition of identity, as individuals tend to reproduce the body ideals promoted by the fitness

and beauty industries, which produce a standardization of „acceptable" or „ideal" bodies, limiting the expression of individual uniqueness.

Exposure to the standards promoted by the fitness industry on social media creates social pressure, dissatisfaction, frustration, and a negative body image, especially among young people and those who fail to achieve those ideals.

Fitness can also be viewed from another perspective, as a form of social differentiation or resistance to gender stereotypes, especially among women who choose not to conform to traditional clichés of „femininity."

Future research should empirically analyze the influence of fitness in shaping body and self-identity and propose programs that support a positive body image and self-esteem.

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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DRIVING STYLE, EMOTIONAL REGULATION, AND FORGIVENESS, IN CASE OF INDIVIDUALS WHO COMMITTED TRAFFIC OFFENSES

**Ancuța CURELUȘĂ**[1]

**Abstract**. The objective of the study was to examine the relationship between driving style, emotional regulation difficulties, and practicing forgiveness in the case of people convicted of traffic offenses. Data were collected from 60 people in the records of the Suceava Probation Service (20-66 years old), who were in different periods of sentence execution. From the data analysis, we found that people convicted of traffic offenses with impulse control difficulties adopt an irrational driving style, and the dissociative driving style correlates most with emotional regulation difficulties. Practicing situational forgiveness correlates with a patient's-attentive driving style, and the specifics of the driving style adopted differ depending on the period of supervision in which the convicted person is found. Difficulties in emotional awareness and an angry driving style correlate negatively with age, and unmarried people have a more angry and irrational driving style. The present study concludes that for people convicted of traffic offenses, the probation counsellor's interventions should aim to encourage the practice of situational forgiveness, as an emotional regulation strategy that favors the patient-attentive driving style, but also to support young people and unmarried people, the most vulnerable categories, in situations where they adopt an angry and irrational driving style.

**Keywords**: driving style, traffic offense, emotional regulation difficulties, self-forgiveness, situational forgiveness.

**Résumé** : L'objectif de cette étude était d'examiner la relation entre le style de conduite, les difficultés de régulation émotionnelle et la pratique du pardon chez les personnes condamnées pour des infractions routières. Les données ont été recueillies auprès de 60 personnes (âgées de 20 à 66 ans) inscrites au registre du Service de probation de Suceava, à différentes périodes d'exécution de leur peine. L'analyse des données a révélé que les personnes condamnées pour des infractions routières présentant des difficultés de contrôle des impulsions adoptent un style de conduite irrationnel, et que le style de conduite dissociatif est le plus corrélé aux difficultés de régulation émotionnelle. La pratique du pardon situationnel est corrélée à un style de conduite patient et attentif, dont les spécificités varient selon la période de surveillance de la personne condamnée. Les difficultés de conscience émotionnelle et la conduite colérique sont négativement corrélées avec l'âge, et les personnes célibataires ont davantage un style de conduite

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colérique et irrationnel. La présente étude conclut que, pour les personnes condamnées pour des infractions routières, les interventions du conseiller de probation devraient viser à encourager la pratique du pardon situationnel, comme stratégie de régulation émotionnelle favorisant un style de conduite patient et attentif, mais aussi à soutenir les jeunes et les personnes célibataires, catégories les plus vulnérables, lorsqu'ils adoptent un style de conduite colérique et irrationnel.

**Mots-clés** : style de conduite, infraction routière, difficultés de régulation émotionnelle, pardon à soi-même, pardon situationnel.

**Rezumat.** Obiectivul studiului a fost de examinare a relației dintre stilul de conducere, dificultățile de reglare emoțională și practicarea iertării, în cazul persoanelor condamnate pentru infracțiuni rutiere. Datele au fost colectate de la 60 de persoane aflate în evidențele Serviciului de Probațiune Suceava (20-66 ani), aflate în perioade diferite de executare a pedepsei. Din analiza datelor am constatat că persoanele condamnate pentru infracțiuni rutiere având dificultăți de control a impulsului adoptă un stil de conducere irațional, iar stilul de conducere disociativ corelează cel mai mult cu dificultățile de reglare emoțională. Practicarea iertării situaționale corelează cu un stil de conducere răbdător-atent, iar specificul stilului de conducere adoptat diferă în funcție de perioada de supraveghere în care se regăsește persoana condamnată. Dificultățile de conștientizare emoțională și stilul de conducere furios corelează negativ cu vârsta, iar persoanele necăsătorite au mai mult un stil de conducere furios și irațional. Concluzia studiului de față este că pentru persoanele condamnate pentru infracțiuni rutiere, intervențiile consilierului de probațiune ar trebui să vizeze încurajarea practicării iertării situaționale, ca strategie de reglare emoțională care favorizează stilul de conducere răbdător-atent, dar și sprijinirea tinerilor și a persoanelor necăsătorite, categoriile cele mai vulnerabile, în situația în care adoptă un stil de conducere furios și irațional.

**Cuvinte cheie**: stil de conducere, infracționalitate rutieră, dificultăți de reglare emoțională, iertare de sine, iertare situațională.

## 1. Introduction

Traffic offenses represent one of the most common forms of law violation, with major implications in the occurrence of accidents, resulting in injuries or fatalities, the driving style correlating to a great extent with the non-compliance of road legislation (Holman & Popușoi, 2020). Thus, in Suceava county in the year 2021, 182 serious accidents (90 deceased persons, 118 seriously injured persons, 106 lightly injured persons) and 766 minor accidents resulted in 987 persons slightly injured (Synthesis of the Suceava county Policy Inspectorate, the number 85.593/21.01.2022).

Driving style is defined as the usual way of a person to drive a vehicle (Hăvîrneanu, 2013), referring to the choice of speed, compliance with traffic laws (Navon-Eyal & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2020), level of assertiveness, and attention (Holman & Popușoi, 2020). Referring to the typology of driving style, specialized literature indicates the existence of two major categories: *maladaptive driving style*, that includes: *the irrational driving style,* associated with the disregard for road legislation, driving under the influence of alcohol, *risky driving style,*

characterized by taking on dangerous situations in traffic, *the furios driving style*, characterized by a violent behaviour in traffic and intense negative emotions, *anxious driving style*, when the driver has a hesitant behaviour, *dissociative driving style*, when the driver commits mistakes in traffic due to the speed of obtaining fun and *adaptative driving style*, that includes: *the driving style of distress avoidance,* when the driver engages in relaxation activities aimed at reducing stress and *the patient-attentive driving style* when the driver is cautious and polite in traffic (Holman & Popușoi, 2020). In other studies, driving styles are divided into four categories: reckless and negligent, angry and hostile, anxious, patient, and attentive (Navon & Taubman -Ben-Ari, 2019).

Referring to theoretical models of driving styles, *The hierarchical Model of driving styles* highlights the role of emotions in relation to driving style and presents three levels: first level is represented by the feelings of the driver who exerts influence over the second level, represented by the state of the driver, and the two levels act upon the third level, represented by the driving style (Aguilar *et al*, 2017; Cordero *et al*, 2020).

Emotional regulation is defined as a set of strategies that individuals use to influence the emotions they experience, the timing of when they express them, and how they manage and express them (Fischer *et al*, 2016). In turn, difficulties in emotional regulation refer to engaging in impulsive behaviours that contradict a person's values, as well as the inability to integrate into one's life the undesirable situations they face (Kalantar, 2017). Referring to the Emotion Regulation Model, emotional regulation involves a set of skills such as *emotional acceptance, impulse control, emotional awareness, emotional clarity, the ability to engage in desired goals, emotional regulation strategies*, and the absence of these skills leading to difficulties in emotional regulation (Trógolo *et al*, 2014).

On the other hand, emotional regulation is associated with a high level of forgiveness. Forgiveness represents the motivation to let go of feelings of anger and the desire for revenge against the person who has offended us, while also serving to restore the dimension of morality or even improve it compared to how it was before the offensive situation occurred (Worthington & Wade, 2007). Referring to the source of the transgression, three types of forgiveness are identified*: self-forgiveness*, in which the source of the transgression is oneself; *forgiveness of others*, in which the source of the transgression is others; and *situational forgiveness*, in which the origin of the transgression is an external situation (Zmău & Cuza, 2018).

### 1.1. Driving style, emotional regulation, and forgiveness

### 1.1.1. Driving style and emotional regulation

Emotion is an important factor that affects the driver´s behaviour (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Thus, drivers who experience anger are more prone to aggressive, risky behaviours in traffic; those who experience fear choose a cautious driving style, anxious drivers resort to aggressive behaviour in traffic, drivers with feelings of helplessness exhibit conservative behaviour, and drivers with feelings

of contempt will adopt radical driving strategies (Wang *et al.*, 2018). Regarding negative emotional states, studies show that they influence the increase in drivers' desire to engage in risky driving and commit traffic errors, such as decreased perception of dangers and direction while driving (Navon & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2019).

Emotional regulation difficulties are positively and significantly correlated with reckless, negligent, anxious, angry, and hostile driving styles and negatively and significantly correlated with the patient's-attentive driving style (Navon & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2019). Difficulties in emotion regulation correlate with different driving styles, except for the stress-reducing driving style, which does not significantly correlate with any of the difficulties in emotional regulation (Trógolo *et al.*, 2014). Thus, the angry driving style correlates with difficulties in impulse control, the dissociative driving style correlates with difficulties in engaging in goal-oriented behaviour, the anxious driving style correlates with the non-acceptance of emotional responses, the risky driving style correlates with difficulties in impulse control, and the attentive driving style correlates with a lack of emotional awareness (Trógolo *et al.*, 2014).

If related to the variable age, it has been identified that between age and driving style adopted, younger drivers adopt a maladaptive driving style: anxious, reckless and careless, angry and hostile, compared to older ones (Long & Ruosong, 2019; Padilla *et al.*, 2020; Navon &Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2019). Studies explain this aspect through the fact that, in the case of young drivers, emotions influence behaviour in traffic (Cerniglia *et al.*, 2015; Navon-Eyal & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2020).

### 1.1.2. The driving style and forgiveness

Focusing on the connection between forgiveness and driving style, studies show that the higher the level of forgiveness, the greater the tendency to adopt a patient-attentive driving style and the less tendency to adopt a reckless and neglectful, angry, hostile, and anxious driving style (Navon & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2019). There are also studies showing that forgiveness (situational and towards others) has a significant indirect effect on traffic offenses, through the mediating variables of aggressive and reckless driving style that has a significant indirect effect on traffic offenses, through the mediating variables of aggressive and risky driving style (Bumgarner *et al.*, 2016).

Regarding the population in Romania, studies indicate that the level of self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations is higher among young people than among the elderly (Zmău & Cuza, 2018), in contrast to the results of other studies suggesting that older individuals are more forgiving compared to younger ones.

### 1.1.3. Forgiveness and emotional regulation

Forgiveness is closely related to emotions, as the process of forgiving requires the regulation of emotions towards the transgressor, which involves replacing negative emotions (anger, hatred, contempt) with positive emotions

(empathy, love, etc) (Ho *et al.*, 2020). The lack of forgiveness is associated with aversive emotions and physiological changes, such as an increased heart rate and blood pressure (Oyen Witvliet *et al.*, 2001), while the practice of forgiveness correlates positively with well-being, life satisfaction, general mental health, and negatively with anxiety, depression, suicide tendencies, alcohol consumption, feelings of anger, guilt, and shame (Worthington & Wade, 2020).

The present study aimed to identify persons convicted of traffic offenses who had a high level of emotional regulation difficulties because this category is more vulnerable to adopting a maladaptive driving style, which could represent a risk factor, both for themselves and for road safety.

These steps could have implications for discouragement of maladaptive driving style, for their behavioural rehabilitation, for discouraging road crime and increasing traffic safety, and also including forgiveness as a strategy for emotional regulation.

Taking the results of previous studies as a reference point, the following hypotheses have emerged**:**

1. There is a significant negative correlation between emotional regulation difficulties and adaptive driving style (patient-attentive, distress-avoidant style) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses.
2. There is a significant positive correlation between emotional regulation difficulties and maladaptive driving styles (irrational, anxious, risky, angry, dissociative) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses.
3. There is a significant positive correlation between forgiveness (of self and situational) and adaptive driving style (patient-attentive, distress avoidance style) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses.
4. There is a significant negative correlation between forgiveness (of self and situational) and maladaptive driving style (irrational, anxious, risky, angry, dissociative) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses.
5. There is a significant negative correlation between emotional regulation difficulties and forgiveness (of self and situational) in the case of individuals convicted of tragic offenses.
6. There is a significant negative correlation between age and emotional regulation difficulties in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses.
7. There is a significant negative correlation between age and forgiveness (of self and situational) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses.
8. There is a significant negative correlation between age and maladaptive driving style (irrational, anxious, risky, angry, dissociative) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses.
9. There are significant differences regarding driving styles among individuals convicted of traffic offenses, depending on the supervision period.

9.1. There are significant differences regarding the adaptive driving style (patient-attentive, avoidance of distress) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses, depending on the supervision period.

9.2 There are significant differences regarding the maladaptive driving style (irrational, anxious, risky, angry, dissociative) in the case of individuals convicted of traffic offenses, depending on the supervision period.

10. There are significant differences regarding driving style depending on marital status.

10.1. There are significant differences regarding adaptive driving style (patient-attentive, avoidance of distress) depending on marital status.

10.2. There are significant differences regarding maladaptive driving style (irrational, anxious, risky, angry, dissociative) depending on marital status.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

Data were collected from 60 individuals, registered in Suceava Probation Service, convicted of traffic offenses: 65% (n=39) driving under the influence of alcohol, 16.7% (n=10) driving without license, 8,3% (n=5) refusal to provide biological samples to determine blood alcohol concentration, 3.3% (n=2) leaving the scene of an accident, 3.3% (n=2) driving an unregistered vehicle, 3.3% (n=2) negligent bodily injury. In the case of 66.7% (n=40), the execution of the sentence under supervision was suspended, while in the case of 33.3% (n=20), the application of the sentence was postponed. The participants are at distinct stages of serving their sentences: 53.3% (n=32) are at the beginning of the supervision period, 35% (n=21) are in the middle of the period, and 11,7% (n=7) are at the end. All participants are male, with different marital statuses: 41,7% are married (n=25), 58.3% are unmarried (n=35), 10%, with ages between 20-66 years (M = 36.1, SD=11.8).

### 2.2. Procedure

Participants received information regarding the purpose of the research, expressed their consent to participate, and were assured of the confidentiality of the information. They were also informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The instruments were completed individually, with some participants requiring additional explanations regarding the completion procedure.

### 2.3. Instruments

*Multidimensional Driving Style Inventory (*MDSI-RO) (Taubman-Ben-Ari *et al.*, 2004; Holman & Havârneanu, 2015) has a total of 41 items, measured on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (*almost never*) to 6 (*almost always*)**.** Item 10 is

reversed. It contains 7 subscales: Irrational-6 items (e.g. „In the city, I speed over the legal limit"), Anxious- 4 items (e.g." I feel stressed while driving"), Patient-Cautious -7 items (e.g. „I drive carefully"), Risky - 6 items (e.g." I like to feel the power of the engine"), Angry - 8 items (e.g. „I argue with other drivers or pedestrians"), Distress - 4 items (e.g. „I listen to music to relax while driving), Dissociative- 6 items (e.g." I drive to a different destination than the one I intended to go initially"). In the sample of this study, the 7 subscales of the MDSI show good internal consistency (α=.83).

*Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale* (DERS) (Victor & Klonsky, 2016) has a total of 18 items, with response options on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*almost never)* to 5 (*almost always*). Items 1, 4, and 6 are reversed. It contains 6 subscales: Awareness - 3 items measuring lack of emotional awareness(e.g. „I pay attention to my feelings"), Clarity - 3 items measuring lack of emotional clarity (e.g. „I find it difficult to figure out my feelings"), Goals - 3 items measuring difficulty engaging in goal-oriented behaviour (e.g. „When I am upset, I have not control at all"), Impulse, contains 3 items measuring difficulty controlling impulses (e.g." When I am upset, I become irritable with myself for feeling this way"), Non-acceptance, with 3 items measuring non-acceptance of responses (e.g. „When I am upset, I feel guilty for feeling that way"), Strategies - 3 items measuring limited access to emotional regulation strategies (e.g. „When I am upset, I find it difficult to focus on other things"). In the sample of this study, the 6 subscales of the DERS show good internal consistency (α=.82).

*The Heartland Forgiveness Scale* (HFS) (Thompson *et al.*, 2005) contains 3 subscales: Self Forgiveness, Forgiveness of Others, and Situational Forgiveness. In the present research, the Self-Forgiveness and the Situational Forgiveness. The Self-Forgiveness Subscale contains 6 items and measures self-forgiveness (e.g.," Although I feel bad at first when I make mistakes, over time I can offer myself leniency"). The items have response options on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*almost always false for me*) to 7 (*almost always true for me*). Items 2, 4, and 6 are reverse-scored. The Situational Forgiveness Subscale contains 6 items and measures forgiveness of situations (e.g., „Over time, I can be understanding of the bad circumstances in my life"). Items 7, 9, and 11 have been reverse-scored. In the sample of this study, the two subscales of the HFS show acceptable internal consistency (α=.60).

## 3. Results

The data were collected following the application of the aforementioned instruments and were analysed and interpreted using the statistical program Jamovi (Version 1.6).

**Hypothesis 1:** There is no correlation between emotional regulation difficulties and adaptive driving style (r = .05, p=.657), (r = .05, p= .694), respectively, between emotional regulation difficulties and patient-attentive driving style (r = .19, p= .142), and between emotional regulation difficulties and distress-avoiding style. Hypothesis 1 is rejected.

**Hypothesis 2:** Difficulties in emotional regulation do not correlate with maladaptive driving style (r = .24, p .057) (see Table 1). On the other hand, it is observed that difficulty in impulse control positively correlates with irrational driving style (r = .27, p= .036), that lack of emotional clarity positively correlates with dissociative driving style (r =.35, p<.05), that difficulty in engaging in goal-oriented behaviour positively correlates with dissociative driving style (r=. 41, p= .001), that difficulty in impulse control positively correlates with dissociative driving style (r=. 45, p<.01), that non-acceptance of emotional responses positively correlates with dissociative driving style (r=. 34, p=.008) that limited access of emotional regulation strategies positively correlates with dissociative driving style (r=. 29, p=.022) (see Table 1). Hypothesis 2 is partially confirmed.

**Hypothesis 3:** There is no correlation between emotional regulation difficulties and forgiveness (r = - .24, p= .057) (emotional regulation difficulties and self-forgiveness (r = - .18, p= .155); emotional regulation difficulties and situational forgiveness (r = - .21, p= .098) (see Table 1). On the other hand, it is highlighted that, from the category of emotional regulation difficulties, the difficulty of engaging in goal-oriented behaviour correlates negatively and significantly with self-forgiveness (r = - .25, p= .049) și and situational forgiveness (r = - .27, p= .035) (see Table 1). Hypothesis 3 is partially confirmed.

**Hypothesis 4:** There is no correlation between forgiveness and adaptive driving style (r = .18, p .166) (see Table 1). On the other hand, it is observed that there is a significant positive correlation between situational forgiveness and patient-attentive driving style (r = .29, p .023). Situational forgiveness and the distress avoidance driving style do not correlate (r = .04, p .719). No correlation was found between self-forgiveness and the patient-attentive driving style (r=.19, p=.146) and between self-forgiveness and the distress avoidance driving style (r=.01, p=.889) (see Table 1). Hypothesis 4 is partially confirmed.

**Hypothesis 5:** Forgiveness does not correlate with maladaptive driving style (r = -.12, p=.345); self-forgiveness and maladaptive driving style (r = -.009, p= .944); situational forgiveness and maladaptive driving style (r = -.17, p=.178) (see Table 1). Hypothesis 5 is rejected.

**Hypothesis 6:** Age does not correlate with difficulties in emotional regulation (r = -.18, p .162) (see Table 1). On the other hand, there is a negative correlation between emotional awareness and age, which is statistically significant (r = -.35, p=.005) (see Table 1). No other difficulties in emotional regulation significantly correlate with age. Hypothesis 6 is partially confirmed.

**Hypothesis 7:** Age correlates positively and significantly with forgiveness (r = .33, p=.010), as well as with self-forgiveness (r = .29, p=.022). There is no correlation between age and situational forgiveness (r = .24, p=.055) (see Table 1). Hypothesis 7 is partially confirmed.

**Hypothesis 8:** A significant negative correlation was obtained between age and maladaptive driving style (r = -.26, p=.038) (see Table 1). On the other hand, it is observed that, from the category of maladaptive driving style, only the

angry driving style correlates negatively and significantly with age (r = -.31, p=.014) (see Table 1). Hypothesis 8 is partially confirmed

**Hypothesis 9**: The values of unifactorial F-ANOVA-test show that, from the category of adaptive driving style, only the distress-avoidant driving style according to the supervision period F(4.26), p=.024< .05, being more common at the beginning of the supervision period (Md=7.56), than in the middle (Md=6.29) or at the end of it (Md=4,57 (see Table 2 and 3). There are no significant differences regarding the patient-attentive driving style depending on the supervision period, F(0,14), p=.870> 0.05. There are no significant differences regarding the maladaptive driving style (irrational F(0,96), p=.402> .05, anxious F(0.86), p=.432> .05, risky F(0.45), p=.643> .05, furious F(2,03), p=.167> .05, dissociative F(0,30), p=.740> .05), depending on the supervision period. Hypothesis 9 is partially confirmed.

**Hypothesis 10**: There are significant differences regarding maladaptive driving style depending on marital status [t(58)= -2.33, p=.024, p<0.05]. Thus, unmarried individuals achieved significantly higher average scores regarding maladaptive driving style (Md=56.8), compared to married individuals (Md=46.4). On the other hand, it is observed that within the category maladaptive driving style, the angry driving style [t(58)= -2.09, p=.041, p<0.05] and irrational driving style [t(58)= -2,39, p=.020, p<0.05] show differences depending on marital status. Thus, unmarried individuals scored significantly higher on average in the angry driving style (Md=14.1) compared to married individuals (Md=10.6). The situation is similar in the case of irrational driving style with unmarried individuals (Md=15.3) achieving significantly higher average scores than married individuals (Md=11.4) (see Tables 4 and 5). There are no differences between adaptive driving style (patient-attentive, distress avoidance), depending on civil status. Hypothesis 10 is partially confirmed.

**Table 1.** The correlation coefficients between variables

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Clarity | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Consciousness | .19 | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Objectives | .17 | .08 | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Impulse | .32* | .11 | .71*** | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Non-acceptance | .25 | -.12 | .69*** | .65*** | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Strategies | .24 | .02 | .71*** | .64*** | .65*** | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Self forgiv. | .07 | .008 | -.25* | -.13 | -.17 | -.21 | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Sit. forgiv. | -.05 | -.02 | -.27* | -.23 | -.19 | -.18 | .32* | — | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 9. Irrational d.s. | .05 | .22 | .16 | .27* | .13 | .10 | -.15 | -.20 | — | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 10. Anxious d.s. | -.03 | .04 | .02 | -.01 | -.06 | .07 | -.17 | -.19 | .18 | — | | | | | | | | | | |
| 11. Patience-attentive d.s. | -.03 | -.08 | .11 | -.006 | .20 | .02 | .19 | .29* | -.16 | -.23 | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 12. Risky d.s. | .19 | .21 | -.02 | .13 | -.04 | -.07 | .03 | -.11 | .46*** | .06 | -.24 | — | | | | | | | | |
| 13. Angry d.s. | .17 | .18 | -.09 | -.03 | -.12 | -.04 | .12 | -.15 | .41*** | .06 | -.30* | .41*** | — | | | | | | | |
| 14. Avoidance-distress d.s. | .20 | .12 | .14 | .15 | .042 | .09 | .01 | .04 | .02 | .07 | -.11 | .23 | .28* | — | | | | | | |
| 15. Dissociative d.s | .35** | .23 | .41*** | .45*** | .34** | .29* | -.11 | -.07 | .19 | -.04 | .04 | .11 | .13 | .40** | — | | | | | |
| 16. Adaptive d.s. | -.05 | -.06 | .12 | -.01 | .17 | .06 | .09 | .18 | -.06 | .28* | .86*** | -.21 | -.26* | -.07 | .02 | — | | | | |
| 17. Maladaptive d.s | .25 | .29* | .10 | .23 | .03 | .05 | -.009 | -.17 | .72*** | .13 | -.28* | .77*** | .75*** | .49*** | .38** | .21 | — | | | |
| 18. Age | -.01 | .35** | -.12 | -.08 | -.13 | -.22 | .29* | .24 | -.13 | -.06 | .08 | -.15 | -.31* | -.13 | -.11 | .05 | -.26* | — | | |
| 19.Total DERS | .54*** | .26* | .84*** | .84*** | .78*** | .82*** | -.18 | -.21 | .25 | .01 | .05 | .10 | .01 | .19 | .50*** | .05 | .24 | -.18 | — | |
| 20.Total forgiveness | .008 | -.01 | -.32* | -.23 | -.23 | -.24 | .77*** | .85*** | -.22 | -.22 | .30* | -.05 | -.04 | .04 | -.11 | .18 | -.12 | .33** | .24 | — |

*Note.* * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

**Table 2**. One-Way ANOVA (Welch's)

|  | F | df1 | df2 | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The avoidance-distress driving style | 4.26 | 2 | 29.6 | 0.024 |

**Table 3.** Group Descriptives

|  | supervision period | N | Mean | SD | SE |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The avoidance-distress driving style | the beginning of the supervision | 32 | 7.56 | 5.27 | 0.931 |
|  | the middle of the supervision | 21 | 6.29 | 2.97 | 0.648 |
|  | the end of the supervision | 7 | 4.57 | 1.51 | 0.571 |

**Table 4.** T-Test

|  |  | t | df | **p** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| The maladaptive driving style | Student's t | -2.33 | 58 | 0.024 |
| The angry driving style | Student's t | -2.09 | 58 | 0.041 |
| The irrational driving style | Student's t | -2.39 | 58 | 0.020 |

**Table 5**. Group Descriptives

|  | Group | N | Mean | SD | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The maladaptive driving style | married | 25 | 46.4 | 14.40 | 2.881 |
|  | unmarried | 35 | 56.8 | 18.90 | 3.20 |
| The angry driving style | married | 25 | 10.6 | 4.68 | 0.936 |
|  | unmarried | 35 | 14.1 | 7.14 | 1.21 |
| The irrational driving style | married | 25 | 11.4 | 5.50 | 1.100 |
|  | unmarried | 35 | 15.3 | 6.77 | 1.14 |

## 4. Discussions

The research results show that the difficulties of emotional regulation faced by individuals convicted of traffic offenses recorded by the Suceava Probation Service do not correlate with the adaptive driving style (patient-attentive and distress avoidance) (Hypothesis 1). These results contradict previous studies, indicating that difficulties of emotional regulation negatively correlate significantly with adaptive driving style; Trógolo *et al.*, 2014). On the other hand, it was found that difficulties of emotional regulation positively correlate with

maladaptive driving style (irrational, anxious, risky, angry, dissociative (Hypothesis 2). Thus, it can be observed that, from the category of emotional regulation difficulties, impulse control positively correlates with the irrational driving style, a fact supported by previous studies (Totkova, 2020). Also, the lack of emotional clarity, difficulty in impulse control, non-acceptance of emotional responses, limited access to emotional regulation strategies, and the difficulty in engaging in goal-oriented behaviour positively correlate with the dissociative driving style, the latter correlation being confirmed by other studies (Trógolo et al., 2014) . The fact that emotional regulation difficulties partially correlate with the maladaptive driving style indicates that there may be other variables capable of influencing this style, such as age (Long & Ruosong, 2019; Padilla *et al.*, 2020; Navon & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2019). Regarding the correlation between emotional regulation difficulties and forgiveness (self-forgiveness and situational forgiveness), it has been found that the difficulty of engaging in goal-oriented behaviour negatively correlates significantly with self-forgiveness and situational forgiveness (Hypothesis 3). Analyzing the correlation between forgiveness (self and situational) and adaptive driving style, it is noted that situational forgiveness positively correlates with the patient-attentive driving style (Hypothesis 4), a finding also confirmed by previous studies (Navon & Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2019). Concerning the correlation between maladaptive driving style and forgiveness (self and situational), the results are statistically insignificant (Hypothesis 5). Age represents a variable that correlates negatively with difficulties in emotional regulation, more specifically, only with the lack of emotional awareness (Hypothesis 6). This aspect is contradicted by other previous studies that highlight the existence of a significant positive relationship between the two variables (Fischer *et al.*, 2016). No significant correlation was identified between age and forgiveness (of self and situational) (Hypothesis 7), which contradicts the results of other previous studies that show that, regarding the population in Romania, there is a significant negative correlation between age and forgiveness, both self-forgiveness and situational forgiveness (Zmău & Cuza, 2018). A significant negative correlation is noted between age and maladaptive driving style, with the mention that, from the category of maladaptive driving style, only the angry driving style significantly negatively correlates with age (Hypothesis 8). The adaptive driving style (patient-attentive, distress avoidance) varies depending on the supervision period. Thus, the distress-avoidance driving style is practiced more in the early part of the supervision period, while the patient-attentive driving style and the maladaptive one (irrational, anxious, risky, angry, dissociative) do not differ during the supervision period (Hypothesis 9). Referring to civil status, the results indicate that there are differences regarding the maladaptive driving style, the angry and irrational driving style being more commonly encountered than among married individuals. On the other hand, it seems that adaptive driving style does not differ by civil status, as it can occur among both young people and adolescents or seniors (Hypothesis 10).

## 4. Conclusions

The research results indicate that individuals who are convicted for traffic offenses face difficulties in emotional regulation (such as poor impulse control, low emotional responsiveness, difficulties in understanding emotions and identifying solutions to regulate them, and engaging in goal-oriented behaviour) and exhibit a higher vulnerability in terms of adopting a maladaptive driving style (irrational and dissociative). Individuals who practice situational forgiveness (are more lenient regarding their legal situation) resort to an adaptive driving style (patient-attentive). Regarding emotional awareness, younger individuals show more deficits, and this category also more frequently adopts a maladaptive driving style (angry). It is noteworthy that the adaptive driving style (of distress avoidance) is practiced more at the beginning of the supervision period by the target group, which raises questions about its evolution throughout the execution of the sentence. The likelihood of practicing an angry driving style, which correlates with traffic offenses, is more pronounced among unmarried individuals compared to those who are married.

Therefore, the categories identified above will represent the subject of interest in the professional activity I carry out within the Suceava Probation Service. Thus, I express my intention to develop specialized programs (mainly aimed at young people), in partnership with the National Probation Directorate, psychological offices, representatives of the religious communities, focusing on identifying difficulties in emotional regulation and practicing forgiveness as an emotional regulation strategy, there efforts converging towards adopting an adaptive driving style which, as studies show, has a negative correlation with traffic offenses.

### 4.1. Strong points and limitations

A primary strong point of the research is represented by the category of persons investigated, considering that, until now, a limited number of studies have been conducted on this sample. A second positive aspect that should be noted is related to the research results, which can serve as a starting point for initiating efforts to prevent traffic offenses and increase traffic safety.

As limitations of the study, I would point out the predominantly low to medium educational level of the individuals who are part of the target group, which complicated the data collection process. Another limitation relates to the fact that the individuals in the target group are serving a sentence, which could make some responses insincere or formulaic.

Nevertheless, the research reveals significant information about the specifics of the activity of the Suceava Probation Service, an institution with an impact on discouraging criminal phenomena, an institution that deserves to be better known.

### 4.2. Future research directions

Because the results of the present research indicate a high number of correlations between emotional regulation difficulties and dissociative driving style, I express interest in further exploring the association between these two variables in future studies.

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# BOOK REVIEW

## Valentina Cornea, *Construcția socială a administrației publice. Procese și instituții / The Social Construction of Public Administration. Processes and Institutions*, Presa Universitara Clujeana, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 2024

**Geta MITREA[1]**

The book „*Construcția socială a administrației publice. Procese și instituții*" *[The social construction of public administration. Processes and institutions]*, written by Valentina Cornea, has an absolutely unique subject in the Romanian academic landscape and in neighbouring countries with common origins. It is written and structured clearly, coherently, and is very well argued. It represents scientific research that has as its object the processes and institutions within the social construction of public administration.

The issue addressed by the author is a current and relevant one for the field of sociology and public administration that she investigates and in which she works as an expert, researcher, and teacher who prepares future generations of specialists in this field.

The six chapters of the book address complex and important themes for public administration. One can observe the breadth and academic rigor that the author demonstrated when preparing the manuscript, because she analysed the particularities of public administration from all possible angles.

This work correlates very well the normative theories that guide administrative behaviour, with those designed to explain the concept of public interest (utilitarianism, contractualism, communicative action theory). Also, classical political theories are brought into discussion (May's Theorem), the theories of Gellner and Hobsbawm, and Anthony D. Smith, all of which try to capture the social essence of public administration.

It started from „Origins. Modeling the institution" (chapter 1), where it presents the analytical framework, the definitions identified in the national and international specialized literature of the „institution" and its implications, emphasizing also the „rationale of public administration" and concluding with the

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„ontological status" of this social construction.

In the following two chapters, the author focuses on „institutional architecture" and „utopian institutions, "where she manages to present elements of the distribution of power, the particularities of democracy and specific bureaucracy, local autonomy, and decentralization. And in the last subchapter, she professionally presents „Ethnic harmony: autonomy or decentralization? „with its particularities.

In the chapter that follows the scientific approach, the author highlights „public interest". Here, various theories existing in the specialized literature are concentrated and presented, as well as definitions identified on the subject brought to the public's attention. All of the above support the author in supporting the fact that the mentioned theories „*give the public interest an ethical, non-subjective dimension, which serves the entire community"* (p. 117).

I particularly note the way in which the author Valentina Cornea managed to bring to the public's attention the „iron law of oligarchy", developed by R. Michels, which states that „*any leader tends to distance himself from the concerns and interests of those he represents due to his functionality and specialization as a politician"* (quoted from Vlăsceanu, p. 122 of the book).

The chapter dedicated to „public services" faithfully presents conceptual dilemmas, the way of organization and provision, the institutional-administrative responses, new paradigms and models of social involvement appropriate to the contemporary society in which we all operate, with the related challenges.

I particularly note the author's contribution regarding the final chapter entitled „Kitsch - an effect of discretionary power?" in which she presents its particularities in the field of public administration, a courageous and thoroughly argued interpretation, concluding at one point „*Kitsch in itself is not offensive, but it vitiates"* (p. 178).

The conclusions of the research are presented clearly, orderly, and succinctly at the end of each chapter. They are followed by the author's personal proposals worthy of all attention. Finally, I express my wish that the analyses and research carried out in this work represent starting points for new understandings and interpretations of the improvement of the social construction of local, regional, and national public administration (and beyond).

The methodology used for this manuscript is focused on the analysis of documents and legislation in the field of public administration and the social field. Also, the following scientific research methods and models used by the author can be identified: secondary data analysis and content analysis. The practical research was carried out on several levels, well highlighted in the paper.

The documentation for the drafting of the work is carried out at a high level. I particularly appreciate the personal interpretation that the author gave to the attributes of kitsch, identified in the decisions of local authorities, and presented synthetically on pages 172-174 of the book. This success in the content of the work is also explained by the fact that Mrs. Valentina Cornea is an expert employed at the University „Dunărea de Jos" from Galați and with extensive

previous experience in the field of public administration as a civil servant during the period 2000 - 2003, when she worked at the Cahul County Council in the Republic of Moldova. From this point of view, she has important and significant experience regarding the field of the administrative apparatus and its social construction from a dual perspective, both from Romania and from the Republic of Moldova.

The bibliographical references are varied and exhaustive. One can easily identify both classical references that underlie the subject analysed in this manuscript, by established authors such as: Locke, J. (1689); Mead, M. (1937); Weber, M. (1947); Mills, W. (1956); Bourdieu, P. (1984); as well as recent, current studies from the contemporary period such as: Abrutyn, S., & Turner, J. (2022); Bryane, M., Kattel, R., and Drechsler, W. (Eds.) (2017); Vlăsceanu, M. (1993); Zamfir, C., & Stănescu, S. (coordinators) (2007).

It is also worth noting that the bibliographical sources used represent a harmonious combination of local authors with remarkable activity, as well as those who have worked internationally and developed multiple theories and far-reaching studies on the subject analysed in this paper.

The book „*Construcția socială a administrației publice. Procese și instituții*” *[The social construction of public administration. Processes and institutions]* written by Valentina Cornea, is of a high scientific level. I note with particular pleasure that it brings new contributions both in terms of theoretical approaches and in terms of concrete analyses, proving an indisputable application potential for the process of management and administration of public administration in Romania, with the possibility of replication in neighbouring countries.