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SCIENCE AND SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE OR WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW ABOUT WHAT WE BELIEVE WE KNOW

Vladimir PASTI[1]

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ABSTRACT. What is knowledge and how can we analyse it from within social sciences as social knowledge? Our socially driven intuition tells us that knowledge is a special relation that humans have with their surrounding world. Its specificity lies primarily in the fact that it implies a direct interaction with the environment. Another important and interesting characteristic of knowledge is its tendency to replace interactions with reality with interactions between pieces of knowledge produced about that specific reality. Connected to this, regarding the issue of truth, paraphrasing both Einstein and Smith, this article argues that 'an invisible hand' of the realities of social phenomena makes it so, that the accepted truths of a certain society are those and only those that are functional for the survival and reproduction of that society. And for this to happen it is a must that the elite designated with the production and the legitimation of 'the truths' exists and produces those 'truths' that support the 'general interest' of that respective society. Most importantly is to understand that the consistency of the legitimated truths with the dominant values of the society imbedded in its social order is far more important that their consistency with the empirical observations of the reality.

Keywords: knowledge, truth, ideology, social science

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Albert Einstein and the mysteries of knowledge

i. The major difficulty in dealing with knowledge is that we do not know what it is[2]. Our socially driven intuition tells us that knowledge is a special relation that humans have with their surrounding world. Its specificity lies primarily in the fact that it implies a direct interaction with the environment, although some forms of knowledge, such as art, religion, logic, and mathematics can function very well without it. Another important and interesting characteristic of knowledge is its tendency to replace interactions with reality with interactions between pieces of knowledge produced about that specific reality. People do not necessarily react to reality as it is, but to what they believe it is. In some cases, this substitution can prove useful. As a child, I did not have to actually try to catch a flame with my hand to figure out that such an action is undesirable. The adults around me delivered me this knowledge to protect me from a painful burn. In other cases, the substitution can be harmful. In medieval times, people swarmed into the churches during epidemics in hope of receiving deliverance based on the 'knowledge' that God had sent them disease and death as a punishment for their sins, an action that, in fact, only spread the disease even more.

In the first example, I could have probably reached the same conclusion based on my own perceptions, but sometimes knowledge received from others has priority over our own perceptions, or even opposes them. The reason I know the Earth revolves around the Sun instead of the other way around is that this knowledge was transmitted to me by others and I had to accept it as true, although I could see the Sun moving daily across the sky from east to west. And despite the fact that everybody knows from personal experience that one cannot fly on a broomstick, thousands of people were burned to death by their ancestors in the Western and Central Europe during the XV-XVI centuries, bases on the knowledge that flying on a broomstick was possible, and that those who did it were antisocial (Mackay, S.C., 2006).

Going back to the question of what knowledge is, we tend to think that it has something to do with information about our surroundings, which, if processed and interpreted correctly, will confirm, complete, or change what we already know. But in fact, we do not know what information is. We only know its effect on us. We know that it functions as a stimulus to which sometimes we react and other times we ignore, depending on how we integrate it in the set of knowledge

[2] In order to be able to discuss the issue of knowledge, I'm using an improvised and imperfect definition of knowledge as being a social product resulted from a common interpretation of multiple personal sensory perceptions, or generational transmitted to us that is functional for the survival and reproduction of a member of a social group or/and of the group itself (upon which the survival of the individual relies anyway).

that we already have. This applies both to individuals and to societies. But it seems that information exists even beyond us and our societies, given that all living (and non-living) matter reacts to stimuli. Information has come to be regarded as a characteristic of reality that is as important and omnipresent as time, space, energy, etc.[3] (Hidalgo, Cesar. 2015). Being of such crucial importance, common sense (we do not know what 'common sense' is either!) tells us we ought to struggle to figure out what information is, in the same way we struggle to figure out the principle notions that lays at the fundamental structure of any knowledge system such as time, space, energy, matter, the universe, life, conscience, human beings, society, etc.

Wrong! If we set aside what common sense tells us, if we set aside rational thinking as it is defined by any of the logical and/or mathematical theories, if we set aside all philosophies, epistemologies, and illuminations produced by the knowledge elites of any given time and we take into consideration only the known history of knowledge, then we realize not only that we have never truly known the realities that are being described by all of the above disciplines and notions - if any, but we also realize that they have had different meanings along history and across societies. However, this aspect doesn't seem to have inconvenienced any society in their quest to describe and explain the reality, neither does it seems to do so for us today, despite the staunch rigours imposed by the scientific methodology, which anyway pertain only to the measuring of reality and not to its description or understanding.

ii. It is Einstein[4] (Einstein, A., 1995) who offers the most clear and easy to grasp general model of knowledge, although he refers only to science: '*Science is the attempt to make the chaotic diversity of our sense-experience correspond to a logically uniform system of thought' (*Einstein, A., 1995:323). Of course science does that, but it is far from being original in this matter. Any given form of knowledge – from the most primitive burning rituals that we know of to language, writing, music, and visual arts - function in the same way. The only difference is that they use different means and apparently have different objectives.

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3 '*The universe is made of energy, matter, and information',* Cesar Hidalgo wrote an entire book about information without explaining what information is, except that it is the *deus ex machina* that counteracts the second law of thermodynamics.

4 In the next part, I will make intensive use of the opinions of Einstein regarding knowledge in the general and scientific sense, since it is my belief that, to this day, although a century of scientific discoveries separates him from us, he is the one who captured its essence better than any of his followers. I also rely on the argument of authority because even though the theory of relativity was contested by quantum theory, Einsteinian epistemology has not yet been significantly contested by anyone.

Knowledge is nothing but the social effort to adapt the perceptions gathered through our senses to the means of actions that we use in relationship with our environment. But this is what all living matter does (we do not know what 'living matter' is!), most of it reacting in an 'instinctual' manner. We also do not know what instincts are, but we do know that they set in motion an algorithm of chemical and behavioral reactions to a perceived stimulus. We also know that the more complex organized the matter is, the more complex these sensors become and the more they complicate the algorithms of reactions. In situations that go beyond the limits of instinctual 'knowledge' some creatures[5] become extinct, making room for a different species in the ecological niche, a species more capable of reacting efficiently to the environmental conditions that led to the extinction of their predecessors. But this biologically implemented mechanism is of course limited. Therefore, during the evolution of species a new mechanism came into being, a mechanism that we now call 'thinking' and, in the case of our species (perhaps of all hominids), we call 'rational thinking'.

Along with the continuous expansion of the organizational complexity of living matter, a new biological mechanism for processing signals developed. We will tackle this later. For now, we recall that we are dealing with a first level of knowledge - which consists of rational interpretation of sensorial perceptions and of different mechanisms of using these interpretations in order to allow and produce behavioural reactions (actions, activities) meant to ensure the survival of the respective species. Taken individually, they use only a minimum of knowledge, insufficient for the sophisticated organization of human cooperation, which is indispensable to the survival of homo sapiens. That is why there is a second level of knowledge, which Einstein describes for science as a theoretical model of the world perceived through the senses. We perceive reality as fragments in time and space, the same way we are discovering one by one the pieces of a giant puzzle. Regardless of if they are the result of the accumulation, over time, of random individual or collective daily experiences, the result of long chains of systematic observations made by ancient priests, or the result of case studies developed by contemporary scientists, there is nothing rational in the multitude of these pieces of puzzle. For this reason, this multitude of puzzle pieces have to be reduced to a model of reality that includes as many pieces of the puzzle as possible, a model which is rational by the virtue of its construction. '*Man tries to make for himself in the fashion that suits him best a simplified and intelligible picture of the world; he then tries to some extent to substitute this cosmos of his for the world of experience, and thus to overcome it*' (Einstein, A., 1995:225). In

[5] By 'creature' I am referring to a living organism whose biography is autonomous in relation to the history of the species it belongs to.

short, knowledge – scientific for Einstein and general in our context – consists in the replacement of a chaotic and thus irrational world of isolated experiences with the unitary order of a rational model created by humans to 'suit them best'. This means a model upon which they base and construct their actions and reactions, to govern the reality. Or at least they think they do.

This model has, again according to Einstein, two component parts and a shortcoming. The first component is a system of universal principles that, in a way similar to the axioms of Euclidian geometry, seems obvious and intelligible and between which clear relationships of determination can be established[6]. In Einstein's view, causality is the fundamental principle of knowledge and of the evolution of knowledge: any given reality has a cause. Which is to say that knowledge consists of the theoretical identification (created by humans) of the hidden causes of the realities perceived through our senses and experiences, be them mundane or specifically constructed for the purpose of pursuing knowledge i.e., scientific experiments. The second component consists of the logical elaborations of the model, which can generate realities that have not yet been experienced, realities previously hidden from knowledge. Either because they are rare, or because they are not accessible to our senses, regardless of how much we may amplify them by the means of the most ingenious instruments.

The shortcoming Einstein was referring to, consists in that there is no rational way, no logical algorithm, no standardizable method to construct these models. The only way to obtain them is, on one hand to resort to what seems obvious – as Euclid did with his postulates - and on the other hand, and more importantly, on intuition. But we do not know what intuition is! According to the Encyclopedia Britannica[7], credited to be the synthesis of all knowledge by the "knowers" of the world, intuition is the power to produce knowledge in a way that ignores both the givens of experience and the results of rational thinking. The way I see it, it is similar to the idea of revelation in the sense that intuition can be given just as much trust as it is given to the knowledge occurred through dreams, divination, palmistry, etc. However, Einstein – a symbol of scientific knowledge, which is considered to be the most rigorous and rational form of knowledge ever to be accepted as foundational for human action and decision-making – describes intuition as the essential mechanism for constructing a scientific model of the world, be that the natural world that we confront, or the social world in which we live. This is especially revealing in relationship with the exceptional rigour of scientific knowledge which is the dominant form of knowledge in the contemporary world.

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[6] Of the type $E=mc^2$.

[7] https://www.britannica.com/topic/intuition

iii. Nevertheless the arbitrariness of the intuitions of those who create models of reality has very surprising underpinnings – as they are strictly personal[8]- and it inevitably leads to a plurality of alternative models of reality, which are equally accepted and efficient. Einstein is aware of this shortcoming in his description of the (scientific) knowledge process, and also of its radical contrast with the precision and rigour elicited by the mathematical-quantitative approach to the phenomenal world. He tries to solve it by appealing to the same type of *Deus ex machina* that Adam Smith had used to explain the paradoxical social efficiency produced by individual egos interfering with one another. An appeal to "an invisible hand".

> '*Nobody who has really gone deeply into the matter will deny that in practice the world of phenomena uniquely determines the theoretical system, in spite of the fact that there is no logical bridge between phenomena and their theoretical use'* (Einstein, A., 199:226).

He was deluding himself, and with him all those who thought that the scientific experiment - this exceptional and defining instrument for the natural sciences, which attempts to reproduce a tiny part of the universe in a laboratory environment; a part that is then considered representative for the entire universe - is truly capable of, at least in these domains, to make a selection among the theoretical systems proposed by different, more or less ingenious systems based on intuitions.

Because the 'world of phenomena' does not 'uniquely determines the theoretical system'. There is also another determination, which Einstein knew about but choose to ignore – the society, or the social factor. Those who had tackled the issue in depth and had recognized the miraculous determinant factor evoked by Einstein were none other than a social group specifically constituted to serve as a legitimating force for its explanation. Einstein does not tell us anything about the criteria that this group had used to confirm the reality described by him, and it is easy to understand why. He does not know what

[8] Einstein recounts that he intuited the problem of special relativity by wondering what happens to a tomato in a free-fall elevator. The physicist P.L. Kapitza recounted that, while visiting an IBM research institute in Switzerland, he found excellently equipped laboratories that were half-empty. Asking the hosts where the researchers were, it was explained to him that they organized their own working time and that the institute provided them with swimming pools, sports fields, etc. because one never knew when and where an idea would strike, which could then be tested in the laboratories. The whole ensemble of heuristic methods is itself based on the premise of advancing science by harnessing the intuition of the researchers.

these criteria are, the same way he does not know what criteria he himself had used to reach his affirmations. We thus arrive at a fork in the road that opens two diverging paths of research which are ultimately reunited through the same answers. But to arrive at this answer we need, in the first place, to remove the mystery that unjustifiably shrouds the hallucinations of shamans, the divine revelations, Adam Smith's invisible hand, or the determination of the phenomenal reality in the natural sciences, a paradigm supported with conviction by Einstein and any other type of *Deus ex machina.* Then, we have to understand why neither Einstein nor many others among those who were in full knowledge of the scientific world and its inner workings did not give the same answer as we are about to provide now.

iv. Einstein's appeal to a group whose function is to legitimate his affirmations is in conformity with social reality where an ignored or vetoed truth does not produce any effects. These groups roam throughout the history of knowledge like ants around an anthill, with the precise function of legitimating a certain rational model of reality and of delegitimating all the others. We are not dealing with any invisible hand nor with a phenomenal reality mysteriously determining the truth. We are dealing with people who give or refuse to give credit to a man-made model of reality based on criteria which cannot be granted to have any relationship to the phenomenal reality referred to by Einstein.

In the third Century BCE, at the request of the Syracuse's tyrant, Archimedes developed a short summary of all the knowledge available about the universe at the time, in which he described the Ptolemaic model of a universe as being made up of concentric spheres centered around the Earth. A model of the world which was accepted by all Greeks "who had really gone deeply into the matter", including Archimedes himself. He briefly, and with scientific probity, mentioned a certain Aristarch of Samos who had developed a heliocentric theoretical model that no one paid attention to at the time. It would take more than eighteen centuries until Copernicus would relaunch the heliocentric model and at least another two centuries of confrontations between 'those who had really gone deeply into the matter'. Around six centuries later (325 CE), at Nicaea, in the Eastern Roman Empire, several such experts gathered to establish which of the Christian writings – among which some were already more than two centuries old - contained the true teachings of Christ. Given the fact that the Christian churches at the time were either in disagreement or in competition with one another, the result of the competition was decided in terms of the balance of power between the different groups, and not according to a reality which was in any case unknown to any of the participants. Much later, a smaller council met at the royal court of the future Charles VII of France, to establish whether the dreams of a French teenager about the coronation of the French heir and the occupation of the city of Orleans were divine revelations or not. Given that all the present experts were supporters of Charles VII, the result of the expertise depended less on examining the divine nature of the message appeared in the dream, but more on the immediate interests of the respective experts. Of course, the number of such cases can be multiplied endlessly in any given historical period.

None of these illustrations of the socially determined nature of legitimized, and therefore accepted, knowledge refers to science. Science, which is presumed to be essentially different from all other forms of unscientific knowledge, such as myths, religions, art etc., should have a thoroughly different mechanism when selecting its theoretical system, as Einstein calls it, or its paradigm, in the words of Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn, T., 1962), or the *hard core* of its theoretical program, as Imre Lakatos names it. And, at least here, in the realm of physics - the most "scientific" of all sciences, the ideal model of ideal scientific knowledge - we ought to be able to find that reality-driven determination of the fundamental principles of knowledge. But no such thing! What we find is an endless number of councils of the same type held at Nicaea, pretentiously called 'peer review', which means 'revised by colleagues' and which arbitrarily decides 'the truth' of a product of the intuition of their peers. Peer review is a fairly complex mechanism, but in essence it does not ensure that the theoretical model is determined by phenomenal reality. All that it does ensure is that a majority of those members of the scientific community who find themselves in positions of authority decide that a certain model of reality should be adopted by most researchers in the field.

The existence of a well-defined, rigid, and all-encompassing structure of authority in any scientific community is a well-known reality. What is less known is the process through which it is established. The ideology that legitimates the hierarchy of authority positions in science is based on the myth according to which the authority of the knowers derives from the quantity and quality of the knowledge that they possess. The reality though is more prosaic. What we preciously call "scientific community" is in fact a social elite like any other, as thoroughly structured, and bureaucratic like any other, and legitimized in the same way as any other. Which is to say, by means of the same social mechanisms of power distribution that exists in a particular society. That is why, when an eminent professor from the University of Texas counted 24 pairs of chromosomes and published the result, this number immediately gained an authority proportional to the status of the respective professor, amplified by the authority attributed to the University of Texas on the knowledge field. As a result, the number of 24 chromosomes was taken up and repeated so often that it became a truth as solid as the one that affirms that the Earth is round. All those who afterwards had the occasion or the curiosity to redo the counting would have to lean over backwards to reach the 'correct' results. And even if they couldn't manage to count the 24 pairs, they would prefer to believe that their methods had been inadequate. It would take 33 years of scientific and social evolution until another American would count only 23 pairs and it would become accepted that the first professor had simply been wrong.

Social knowledge

i. Einstein's description of knowledge in general and of scientific knowledge in particular is a structure made up of four components, two of which are realities observable via the senses - human experiences and the abstract models of realities - and the other two are 'mysterious'. The first one of the last pair is the 'intuition' of the theoretician who is constructing a theoretical model by struggling to achieve what rational thought cannot achieve, which is to bind the theoretical model to human experiences. Intuition is an extremely personal and imprecise mechanism of knowledge production, and what these features eventually lead to is the simultaneous apparition of a plurality of divergent or contradictory models of reality described by the senses (Einstein, A., 1995). But empirical reality, at least the reality as described by the physics contemporary to Einstein and his followers, proves that in the end a single model is accepted as the 'true one' by most members of the knowledge elite. However, explaining such a common choice is a difficult problem since one has to find a cause for this common choice, and a mechanism that provides the necessary links that insures such a unity of agreement. There are only two categories of possible candidates for this cause: either the common choice is determined by the results of the study of reality itself, due to its obvious evidence, or it is determined by the social realities to which both the creator of the model and his peers belong. Einstein *had* to choose the first category, in order to be consistent with the methodological principle of the objectivity of science, that proclaims that scientific knowledge is independent of any social determination or influence, which make its models universally true.

But such a choice transformed the problem of the mechanism linking the cause (the reality) to its effect into an insoluble one, since Einstein himself was rightfully sure that there was no rational thinking that links empirical observations to the model itself. So that, Einstein launches the hypotheses of a 'mysterious determination', similar to the one launched by Adam Smith a century and a half earlier regarding the 'invisible hand' that acts in order to reunite the egotistical actions of individuals on the market in service of the public interest. Namely, the interest that Adam Smith and the social group he belonged agreed upon being "the general interest". Of course, Einstein knew the underpinnings of the peer review system, as well as the general structure of authority that exists in any and especially in the scientific knowledge production – he was part of it all! He was well aware of his personal legitimating power in his field and consequently in politics and in society as a whole. What he was not aware of was that belonging to this complex network of relationships could determine him to build and his peers to agree to the choice of the dominant model to describe physical reality. He did not realize that he is combining *the apples of the experimental truths with the pears of the legitimate truths* and that by doing so he violated his own methodological principles. Because the legitimation that is given to a theoretical model of the reality by an institionalized group of people doesn't make it valid, it only gives it credit by default. This credit implicitly discredits all the alternative models either by eliminating them (sometimes with the input of their creators as well) or by ignoring them and thus making them inconsequential upon reality. It is precisely the same mechanism that is used in any mythology, in any religion, any political discourse, and any artistic current, etc.

Paraphrasing both Einstein and Smith I would suggest that 'an invisible hand' of the realities of social phenomena makes it so, that the accepted truths of a certain society are those and only those that are functional for the survival and reproduction of that society. And for this to happen it is a must that the elite designated with the production and the legitimation of 'the truths' exists and produces those 'truths' that support the 'general interest' of that respective society, i.e., legitimize its existing9 social order. Most importantly is to understand that the consistency of the legitimated truths with the dominant values of the society imbedded in its social order is far more important that their consistency with the empirical observations of the reality. That`s why there is no algorithm that could link empirical reality to a rational model of natural reality, since rationality means selecting and adapting non-social realities to a social instituted objective, while natural realities have no objectives. So that there is nothing misterious with the intuition. It is just the non-logical mechanism that allows the researcher to rationalize the existing empirical experiences according to the necessities and the objectives of the societies he is a member of.

Neither is what Einstein believed to be the influence of the world of phenomena on the choice of the true model of reality a mistery any more. Mainly, because there is none or, the best case, its influence is quite limited. In science,

[9] In some cases these truths may legitimate the emergence of an alternative social order which needs, of course needs the emergence of a new social knowledge.

as well as in any other pre-scientific form of knowledge, there will be empirical observations or known realities that are not consistent with its accepted model, but can not be ignored. So that any form of knowledge will develop pseudo-explanations or any other form that permit to accept them as real but unable to falsify the existing dominant model. '*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy*'[10] is as good an illustration as '*God works in a misterious way*' in pre-scientific science, as it is the existence of paradoxes in any existing scientific theory.

The extent to which a legitimate truth is consistent with the reality may well be slightly relevant, as it is in any ancient explanation that now we consider to be just a myth or a false true. Social knowledge doesn't about this. What really matters for it is that a certain assertion about reality provides the legitimate knowledge for an equally legitimate reaction of the society if and when it has to react. It might be a prayer or an antibiotic, a new technology or a new economic or social policy, such as an increase of the price of credit or the emancipation of slaves. The effectiveness of such a technical or social engineering is also less irrelevant as much as its failure may be explain within the same legitimate theory, paradigm or according with the postulates of the social knowledge. Any alternative description of the natural or social reality In other words, since in order for any type of truth to be accepted in a society as being as such, it has to be legitimized by appealing to a "general truth", the conclusion is that science, like any other forms of knowledge, legitimizes its models of reality according to a general knowledge, generally accepted by the society for its instrumental functionality in the process of reproducing itself. In what follows I will identify this knowledge as 'social knowledge'[11].

ii. *Social knowledge* is that knowledge credited as being 'true' in a given society at a given point in its history It constitutes the foundation and the legitimation for all existing and accepted realities of a society: the values, the objectives, the instruments, and the practices of the different subsystems that form the respective society and the majority of its members. That is, all that exists in a society or in a human community - from language to food recipes, from social relations to dress codes and from power networks to art, entertainment or sexual relations. The social knowledge opposes any attempt aimed at diminishing its domination, regardless of whether such an attempt is internal or external, but remains in the same time tolerant, flexible, and dynamic. A triad of characteristics that we basically find in any type of the life form organization that we call society.

[10] Shakespeare, W., *Hamlet,* act I, scene 5, any edition.

[11] The introduction of the concept of "social knowledge" raises many questions about the nature and structure of society that I will not deal with in this article.

Traveling in the USA, the count of Tocqueville criticize the censorship effect that the American democracy - which he considered a tyranny of the majority - had upon thinking:

> *... tant que la majorité est douteuse, on parle; mais dès qu'elle s'est irrévocablement prononcée, chacun se tait, et amis comme ennemis semblent alors s'attacher de concert à son char. ... Je ne connais pas de pays où il règne, en général, moins d'indépendance d'esprit et de véritable liberté de discussion qu'en Amérique.*[12] (Tocquevile, A. de, 1835:84)

A few decades later, Mark Twain was expressing the same idea through his famous quip, saying that God gave Americans two exceptional gifts: "freedom of speech and the wisdom of not using it".

Both Tocqueville and Mark Twain were referring to a specific type of political discourse and behaviour, where the social control is often doubled by the control of the state's administrative and repressive institutions. In the case of knowledge elites, especially of those whose activity is far removed from the mundane issues of policies and ideologies, the determinants of social knowledge are more subtle, but nevertheless efficient.

We already know that in societies in which the dominant form of knowledge was non-scientific - the most at hand example being the religious societies – the social determination of knowledge in regard to the natural and social realities was predominant. From Socrates, who was forced to drink poison for his philosophical ideas, to Giordano Bruno who was burned at the stake for his cosmic pluralist vision of an infinite, uncentered universe, to Galileo Galilei who was imprisoned and forced to renounce his heliocentric model of the universe, to the scientific works of Jewish scholars that were burned by antisemites or to the banning of sociology and genetics by Stalin, the dominant ideology had the same dogmatic character that religious dogma used to have in societies where the dominant form of knowledge was that in the shape of the revelation, which the dogmatic authorities attested to be of divine origin.

However, we are firmly convinced, like Einstein, that an 'arbiter of truth' exists at least in the natural sciences, and that this arbiter is the reality itself. And, since societies believe this to be true, so do most scientists. Their conviction runs so deep to the extent that the entire structure of scientific research - from

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[12] '...as long as the majority has doubts, debate occurs; but once the majority has irrevocably decided, everyone is silent, and friends or foes rally to its chariot... I know of no other country in which independence of spirit and genuine freedom of debate reign more poorly than in America.'

the construction of the scientific experiment to the construction of the theoretical models which are foundational to the experimental realities that they are probing - is built upon it. But in the same time, we also know that this theory (of the prevailing of reality upon the imagination of theoreticians in various fields of research) has its shortfalls. And furthermore, we are all aware, as was Einstein, that a scientific community, national or even international, in the end is just a social group like any other, subjected to the influences and the pressures of the society. Which is perfectly normal, given that, as we previously established, science exists so as to be useful to society – either through its direct results or through the engineering processes that it provides grounds for. If it wasn't, instead of science we would be dealing with a 'glass bead game'[13], perfectly useless and therefore condemned to extinction, an action that any society would take if it would reach the conclusion that it is wasting its resources on the high maintenance of an elite whose products are useless even for themselves.

iii. Immanuel Wallerstein made the just observation that scientific disciplines are cultures (Wallerstein, I, 2004). Such cultures contain a certain quantity of legitimated knowledge, they contain criteria for identifying the science behind a research, norms and rites for inducting new members and ideas (theories), what Thomas Kuhn called 'paradigm', and Imre Lakatos's 'research program', and all of the other socio-scientific baggage specific to the respective field of knowledge. And, in Einstein's words, all those who have dealt with the issue of scientific knowledge recognize, under one name or another, the existence of a global culture of science. A culture which the society considers legitimate and able to induce authority. But they stopped at that, believing that anything more said would contribute to the delegitimization of science as a dominant form of knowledge in society. In reality, similar to any subculture of a society, the scientific one is subsumed to the culture represented by social knowledge and this subordination presupposes the inclusion, in the scientific culture, of a set of values, foundational myths, convictions - be them religious or secular - and ideological beliefs, etc. which describe a general picture of the world we live in.

For Einstein, two such myths prohibited him from reaching an understanding of social knowledge as a decisive component of the mysterious mechanism that operates the selection of one unique model of reality among the totality of such models constructed by the theoreticians of the field. The first is the myth of the objectivity of the scientific knowledge of nature. The second is the myth of individualism in scientific research (of the realities of nature). None of these attest to any other reality, apart from the reality of the historical existence of

[13] The phrase belongs to the German writer Herman Hesse and is described at length in his dystopian novel of the same title.

these two convictions. And none of them are specific to scientific knowledge, although they are often taken as intellectual foundations of its existence and organization.

The myth of objective knowledge, or the myth of truth affirms the capacity of the dominant form of knowledge in a society at a given moment to describe a reality and its relationships with the realities it interferes with, exactly as they are. We know from history that societies have periodically changed their dominant forms of knowledge, and they have therefore used different models in order to describe the same realities. What we also know from history is that it is not for the sake of truth that societies change their dominant form of knowledge, but because they themselves change and as a result they have to change their dominant form of social knowledge. And along with every change, the new dominant form of knowledge convincingly argues the falsity of the previously valid model of reality, and in an equally convincing way argues for the superiority of its own model.

This is how the eminent physician Steven Weinberg proceeded in his book popularizing the Big Bang theory as a theoretical model for the origin of the known universe. He opposed the sophisticated theory of contemporary physics to a Norse myth explaining the same origin. The Norse myth claimed that the universe had been created by a giant with extraordinary powers who was feeding on the milk of a cow that ate salt (Weinberg, S., 1985). Given that societies have at all times constructed myths about the origin of the universe and given that other myths of this type were more familiar to him and to these readers, it is obvious that Weinberg searched for the most incredible, most improbable and ridiculous myth about the origin of the universe that he could find, in order to set the Big Bang in opposition to it[14]. It is obvious that the Norse explanation about the giant and the cow is totally unacceptable as a model of the apparition of the universe for contemporary society, but in fact there are two characteristics of this opposed explanations of the origin of the universe that are mostly relevant for our research. The fact that the two explanations have, in the end, the same structure and the same essential shortcoming. And the fact that Norse society, like all other societies in history, managed well enough with their own model of a universe created by a giant fed by a cow[15], just like the contemporary societies manage with a model of the universe created through a Big Bang.

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[14] As it is equally obvious that he avoided using the Christian myth of the origin of the universe for social, commercial and political reasons.

[15] The Norse myth is not as original as Weinberg thinks. In Greek mythology, Zeus was fed on the milk of a goat.

iv. When it comes to the structure of the origin myths, they usually[16] start off from a reality which pre-exists and is exterior to the universe – a logical shortcoming, given that any universe should contain its origin - and from a cause that is put into motion by unknown reasons, followed by a semi-automatic development of a process that leads to the apparition of the world as we know it; that is, as it is known by the social knowledges of the societies that created and adopted the respective myth as a theory for the origin of the universe. In the Norse myth, the reality pre-existing the universe is formed by the cow-giant couple and, of course, the block of salt, while the motivation behind the giant's creation of the universe is unknown to us. In the same way that God's motivation for 'creating Heaven and Earth', as by the oldest version of the Christian myth (Genesis, 1.1), is unknown. In the explanatory model of contemporary physics, 'in the beginning' there was 'a singularity' - an unknown and unknowable entity that was devoid of dimensions (space and time) and was infinitely[17] hot. For unknowable reasons, it exploded (Big Bang) and gave birth to the current universe according to the 'laws of nature', meaning the regularities that we observed in our study of the universe - around 13 billion years later, and that seem to have necessarily been contained in that singularity, and therefore to have pre-existed the known universe.

Before being dismantled by any faithful enthusiast of the truths produced by science for my impermissible reduction of the sophisticated physics-mathematical theory of the Big Bang so that it resembles the ridiculous origin myth adopted by the Norse long ago in the unscientific past, I want to make an appeal to the double authority of the Vatican and of the well-known English physicist, Stephen Hawking. In one of his books he talks about how he participated in a conference about cosmology held at the Vatican, followed by a meeting with the pope during which it was explained to them that the Catholic Church accepts the Big Bang theory, but that physicists '*should not inquire into the Big Bang itself because that was the moment of creation and therefore the work of God*.' (Hawking, S., 2003:63) A few pages later he admits that, if the anthropic principle is accepted, as some physicists do, then '*It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us' (*Hawking, S., 2003:74). Thus, the Vatican and Hawking are

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[16] I generalize, without any statistical grounding, the few myths of the origin of the universe that I am familiar with, and there are not many. I believe the generalization in no way affects the present argument, for in fact it is enough to observe that the Norse myth and the Bing Bang theory have the same explanatory structure.

[17] 'Infinitely' is not a measure of anything. It is a euphemistic formula used by mathematicians and scientists alike, in order to acknowledge that we are clueless about something.

doing exactly the same thing - recognizing the structural resemblance between the scientific explanation and the mythological one. And this resemblance must have a source, which may be the result of a biological or social determination of humans - we can only conceive explanations in this manner. But at the end of the day, this determination is one and the same thing since the primordial human (homo erectus) was conceived and formed exclusively within and under the protection of society and thus his biological evolution was geared towards adapting to the requirements of social life instead of adapting to those of the natural environment, as did the other animals.

If this is how things are with this explanatory structure[18], then in no way are we dealing with a determination by the phenomenal world - by the empirical reality - of the selection of the model of reality deemed as being "true". The selection among the plurality of models of reality that consecrate knowledge of any type belongs more likely to what we have called social knowledge, than to any determination elicited by the phenomenal world. It is out of the question for the phenomenal world to have influenced the myth of the giant and the cow in any way, because there is no empirical evidence that any of the two had ever existed anywhere outside the imagination of the creators of the myth. And the fact that myths or theories of this or any other kind share the same structure should rather convince us that beyond the plurality of social knowledges particular to each society, they all have a common set of elements that define social knowledge in general, a sort of generic social knowledge that has two essential and permanent components – daily experience as a mechanism for collecting information from reality, and rational thinking - as an instrument for ordering, processing and inferring models of reality. None of these two components fulfil the rigorous conditions presupposed by the ideal model of science and, more importantly, none of them are situated outside of the determination of social knowledge.

Daily experience is on the one hand selective, and on the other it is fully subordinated to the model of reality, regardless of how that model is constructed. Which is to say, daily experience/observation only rarely occurs randomly or under the pressure of reality. However, within systematic forms of knowledge, daily experience is subordinated to the rational theoretical model of reality. If the theoretical model posits that the future can be read in the bowels of birds, then Roman priests will sacrifice birds and read into their entrails before every important battle, instead of paying more attention to environmental conditions, weather, landscape, technological and logistical capacities, etc. On the other hand, unsystematic daily experience was dominated by the necessity to ensure

[18] As well as with the much more debated case of grammatical structures, for example.

the successful use of quotidian engineering. Is there a need to run a thin, long piece of metal through two pieces of wood in order to fix them together? Daily experience led to the conclusion that it was more efficient to have one sharp end run through the wood, and have the other end, which is being hit with a heavy object, wide. Most often, the two components were joined together, completing one another.

The medics of Antiquity knew from the general model built by religion that the healing of a wounded person depended on the will of the gods, therefore sacrifices took place, prayers and incantations were uttered and amulets were worn. But daily observation told them that dressing the wound with an alcoholic or vinegar-based solution would reduce the risk of infection. Thus they enacted a mix of empirical results derived from the successful use of mundane engineering in combination with the religious model of reality subordinated to social knowledge. Its particularization for the medicine of the time was realized through the invention of gods specialized in the protection of both wounded and doctors. In the Middle Ages, these were replaced with equally qualified saints, and in the contemporary world with famous personalities in the medical world or with treatments based on models of reality situated outside of the scientific model.

v. What results from here is that the pressure of the phenomenal world upon knowledge in general and upon scientific knowledge in particular, which Einstein was referring to, is predominantly enacted not upon the models of reality, but upon experience/observation. And this enactment does not take place directly, as the result of an observation that contradicts the knowledge held true until then, as in the case of the discovery of black swans by Europeans who had been convinced that all swans were white. It is enacted in an indirect manner, only after the engineering process established in the dominant knowledge fails and only when, after a sufficient number of failed attempts, society - always society - accepting the conclusion that the source of the error is found in the sectorial knowledge of that field, will impose the creation of a new research program or the construction of a new paradigm. That is to say, of a new model of reality, on the condition that this new model does not in any way interfere with the credibility of the general model of the world created and carried out by social knowledge. This is what the cardinal Bellarmine was asking of the heliocentric Foscarini (Favaro, A. (ed), 1968) (and, implicitly, of Galileo Galilei) in 1615 and this is what pope John Paul the Second asked of Hawking & co. in 1981. This is what Einstein was asking of his colleagues with his famous quip, "*God does not play dice*", at a time when the quantic model of physical reality was becoming a real competitor to the paradigm of general relativity.

Conclusions

i. The influence of reality (the phenomenal world, in Einsteinian terminology) upon the theoretical model of reality is therefore weak. The first necessary condition for such an influence to happen is that a continuously increasing number of actions based on the existing legitimate knowledge are failing, and the failures could not be ascribed anymore to engineering mishandlings. That could raise questions about the accuracy of the legitimate theory or paradigm. However, theoretical models usually have a much higher explanatory capacity of post-factum realities, that is the failed actions, than predicting the future, which means accuracy. The second necessary condition is that the raising social costs of these failures is that the soaring of the social costs of the failures becomes socially unacceptable. This very rarely happens, since societies are able to absorb immense social costs in order to preserve a social knowledge that is the embodiment of its specific values and organization. However, knowledge in any form, and especially scientific knowledge, can easily diversify and even modify theorems and theories in order to include as relevant new realities as much as such changes do not falsify the existing legitimate social knowledge. But altering a legitimate truth will always face some social resistance from the beneficiaries of the social effects of that legitimate truth.

Resistant when facing inconvenient realities or alternative interpretations, legitimate theoretical models are however more easily influenced by social, political, ideological, religious, or even aesthetical factors and agents. This final criterion (aesthetics) seems to have a bearing even upon physics – the science taken as a model for scientific activity in all fields. Even Einstein expressed the requirement that the fundamental laws of nature be framed as simply as possible, as is his famous formula (E=mc2), which by now belongs to social knowledge. Simplicity can be considered more of an aesthetic[19], rather than a scientific criterion and at least one research has shown that the followers of Einstein in creating models of the natural universe are more inclined to judge each other's models in terms of standards of the beauty (Hossenfelder, S., 2018) of the mathematics demonstrations they used to arrive at their results, instead of judging them according to their correspondence to reality. Mathematics is considered to be institutionalized rational thought in its most perfected form. But it also has a series of shortcomings that derive from the nature of mathematics itself, which belongs to the realm of imaginary. Unlike all the forms of knowledge that have preceded them, the natural sciences and, in most part, the social

[19] Simplicity is an aesthetic criterion only in certain cultures and societies, where it is obviously part of what I call social knowledge.

sciences are trying to translate observable reality into the imaginary world of mathematics where it is mathematically processed until there is a sense of a new finding, for which scientists struggles to identify a correspondent in reality.

We saw earlier that the mechanism through which such a link is established is the agreement of the scientific community, which functions as a complex social group. Then Stephen Hawking announces that, for now, the scientific community is divided between two models of reality[20], between which he cannot make a choice and to which the phenomenal world is stubbornly impassive. Then comes Sabine Hossenfelder who announces us that the models are not being accepted just for the sake of their correspondence to observable reality, but also because of beauty, and that these risks affecting their correspondence to reality. And the chain of critiques addressed to the methodology of the models of reality constructed by physicians continues, as Jim Baggott lets us know that theoretical physics has already parted from the reality that it was supposed to have modelled (Baggott, J., 2013) while a study conducted upon published pieces of medical research[21] argues that 70% of them are false, that is they are unscientific (Ioannidis, J.P.A., 2005). Meaning that the results of these studies were neither impartial, nor an accurate description of the reality. However, they were accepted as legitimate scientific truths and founded legitimate medical practices in the domain. There are no reasons to believe that other areas of scientific study perform better, or worse, natural sciences included, even if the percentages are varying from one domain of study to another.

ii. However, there are reasons to believe that social and political sciences perform somewhat worse. That's because of the ideologies. An ideology is a particular social knowledge derived from the dominant social knowledge of a certain society at a certain historical time that legitimates the social interests of one o more social groups belonging to that society. An ideology is consistent with the basic principles and theorems of the social knowledge but is mainly function is to legitimate the values and objectives of a special social group (and any other that is interested in one or all of these objectives). Usually, such social groups create political elites meant to represent their interests and to promote their objectives as objectives of the society as a whole, which allows them to use the totality of the social production as resources for accomplishing its own interests, via social engineering i.e., political, social, economic, and cultural policies

[20] The one grounded in Einstein's general theory of relativity, and the one grounded in the quantum paradigm.

[21] That is to say, on research accepted as scientific by the community in the respective field.

of the government. In specific conditions, contrary to the social status of the natural sciences whose truths and theories found the technical engineering. At least that is what the political elites themselves believe as it was declared by the American politician Karl Rove to a selected group of social scientists:

> *We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors...and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do*. (apud. Hunter DeRensis, 2019).

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DEINDUSTRIALIZATION AND THE REAL-ESTATE–DEVELOPMENT–DRIVEN HOUSING REGIME. THE CASE OF ROMANIA IN GLOBAL CONTEXT[1]

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ABSTRACT. The article examines how deindustrialization as economic restructuring and housing regime changes evolved interconnectedly in Romania during the Great Transformation from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism. This article also explores how they acted as conditions for the emergence of a real-estate-development-driven housing regime (REDD-HR) alongside other factors. The analysis is from the perspective of the geographical political economy on the variegated pathways of these phenomena across borders and secondary statistical data collected by two research projects conducted in Romania in the past two

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years. In the Eastern semiperiphery of global capitalism or a country of the Global Easts with a socialist legacy, after 1990, the state restructured the economy by privatizing industry and public housing. During state socialism, the housing regime supported industrialization-based urbanization, whereas deindustrialization-cum-privatization in emerging capitalism facilitated the appearance of real estate development. On the one hand, the article enriches studies on deindustrialization by highlighting the role of housing in the transformation of industrial relations; on the other hand, the paper revisits housing studies by analyzing deindustrialization as a process with an impact on the changing housing regime. Altogether, deindustrialization-cum-privatization and the changing housing sector are analyzed as prerequisites of the REDD-HR.

Keywords: deindustrialization, housing, real estate development, Romania, semiperiphery, capitalism

Introduction: Theoretical and methodological concerns, contribution to existing knowledge

In this article, I explore deindustrialization in an East-European semiperiphery country evolving on the path of dependent development in the milieu of global capitalism. Speaking about Romania in a larger context, one should note the country's long history of dependency on and subordination to both Western and Eastern structures of the Cold War (Ban, 2012, 2014, 2019; Chari & Verdery, 2009; Clark & Bahry, 1983; Vincze, 2015), and that – from the late 1970s and even more strongly after 1990 – it was affected by the changes in the global economy under the influence of neoliberalism (Bartel, 2022; Harvey, 2005). I address three big questions from this broad picture: (a) how deindustrialization advanced in post-1990s Romania as an effect of the state-owned industries' privatization and (re)created Romania's dependent development; (b) how did the changing property relations in the housing sector evolved in this context; and (c) how these two processes of the Great Transformation from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism triggered the formation of the REDD-HR. I argue that among all the other conditions needed for the formation of the latter, deindustrialization and housing regime changes acted as core factors because they reshaped the economy, created opportunities for the renewal of the capital accumulation regime, and mediated the integration of Romania into global financialized capitalism.

The article is supported by longitudinal secondary statistical datasets collected from the national and city levels under the umbrella of two research projects, covering four second- and five third-tier cities (Baia Mare and Cluj-

Napoca, Reșița, Brașov, Craiova and Tg. Jiu, Iași and Bârlad, and Bragadiru) in six out of eight of Romania's unevenly developed regions (North-West, West, Center, South-West, North-East, and South). I refer to statistical data about the private sector; employees and contribution to GDP in industries; external debt; foreign direct investment; imports; remittances; mobile citizens; profit, employees and gross value added in construction and real estate transactions; number of homes; housing price; loans granted to population – to sustain my diagnosis and not analyze them as such. Relevant figures are collected in the Appendix.

The core concepts of my investigation situate this inquiry at the intersection of studies on deindustrialization that focus on economic restructuring on the one hand and real estate development, which stress the increased role of real estate in late capitalism on the other hand.

I follow Schindler et al. (2020), who investigated the connections between deindustrialization and urban transformations in the Global South. They revisited the mainstream literature on deindustrialization that referred to the North Atlantic (including the recent High et al., 2017), whereas my focus is on Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, I also join the conversation about urbanization in the Global Easts (Müller & Trubina, 2020) and the experiences of the former Second World as part of them (Müller, 2020). Most importantly, my contribution to this literature is to highlight the relationship between deindustrialization and the real-estate-development-driven housing regime in a former state socialist country undergoing great transformations in the context of 21st-century capitalism. The postsocialist economic restructuring via deindustrialization created capital investment opportunities in Romania both in reindustrialization and real estate development, in addition to the growing service sector. By acknowledging the internationalization of deindustrialization, through this article, I enrich existing knowledge about the semiperipheries of global capitalism. My investigation of deindustrialization connected to privatization and dependent development (see Section 4 of the article) takes the path opened by scholars inquiring about the uneven changes generated in an interdependent global context. They have used the tools of a geographical political economy that contributed to international studies on deindustrialization (Pike, 2020). I follow the idea that geography and history matter in how capitalism evolves across the globe; hence, I analyze the advancement of deindustrialization in the transformation of state socialism into neoliberal capitalism in Romania since 1990, during a period when capitalism needed new spaces for the global flows of capital and integrated Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in its sphere of interest.

Because the article also explores the transformation of the Romanian housing regime, my analysis is related to the literature that puts housing and real estate at the center of the political economy (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014;

Aalbers et al., 2020; Hofman & Aalbers, 2019). I follow the arguments of these studies and adapt them to show how the centrality of real estate development in the political economy is also rooted in its connections with deindustrialization/ economic restructuring (see Section 5). I am interested in real estate development as a capital investment into housing-cum-land, which extracts profit from commodified housing and land and uses homes as a financialized asset class. Relying on Harvey (2010), who described switching capital investments in the productive economy into speculative investments in the built environment, I adapted his analysis to my topic. I observed that the shift from the first to the secondary circuit of capital also happened when the privatized material industrial heritage emptied of production was transformed into real estate development. From the housing financialization literature, I borrow the idea that this phenomenon unfolds unevenly across borders, as it is highly context- and path-dependent, creating, among others, situations of subordinate or (semi) peripheral financialization (Aalbers, 2017, 2019; Büdenbender & Aalbers, 2019; Fernandez & Aalbers, 2019; Gabor, 2012; Gabor & Kohl, 2022; Gagyi et al., 2021; Rodrigues et al., 2016).

The existing literature on CEE (and Romania), and in particular on housing, has hardly addressed the interlinkages of deindustrialization and changes in the housing regime, while it studied housing transformations in the region through a variety of theoretical perspectives and around numerous topics, such as policies (Kroes & Ambrose, 1991; Lux, 2003; Tsenkova, 2009); privatization (Anderson et al., 1997; Clapham, 1995; Clapham et al., 1996; Vincze, 2017); restitution (Chelcea, 2003; Fisher & Jaffe, 2000; Lux & Mikeszova, 2012; Lux et al., 2018); reform/ transition (Baross & Struyk, 1993; Turner et al., 1992); marketization (Cirman, 2008; Ionașcu et al., 2019; Leetmaa & Bernt, 2022; Mandič, 2010; Pichler-Milanovich, 2001; Pósfai & Nagy, 2017; World Bank, 1993); finance (Hegedüs & Struyk, 2005; Renaud, 1996, 1999; Struyk, 2000); welfare regime (Stephens et al., 2015); gentrification/ evictions: Chelcea, 2006; Chelcea et al., 2015; Sýkora & Špačková, 2022; Zamfir, 2022; Zamfirescu & Chelcea, 2021); segregation/ gated communities (Marcińczak et al., 2014; Polanska, 2010; Rufat & Marcińczak, 2020); social housing/ public housing (Hegedüs et al., 2013; Lux & Sunega, 2014); homeownership (Lux et al., 2021; Mandič, 2018; Soaita, 2015); private rental (Hegedüs et al., 2014; Lux & Mikeszova, 2012); housing estates and quality (Soaita, 2017; Soaita & Dewilde, 2019); stratification (Soaita & Dewilde, 2021); housing tenure (Cirman, 2006); retail real estate (Kok, 2007); financialization (Gagyi & Mikuš, 2022; Gagyi et al., 2021; Mikuš & Rodik, 2021); mortgages (Florea & Dumitriu, 2022; Mikuš, 2022; Roy, 2008); or housing struggles (Florea et al., 2018; Lancione, 2017, 2019, 2020).

Nevertheless, a few exceptions should be noted while addressing postindustrial sites 'transformation to real estate development in Romania (Chelcea, 2008, 2015; Simion, 2016; Vincze & Zamfir, 2019; Vincze et al., 2019), and the analysis of the relations between the postindustrial and the housing/ real estate development-related transformations in other CEE countries should necessarily be looked at (Audycka, 2021; Büdenbender & Aalbers, 2019; Polukhina, 2022). My article completes the above resources by focusing the analysis of real estate development on the linkages between the changing housing sector and the restructuring of the economy via deindustrialization while acknowledging that this happens in an East European semiperiphery country of global capitalism.

One may say, however, that the proposed discussion about the relationship between deindustrialization, privatization, and housing currently is no longer the main interest of any field of study because, since the 1990s and 2000s, other (related) processes have shaped the economies in CEE, such as reindustrialization/industrial policy (Aralica & Nebojša, 2015; Chivu et al., 2017; Czirfusz et al., 2008; Krawczyński et al., 2016; Nagy et al., 2017; Stojčić & Aralica, 2017; Westkämper, 2014) and financialization (Büdenbender & Aalbers, 2019; Florea & Dumitriu, 2022; Gabor, 2012, 2013, 2018; Gagyi & Mikuš, 2022; Mikuš & Rodik, 2021). Contrary, in the conclusions of the article, I argue that it is still relevant "to go back" and revisit deindustrialization-cum-privatization and its understudied links with housing and real estate development and discuss the result of this connection via the concept of the real-estate-development-driven housing regime.

After clarifying in Section 2 its core concepts (deindustrialization and real estate development), the article proceeds in three analytical parts: Section 3 describes the country context on a regional and global stage; Section 4 outlines how deindustrialization is related to privatization and dependent development; Section 5 briefly characterizes real estate development as an economic sector in Romania and, most importantly, highlights the role of deindustrialization and changes in the housing sector in the formation of the REDD-HR. The paper ends with conclusions that stress its contribution to studies about deindustrialization, housing, and real estate development (Section 6).

Central concepts: deindustrialization and real estate development

Considering the theoretical frames mentioned above, in this section I elaborate on the core concepts of my analysis in two steps: (2.1) deindustrialization as economic restructuring; (2.2) real estate development as part of a financialized accumulation regime. One of the conditions of possibilities for both to happen was the privatization of industries and the housing sector, triggered through state politics informed at its turn by international organizations guiding Romania towards a market economy starting with the 1990s.

Deindustrialization: Restructuring the economy

Wherever it happened, measurable with the decrease in industrial production, the number of its employees, or contribution to GDP, deindustrialization did not imply the disappearance of the industry but a restructuring of the economy. It led to job losses, unemployment, declining trade unionism, wage bargaining, and urban shrinkage. International organizations with a critical influence on "structural adjustment" worldwide sustained that "deindustrialization is the natural outcome of successful economic development and is generally associated with rising living standards" (Rowsthorn & Ramaswamy, 1997, p. 5).

Since the 1970s, deindustrialization in advanced capitalist countries meant closing the plants of the manufacturing sector and moving them to other parts of the world, i.e., Third World countries (Lord & Price, 1992). According to Michael Roberts, the mature capitalist economies lost their industrial base because 'it was no longer profitable for capital to invest in … OECD industry in the late 20th century. Capital counteracted this falling profitability by 'globalizing' and searching for more labor to exploit …, because (in capitalism) the drive is always for reducing the amount of labor power to boost profits'(Roberts, 2014). The transnational movement of capital invested into industrial production was headed toward countries with a cheap labor force. The economic crisis of capitalism in the 1970s and its solution to assure the free movement of capital across national borders triggered this change. The neoliberal turn facilitated the expansion of capitalism across continents and countries.

During the 1980s, in parallel, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) introduced Structural Adjustment Programs in the Global South. During this era, these institutions made access to loans by "poor countries" conditional on a set of policies enforcing privatization, opening their economies to international trade and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Besides, multinational corporations started to develop global value chains creating unprecedented economic dependencies between the Global North and Global South.

In the case of CEE countries, deindustrialization did not mean two decades of delay in post-Fordist deindustrialization (as some analysts imply, Kovács, 1999); however, one may argue that deindustrialization was inevitable due to the economic logic of post-Fordist capitalism. Instead, I emphasize here that a different political economy logic induced deindustrialization in this region when political decisions triggered the formation of capitalism via the destruction of the public sector. International organizations implied that former state socialist countries must enter the path toward a service- and knowledge-based society to catch up with the advanced economies, opening up towards foreign investments and playing a role in the global market economy.

Real estate development in a financialized capital accumulation regime

When discussing real estate development, one should remember that it "includes a range of sub-sectors (e.g., residential, offices, leisure), locations and modalities (e.g., construction, use, exchange, investment). Moreover, the real estate market is intricately interwoven with several other economic and financial markets, including but not limited to construction, development, mortgage, and equity markets" (Hofman & Aalbers, 2019, p. 90).

My article focuses on residential real estate development, which allows me to address the formation of a REDD-HR. Comprising land with buildings and other resources, real estate becomes a site for residential real estate development when an institutional developer purchases it on the market to produce housing for profit. The REDD-HR is one where the exchange value of homes replaces their social or use value, or where housing becomes a commodity to be sold and bought, and an asset class where the developers or the investment funds invest or store money capital. From a systemic point of view, a REDD-HR is characterized by the negligible number of public housing, and, consequently, by the fact that homes are accessible almost exclusively through the real estate market, while private developers become the most influent actors of housing production and transaction supported by banks, investment funds, and global consultancy firms. Even if they are actors and beneficiaries of this field, the small home builders and homeowners structurally do not have a say in how it evolves. An investment in real estate is an investment in the property market. However, as the domain became increasingly financialized, these investments diversified from building and transactioning buildings to investing in real estate funds and buying residential mortgage-backed securities or derivatives on real estate debt (Hofman & Aalbers, 2019).

For orthodox economists, real estate development is an economic matter ruled by the law of the market, i.e., by the game of supply and demand (Strom, 1996). However, for those who apply a political economy framework, like in housing studies (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014), state politics is crucial in the historical evolution of real estate development in different contexts. Dependent on other economic sectors, such as industry, construction, and financial transaction, it also plays an essential role in political economy because it provides essential building blocks for the reproduction of the regime. Various instances illustrate this relationship, such as the investment in the built environment as a secondary circuit of capital when productive economic sectors such as industry are not profitable enough for the capital (Harvey, 1985) and the 2008 financial crisis induced by the real estate bubble grown during the 2000s. The transnational move of real estate companies is an example of how spatial fix (Harvey, 2001) works to provide real estate capital with new opportunities for accumulation.

As a process that evolved unevenly across geographies, deindustrialization everywhere contributed to restructuring the economy and, together with other forces, created the possibilities for the rise of a financialized capital accumulation regime in which the REDD-HR plays a vital role.

The country context on a regional and global stage

The formation of neoliberal capitalism in Romania is part of a critical movement in Central and Eastern Europe, one of the century's Great Transformations (Burawoy, 2009; Polanyi, 2001). In a European semiperiphery, it is not only a case of the transformation of state socialism after over four decades of its existence into a form of late capitalism (Vincze, 2019, 2020), but it is also an episode of the centuries-long spread of the capitalist economy globally (Kornai, 2006). In the long history of capitalism, the formation of its characteristic institutions (private property, waged labor, market-based exchanges, credit system) was linked to industrialization, urbanization, and marketization. In the advanced capitalist countries, deindustrialization went along with the transformation of capitalism within capitalism, i.e., from state capitalism to neoliberal capitalism, and it included the relocation of industrial production via multinational companies into countries with a cheap labor force. The formation of capitalism from the ruins of state socialism did not occur through industrialization. In contrast, it occurred alongside deindustrialization-cum-changing property regimes leading to dependent development, and it exploited the infrastructure of the destroyed socialist regime. The latter included the state-owned industrial patrimony and housing stock, which had to be privatized first, transformed into a commodity, and then turned into financial assets via real estate development.

The privatization of industries needed capital to purchase the factories that the state aimed to sell. Sometimes, the plants losing state subsidies ended in bankruptcy, and emerging local entrepreneurs bought them at a meager price. However, the state sold its assets to foreign companies in several cases. In all cases, the decline or closedown of production after privatization created a surplus labor force looking for new opportunities to sell itself in the country or abroad. Therefore, the privatization of the socialist means of production contributed to the primitive accumulation of capital as "the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production" (Marx, 1887, p. 508). Moreover, this privatization was a process of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003), when the state created the possibility for foreign and local capital to acquire public goods from all societal sectors, including the built environment, and transform them into sources of profit. In 1992, the Romanian state formed the State Ownership Fund, the authority responsible for privatizing the industrial units transformed into state commercial companies. Furthermore, the state also established five Private Ownership Funds covering different regions of Romania, whose initial capital was constituted by allocating 30% of the state commercial companies' joint stocks to them. Later, the state transformed these property funds into Financial Investment Funds, which became vehicles for the financialization of formerly public goods, trading its assets on the stock exchange market. State-mediated politics coordinated privatization and deindustrialization; however, in Romania, the IMF and the WB acted as facilitators of these global processes. The tools they used were loans conditioned by structural adjustments or economic reforms and their monopoly on technical expertise in reforming governmental policies in all domains and levels. Romania became a member of the IMF in 1972 when it needed loans for its developmental objectives. Refusing their conditionings in the 1980s, its political leaders decided to reimburse the loans with the price of the austerity measures paid by the population.

The new wave of Memorandums of Understanding between the Romanian government and the IMF regarding new loans and their conditions started in 1991. The conditions were mainly related to privatization, adjustment programs dedicated to the emergent private sector, and the reform of the state.[3] As a result, new austerity waves affected the population. The WB stimulated Romania's switch to market economy in similar ways. The government respected its recommendations about developing the housing market via privatizing the housing and banking sector (World Bank, 1993); however, the Bank expressed discontent about the rhythm of these processes. To accelerate them, in October 1998, it invited the Romanian government to become a pilot country to implement the Comprehensive Development Framework.[4] In 2001, it recalled that its strategy for Romania

[3] Out of the hundreds of documents reflecting this collaboration, I mention here as an example The Letter of Intent and *Memorandum on Economic Policies of the Government of Romania* sent by the Romanian government to the IMF in 1999, https://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/1999/072699.htm, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[4] Later the WB analyzed this experience as a case study entitled the Implementation of CDF principles in a transition economy, disclosed to the public in 2006, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/298071468776742845/pdf/293880CDF1Romania.pdf, Accessed 10 September 2022.

focused on "the important role that the private sector must play for generating growth and reducing poverty: 60 percent of its commitments were for private sector development" (World Bank, 2005, p. v). It was observed that the 1999 crisis was a turning point in Romania's reform process, and the Bank accompanied its adjustment lending with technical assistance loans to ensure the country had the right kind of technical expertise to implement the reforms.[5]

Furthermore, the position from which the Eastern enlargement of the European Union affected Romania was also one of dependency on foreign capital and imports, enforced via the politics of conditionality and civilizational discourse used in the unification process, (re)creating unevenness across countries (Vincze, 2019, 2020). The former state socialist countries of CEE were scored and hierarchized according to their readiness to accommodate the FDI looking for new opportunities in this region, pending how fast they privatized their industries and housing stock. The Eastern peripheries' moment in the EU accession (Bulgaria and Romania) came only in 2007, four years after the Central European countries, which proved to be more successful in this competition.

Forms and dynamics of real estate development did not unfold uniformly across geographies. The conditions behind its formation in Romania were multiple, including the privatization of state-owned industries, housing stock, and land; attraction of FDI and capital according to its country score promoted by international organizations; accession to the EU; investor-friendly national policies; advertising Romania by different consultancy companies as a country in which it is worth investing; and a new housing ideology centered on personal merit and financial credibility. Today, after three decades of capitalist transformations, when the capitalist accumulation regime in advanced economies is finance- and real estate-driven (Hofman & Aalbers, 2019), Romania is in another phase of real estate development (and financialization). This stage is characterized briefly by the following: the number of mortgages is growing; households are financialized via consumption credits; investing in real estate is celebrated as the most brilliant strategy for all; ruined industrial platforms are transformed into sites of new real estate development; investment funds and real estate investment trust started to enter the residential sub-market, too; housing market prices in the regional cities[6] are skyrocketing as real estate developers dominate housing

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[5] WB, Report No. 32452, *Romania country assistance evaluation*, 2001, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/173931468294053526/pdf/Romania-Country-assistance-evaluation.pdf, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[6] Besides the capital city (Bucharest), these are the county seats that became the growth poles or magnet cities of the post-1990s territorial policies, designated as such by Governmental Decision 998/2008: Cluj-Napoca, Brașov, Timișoara, Iași, Craiova, Ploiești, and Constanța.

provision; the housing property structure is fragmented between millions of small private owners whom all may contribute to the real estate market, but – compared to institutional developers and the state – they do not have a crucial role in framing the systemic trends of this domain. Besides, real estate consultants often "sell" Romania as the European country with the most affordable housing prices; they argue that the housing prices increased slower in this country than the mean income,[7] moreover, compared to other countries in CEE, house prices in Romania have grown by "only" 40% since 2015.[8] These arguments miss that over 80% of employees earn less than the mean income in this country, and even such a "low" increase makes adequate housing unaffordable for many. However, for developers, a country with lower housing prices means good investment opportunities with the hope that prices will grow.

Deindustrialization, privatization, and dependent development

In Romania, privatization evolved in several phases triggered by specific legislation. It started in the early 1990s with the privatization and restructuring of large-scale industries. In the middle of the 1990s, the government reduced the subsidies to these enterprises. Between 1997-1999, the mining sector was the next targeted domain. The recession in these years continued to weaken industry and caused a strong wave of urban out-migration. With the increase in FDI in the 2000s and the strengthening of domestic manufacturers, the industrial production growth rate recorded positive values, culminating at 10.6% in 2008. A multiplication of low-paid jobs accompanied this evolution, an uneven territorial development characterized by the concentration of private sector industrialization in several leading regions, and a depletion of many small towns of the working-age population (Popescu, 2014). Nevertheless, in 2013, when the Romanian government launched its intention to propose a strategy for reindustrialization, the Ministry of Economy continued to push for further privatization. The ministry said: "one of the main directions for industrialization is the responsibility of the Ministry of Economy to privatize everything that can be privatized. Industrialization will have three levels, one of which is the cleaning of the economic space from loss-generating areas."[9] Eventually, the idea of such a reindustrialization was recalled in 2018 and 2022.

[7] https://www.romania-insider.com/kiwi-housing-affordability-ro-jan-2022, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[8] https://www.erstegroup.com/en/research/report/en/SR287305, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[9] Reindustrializarea României, aprilie 4, 2013, https://www.focus-energetic.ro/reindustrializarea-romaniei-10308.html, Accessed 10 September 2022.

As a result of continuous privatization, the percentage of state-owned companies reduced to 12% by the end of 2019, while out of the 88% of companies with private capital, 44% were Romanian and 41% were foreign, the rest being mixed (Georgescu, 2021, p. 234). Figure 1[10] illustrates the gradual increase in the private sector in the total economy, respectively, in the major domains of the national economy.

Privatization and dependent development should be explored together while discussing Romania's deindustrialization. The two reasons are described in sections 4.1 and 4.2 focusing on how privatization induced deindustrialization, and how deindustrialization resulted in a dependent development.

Deindustrialization-cum-privatization

The transfer of ownership of industrial patrimony from the state to private property resulted in the privatization of over 1,250 factories.[11] Before this transfer, through Law 15/ 1990, the state transformed them into commercial societies with state participation but with decreasing subsidies, dramatically reducing the intensity of their production and the number of employees. As a result, most former factories were bankrupted and liquidated a few years after they were sold based on consequent privatization laws (59/1991, 137/2002). This process was administered through the institutions created by the state with this aim, which demonstrates that a fully centralized economy could be disassembled only through a centralized political process.

In parallel with this dismantlement, hundreds of thousands of new enterprises with Romanian or foreign capital emerged in different economic sectors (Figure 2), many small and middle-sized. In industry, they usually manufacture sub-assemblies for a global chain of production owned by multinationals, which is a radically different production/management structure than the one that characterizes the centrally planned economy.

Despite the set-up of new enterprises, Romania's unemployment rate continued to increase (Figure 3). However, unemployment became hidden as transnational migration of the Romanians became possible due to the opening of the borders and later the country's EU accession (Figures 10 & 11). Because of the latter, after 2011, unemployment continued to be relatively low, but its figures statistically became irrelevant.

Figures 4 and 5 show the decreasing number of employees in the industry and the industry's contribution to GDP in Romania since 1990. The two variables show that even if the number of employees in this sector slowly but

[10] This Figure and all the article's figures are placed in the Appendix.
[11] http://www.socialistul.ro/articole/254/, Accessed 10 September 2022.

continuously increased in the last post-crisis cycle, its input to the country's GDP declined between 2010-2020. Diagrams show a decline of 20% of the employed persons in Romania from 1992-2020, a decrease of 43% of those employed in industries, and a drop of 45% in the percentage of the industry's contribution to GDP. While, during state socialism, after 1975 the "big enterprises increased both in number and employment; so there were 140 at the end of 1980s, which employed over 1,2 million persons" (Popescu, 2014, p. 187), after 1990, due to economic restructuring, all the industrial giants hiring over 10,000 workers, slowly disappeared.

Deindustrialization induced by the privatization of state-owned industrial giants led to the fact that in 2019, out of the total of 689,700 companies, only 9% (65,400) were active in the industrial sector, 6,400 in manufacturing, and 1,400 in the extractive industry. This situation had a damaging effect on the whole economy because these were the sectors with a high added value (Georgescu, 2021, p. 8).

Affected by the tendencies of uneven territorial development, the evolution of the number of people employed in the industry was different at county levels, as Figure 6 reveals. For example, after a decrease until 2008, in Cluj, Maramureș, Brașov, and Dolj counties, the employed population grew slightly by 2020, whereas in others such as Iași, Gorj, Caraș-Severin and Vaslui continued decreasing.

Dependent development-cum-deindustrialization

The privatization of former factories stayed at the core of the emerging market economy, i.e., the formation of capitalism. As already said, this process was enforced by the WB and the IMF. Liberal economists explained privatization as the need to end the public-resource-consuming and uncompetitive state industries and hidden unemployment. According to some, privatization took place too slowly in Romania (Popescu, 2014), and "the hesitant … way in which the reform package has been implemented by Romanian post-communist governments raises doubts regarding the country's commitment to real reform" (Stan, 1995, p. 433).

Figures 7, 8, and 9 show that the external debt increased in Romania in parallel with the growing values of imports and FDI between 1990-2020. These also indicate that the disintegration of the public sector and the lack of Romanian capital for re-technologization created business opportunities for transnational corporations. Romania was and still is marketed in global capitalism as a country with a cheap labor force, low taxation on profit, and a permissive business environment. The upsurges of all these indicators are signs of development depending on loans, imports, and FDI. This dependency was strengthened in parallel with the processes by which former industrial units were increasingly privatized, diminished, and finally liquidated across the country. Even if Romania lagged behind other former state socialist countries of the region in this matter, it also displayed a growing trend until this situation changed by the effects of the 2008 financial crisis. FDI increased from 0.96 billion EUR in 1996 to 8.68 billion in 2006 and approximately 9 billion in 2008. It decreased in 2011 to under 2 billion, rose again in 2015 to 3,840,47 billion, and fell back to 2,321 billion euros in 2022 (Horobeț & Popovici, 2017, pp. 26-27).

The number of emigrants from Romania has continuously increased since 1990, rising to approximately 4 million in 2020.[12] Moreover, approximately 200,000 persons yearly leave the country as long-term emigrants (Figures 10, 11), exposing Romanian citizens' dependency on jobs and living conditions abroad.

As a result, according to the National Statistical Institute, Romania's population decreased from 23,211,395 (1990) to 19,201,662 (in 2021). According to Statista,[13] in 2019, Germany hosted 23.3% of Romanian emigrants, the U.K. 17%, Italy 15.7%, Spain 11.2%, Austria and Belgium 5%, and France 3.1%. Being such a mass phenomenon, the dependency on transnational migration includes not only direct persons who emigrated for a (better) job, but it also translates into a dependency on the remittances or the money transfers into Romania from citizens working abroad (Figure 12).

Figure 13 on EU mobile working-age citizens reveals that this Romanian condition is highly unusual in the EU. Moreover, this tendency has remained the same since the very critical 1990s; and it has continued even during economic stabilization and growth periods. Without such systemic transnational emigration flows, at-risk-of-poverty and at-risk-of-poverty-and-social-exclusion rates would have been even higher than in the 1990s, when they were 24.6% and 47% (in 2007), and 23.4% and 30.4% (in 2020), respectively.[14]

Housing, deindustrialization, and the formation of the REDD-HR

The former state socialist countries were expected to privatize all their state-owned companies and offer business opportunities for new private firms. Beyond this, because these changes happened in financialized global capitalism,

[12] UN International Migration Stock, https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[13] https://www.statista.com/statistics/1096052/destinations-of-romanian-emigrants/, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[14] Eurostat statistics: at-risk-of-poverty and at-risk-of-poverty-and-social-exclusion rates, Accessed 10 September 2022.

CEE countries also became territories for housing financialization and real estate development for profit. Even if the number of newly constructed homes between 1990-2021 increased in Romania only by 1,58 million, this new private supply and the old privatized state-owned stock became commodities and an asset class attractive to investors.

In what follows, I will briefly characterize real estate development as an economic sector in Romania (5.1.) and describe the road leading to the formation of REDD-HR in two steps, via housing privatization (5.2) and through the process of privatization-cum-deindustrialization (5.3).

Real estate development as an economic sector in Romania – a brief description

This economic sector only emerged around the 2000s (and it did advance unevenly across the country) because the conditions for real estate development in Romania were also linked to the privatization of the industrial platforms and the housing stock. Via the extension of the private sector in the productive economy, capital gained from businesses could reach a level of over-accumulation to invest in real estate. Moreover, foreign capital flowed into the country increased as Romania's EU accession was secured. After being bankrupted and demolished, the former industrial platforms made a place for new real estate development. Furthermore, a housing market emerged via privatizing the housing stock, which real estate development could use (and expand). Deindustrialization destroyed the idea of state-provided jobs linked to state-provided homes. Market specialists and investment consultants promoted the new housing ideology and created the desire for a new lifestyle that only real estate developers could offer. After kickstarting, the fiscal facilities offered by the state to investors, and in particular, the ones supporting the construction sector, as well as the marketing efforts of the Directorate for Foreign Investments ("Invest Romania"), pushed real estate development in the capital and regional cities of Romania to high levels. All the investors in Romania benefit from "one of the lowest flat tax, VAT and income tax rates in the EU as well as tax exemption on reinvested profit …, and also a highly skilled workforce at competitive prices, (third lowest minimum wage in EU)."[15]

The evolution of the percentage of profit made in real estate sectors (construction and transactions together) of all sectors at city levels reflects its growing importance. This percentage increased gradually but displayed different

[15] http://investromania.gov.ro/web/doing-business/competitive-advantages/, Accessed 10 September 2022.

trends according to the local contexts (Figure 14).[16] For example, in the case of Cluj-Napoca, which between 2008-2020 created the highest total profits in the sample of our selected localities (Figure 15), this percentage is lower than in two other big cities (Iași and Brașov), probably because the former has other vital economic sectors, such as IT that generate highest profits. Over time (2018 compared to 2008), in all our selected cities, except Bragadiru, the percentage of profit gained from constructions, relative to the total profit of constructions plus real estate transactions, slightly decreased, which shows the strengthening of real estate transactions from this point of view (Figure 16).

The advancement of the percentage of employees in real estate sectors (construction plus transactions) of the total employees (Figure 17) is also an indicator of their role in the economy. This percentage was everywhere at high levels in 2008; it decreased during the crisis and started to grow again after 2014. Bragadiru, the town created as an extension of the capital city, dominated by the construction sector, leads the hierarchy of our selected localities from this point of view.

Several online platforms promote Romania for its potential in real estate investments. Global Property Guide offers up-to-date information, for example, regarding the rental yields in Romania, which, compared to other EU countries, are very high, at approximately 6%.[17] The platform "Move to Romania" is a general invitation to the country, among others, as a good site for real estate investment owing to the following arguments: there are no restrictions on foreign nationals acquiring dwellings in Romania, and since 2012 they can also acquire land; the demand for real estate properties dramatically outstrips the supply; there is a great scope for a rise in the prices of the properties; the central bank of Romania implements 100% mortgage scheme for property buyers; and the foreign investors take advantage of the current low real estate prices in Europe, which is inevitable to increase in the future.[18] The "boutique media company" Investment Reports in 2021 noted: "Romania is a rapidly developing country, and an established EU and NATO member. In 2019, the World Bank promoted Romania to the High-income group of countries. By 2021, the European Commission projects that Romania will enjoy the EU's third highest GDP growth rate of 5.1%."[19]

[16] Statistical data for Figures 14, 15, 16, and 17 were collected and prepared by my colleague Ionut Foldes in a way that allowed me to compare the selected cities.

[17] https://www.globalpropertyguide.com/Europe/Romania/rent-yields, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[18] https://movetoromania.com/real-estate-investment/, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[19] https://www.investmentreports.co/article/real-estate-in-romania-low-risk-high-reward-313/, Accessed 10 September 2022.

The road to the REDD-HR via housing privatization

Housing construction was an engine of the economy during state socialism as well. It created jobs and contributed to GDP; however, it consumed public money due to the subsidies it enjoyed. The housing sector was not only a core part of the productive economy but was also linked to the need to produce a new and extensive public housing stock to support industrialization. More specifically, new industries needed a labor force, and the new labor force migrating from rural to urban areas needed new homes. All these interventions were coordinated via the instruments provided by Planned Socio-Economic Development Law 8/1972 and the Systematization Law 58/1974. Between 1946-1989, the Romanian state constructed circa 6,8 million new homes. After 1990, the concepts of planning and systematization were erased from public policies, and during this period, the state produced across the whole country only 189,139 new homes (which represented 13.9% of the total homes constructed between 1990-2021).

Most socialist blocs of flats built for the workers were rented at a meagre price, but the state constructed them, too, to sell them, while also supporting the construction of homes from the households' budget. State socialism created a market in which the state itself was an important actor, both as a supplier and regulator. The price of homes was low, and the state-owned savings bank offered the population loans at a reduced interest rate. In 1990, Romania had approximately 8 million homes,[20] out of which, nationally, approximately 30% were in state ownership. This percentage was higher in urban areas (approximately 50-60%) because industrialization triggered their construction at an intense rhythm, especially in the cities, acting as an engine for urbanization. These figures also reveal that state socialism, in the housing domain, allowed people to own personal property. Personal property on homes resulted from buying state-constructed homes and houses constructed by people before or during socialism. Nevertheless, according to the housing laws from the 1970s, the state strictly controlled personal property by measures such as the number of homes one could own, allocating compulsory renters to those who were considered to have too large homes for their families, and strictly regulating the possibility of selling them.

Among the conditions of the emergence of real estate development, the privatization of the old state-produced and state-owned housing stock and the advancement of private construction of new private homes had a crucial role (Vincze, 2017). As a result, homes became accessible almost exclusively through

[20] Ministerul Dezvoltării Regionale și Administrației Publice: Strategia Națională a Locuirii, Mai 2022, Accessed 10 September 2022.

the unregulated market. The state played a critical role in such processes via legislative measures (Laws 85/1992, 112/1995) and programs supporting the private sector, both construction and banks (*Prima Casă* 2009/*Noua Casă* 2020) while withdrawing from its earlier roles of a housing producer and urban development regulator. Changing housing policy happened in the context of the decentralization of public administration (Laws 69/1991, 215/2002); hence, social housing production was transferred from central to local governments. Administrative decentralization (Law 22/2006; New Administrative Code, 2019) triggered further territorial unevenness due to financial inequalities between poor and rich localities/ local governments. Nevertheless, across the country, there was a consensus between the local public administrations – facilitated by the national laws of housing privatization and property restitution – regarding selling as much public housing as possible and restricting the production of new social housing to the minimum.

During the first part of the 1990s, the need for new homes was met by completing several blocs of flats that started being built during the last years of state socialism. In the second part of the 1990s, the need for new housing was mainly fulfilled via the construction of family homes by small private owners of lands. The transactions with the old housing stock started in the 1990s, when privatization and deregulation transformed housing into a commodity, nationally reducing the percentage of public housing from 30% to below 2%. As a result, the real estate market and transactions had an earlier start in Romania than the real estate development as a business that involves investors buying land or old buildings to demolish and construct new residential complexes.

The process of land retrocession in the outskirts of the cities, in the first part of the 2000s, created the possibility for private companies to buy land there and begin constructing blocs of flats. The latter was also facilitated by the deregulation of urban planning and the rapid growth of city limits. As the first wave of the REDD-HO, this phenomenon mainly happened in big urban areas of Romania, which attracted investors and the population needing new homes and triggered the first boom in housing prices by the middle of the 2000s. During this phase, the relations between deindustrialization and REDD-HO were indirect; privatization leading to deindustrialization-cum-dependent development and the restructuring of the economy, alongside the privatization of land and housing, created the conditions for capital accumulation in real estate and speculative businesses in this sector.

In several years, especially in the rapidly growing regional cities, the available lands for new real estate developments became increasingly scarce. Therefore, in the 2010s, the closed industrial platforms were vigorously hunted by developers. In this second stage, deindustrialization and REED-HO exhibited a more direct relation, not only in a physical/ spatial but also in a financial sense, because the material infrastructure of the ruined factories provided not only territories for real estate but also high profits. This trend went beyond the capital and the regional cities toward smaller towns, even if to a lesser extent. Because priorly, the socialist state constructed industrial platforms not only on the margins of the localities but also in the proximity of the new districts, and due to the spatial extension of the cities in time, several postindustrial ruins in their semi-central parts were targeted by new real estate development. The latter changed the built environment with new housing estates, corporate headquarters, business, and commercial centers, hotels, and tourist facilities, as well as the dwellers' social composition.

The path toward the REDD-HR through deindustrialization

As already stressed, deindustrialization in Romania had a distinctive trajectory and happened in a different period than in the Global North. In its case, this took place in the context of the financialized neoliberal capitalism of the 1990s and 2000s, when in the advanced countries, speculations on the real estate market, institutional landlordism, and the presence of investment funds in real estate development were already predominant (Aalbers, 2017; Gabor & Kohl, 2022; Hofman & Aalbers, 2019). Wherever this happened, deindustrialization implied restructuring the economy and, implicitly, the changes in the structure of contribution to GDP of different economic sectors.

Except for Ireland, Norway, and Finland – in the case of many CEE countries, in some years between 1995-2021, the value added by the industrial sector to GDP was higher than in the advanced capitalist countries (Figure 18).

This situation was the case, for example, in Romania. This value decreased between 1995-2005, but it grew in 2010 to the level of 1995 (30%) and – after falling to 20.3% in 2020 – re-increased in 2021 (21.1%). Real estate development in this country also exhibited different dynamics than those known today in the core countries of global capitalism. Even if it was among the countries where the contribution to GDP of real estate transactions was above 7% in 1995, between 1995-2021, Romania displayed a lower level than the EU average (Figure 19).

Nevertheless, the construction sector contributed to GDP with values slightly higher than the EU average while displaying a particular feature in 2010 when this value increased in comparison with 2005, whereas the other member states had a fall of several percentages (Figure 20).

Figures 21, 22, and 23 illustrate the direct impacts of economic reconstruction-cum-deindustrialization on the Romanian housing sector at the national and city levels.[21] At the national level, the percentage of new homes made from public funds decreased from 88% in 1990 to 2.28% in 2021. At the city level, there is an insignificant difference between the selected localities regarding the percentage of public housing in the total housing stocks: in Bârlad and Craiova, below one percent; in Baia Mare, Bragadiru, and Cluj-Napoca between one and two percent; in Iași and Reșita between two and three percent; and in Brașov above 3%.

Considering these localities, the population with domicile in 2021 was higher than in 1992, only in three cities: Cluj-Napoca, Iași, and Bragadiru. The latter is an exceptional case, being a residential extension for people attracted by the capital city Bucharest (+22,251). The population growth in Cluj-Napoca, North-West Development Region (+14,754 persons), and Iași, North-East Development Region (+71,863) is due to the economic revival of these cities. Although Brașov's and Craiova's populations with domicile decreased (-31,258, respectively -13,550), as regional cities of the Centre, respectively of the South-West Oltenia region, they maintained a magnetism after the collapse of their socialist industries, which has triggered current economic revival. Such a trend happened in Baia Mare as well (-9,681), the county seat of Maramureș county; nevertheless, its catch-up in development occurred to a lesser degree because of Cluj-Napoca's proximity. Therefore, the above mentioned third-tier towns have different trajectories than most of the shrinking Romanian localities, which have been depopulated due to the lack of economic activities because they do not present interest for private investors, and the state does not have a territorial cohesion policy that could support them in overcoming their difficulties. In Romania, a critical rupture was created between the regional cities and the rest of the localities, a new feature of territorial unevenness beyond the traditional rural-urban divide (Fina et al., 2021). Usually, the towns strongly relying on industries or having a mono-industrial profile during state socialism suffered the most from deindustrialization and overall capitalist transformations that left people without jobs. Moreover, the cities recovered from the crisis induced in its turn by the disintegration of socialist industries, are characterized by intense polarization and inequalities between the better-off and people with minimum or even below medium income.

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[21] Out of them, four are regional cities (Brașov, Iași, Cluj-Napoca, and Craiova, with approximately 300,000 residents), and four are third-tier towns with between 70,000-150,000 inhabitants (Baia Mare, Bragadiru, Reșița, and Tg. Jiu). At the same time, one is a town created in 2006 in the proximity of the capital city, Bucharest (whose population with domicile grew in the past 20 years by 244%, being over 25,000 persons in 2020).

The speculative housing market led to the first price boom by the mid-2000s, whereas the 2008 financial crisis steered its fall between 2012-2015 (Figure 24). However, due to the reduced number of mortgages at those times in Romania, it did not experience such a severe mortgage crisis as Greece, Spain, or Portugal; nevertheless, the country was affected by the austerity measures that the government implemented as a "solution" to this crisis in the frame of further neoliberal "state reform" enforced by conditioned WB and IMF loans. Since 2015, with the post-crisis economic growth, housing prices have been on an ascendent trend even during the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend is part of a larger paradigm in CEE; for example, a recent ERSTE report shows that house prices have been growing continuously since 2015 in Romania by 40%. Despite the sharp fall in GDP growth and severe recession in 2020, house price growth has not slowed during the pandemic.[22]

Until now, most of the apartments constructed in the new real estate complexes were sold by the developers during their project phase. Currently, some forecasts predict an increase in stocks for renting.[23] The first tendency is inscribed into the dominant Romanian homeownership trend (in 2021, with 95.3% of its people residing in their own homes),[24] whereas the second one signals a potential change toward the rental model, or, at least, to a dual system of tenure in the future.[25]

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[22] https://www.erstegroup.com/en/research/report/en/ER2289, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[23] "We lack institutional investors, and there is not a single big institutional player who amassed a sizeable portfolio of thousands of apartments for rent. Sooner or later, we will probably see a movement in this respect in the market." - https://ceelegalmatters.com/romania/19159-status-of-the-real-estate-sector-a-romanian-round-table (February 2002); "There is a high level of liquidity among investors and a thirst for different products. This thirst comes as a result of high inflation but also a desire to preserve capital. As new asset classes, data centers and residential for rent (PRS) will increasingly attract investment." – https://www.property-forum.eu/news/there-is-a-high-level-of-liquidity-among-real-estate-investors/12607 (June 2022).

[24] Owning or renting? What is the EU's housing situation?, Eurostat, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/wdn-20211230-1, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[25] In a June 2022 report by the IMF on Romania, written in the current context of inflation and crisis, when the public debt of the country is rising, IMF recommends the increase in taxes on homes in private property, which may be considered a sign of promoting a potential switch from the till-now dominant homeownership paradigm – the report is accessible here, https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2022/06/28/Romania-Technical-Assistance-Report-on-Improving-Revenues-from-

Even today, the population buys most of the new homes in cash.[26] Nevertheless, between January 2007 and June 2022, the number of loans granted to the population increased more than four times (Figure 25), and the percentage of mortgages from the total of loans granted to the population increased from 19.6% in January 2007 to 61.6% in June 2022 (Figure 26). This trend is also a sign of housing financialization, linked to the fact that the current access to homes almost exclusively occurs through the market.

Besides residential real estate, retail and office building investments have become preferred sites for capital accumulation since the 2010s.[27] The logistics and residential market registered an increase in 2021 when office and retail experienced a pandemic-induced decrease.[28] The service sector, which grew parallel with deindustrialization, induced a growing demand for non-residential spaces. The ruined industrial platforms created spaces for such new constructions. In Romania, supermarkets were built and owned by foreign capital functioning through multinational companies,[29] whereas the residential sector was mainly developed by Romanian investors who gained their profit invested in real estate from other businesses. The transactions with the office buildings are highly tempting for foreign investment funds, even if constructed by Romanian businessmen.

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the-Recurrent-Property-Tax-520127. Several years earlier, the World Bank issued the report which recommends more firmly such a turn in policies supporting one housing tenure or another – this is accessible here, https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/living-and-leaving, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[26] In 2020, in Cluj-Napoca, approximately 70% of the homes were bought without credit, whereas in Bucharest, this percentage was approximately 50% (news quoting real estate developers, https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/financiar/din-ce-in-ce-mai-multi-romani-cumpara-locuinte-cu-banii-jos.html), Accessed 10 September 2022.

[27] According to the Investment Reports platform in Romania, "historically, the market has been driven mainly by local or regional developers, but, especially in the last seven years, we have seen increasing interest from international institutional players. Some international office developers with a track record in Romania are Globalworth, Skanska, AFI Europe, GTC, IMMOFINANZ, and CA Immo. NEPI, AFI Europe, Sonae Sierra, S IMMO, and IMMOFINANZ have been active in the retail sector. The industrial sector has been shaped by developers such as CTP, P3, WDP, VGP, and Alinso Group." https://www.investmentreports.co/article/real-estate-in-romania-low-risk-high-reward-313/, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[28] https://ceelegalmatters.com/romania/19159-status-of-the-real-estate-sector-a-romanian-round-table, Accessed 10 September 2022.

[29] The major companies in the food-retail chains are Kaufland, Lidl, Auchan, Carrefour, Mega Image, Cora, Profi, Penny, Metro, and Selgros.

Conclusions: an East European contribution to studies on deindustrialization, housing, and real estate development

In any corner of global capitalism, deindustrialization restructured the economy and contributed to forming a financialized capital accumulation regime, in which real estate development played an essential role. Scholars have identified differences in how this happened in the Global North, South, and East; nevertheless, they have recognized that the expansion of neoliberal capitalism influenced all countries.

In the 1990s, the dismantlement of state socialism in CEE was needed for a new boost to global capitalism. Due to their state properties being privatized and their economic capacities being destroyed, CEE countries, including Romania, became dependent on foreign capital. Hence, they created new opportunities for FDI and provided markets and a cheap labor force for multinationals. When deindustrialization/the restructuring of the economy entered a mature phase in Romania in the 2000s, the transnational flow of capital, investment of speculative capital in real estate, and its financialization were already overwhelming phenomena on the global stage of capitalism and became even more potent because of the 2008 financial and mortgage crisis. Therefore, when foreign capital arrived in Romania, it was already a capital that looked for investment opportunities with an extensive and quick return.

The three research questions of my article referred to several aspects of the formation of a REDD-HR. More precisely, I inquired how economic restructuring via deindustrialization (Section 4) and the changing housing regime (Section 5.1) – interconnected in their formation and consequences – created the structural paths that enabled the formation of the REDD-HR (Section 5). Below I present a synthesis of the findings elaborated in the separate paper sections.

The study focused on Romania, viewed in a regional and global context, to enrich the literature on internationalized deindustrialization, housing, and real estate development. The timeframe of the analysis covered the post-1990s period when financialized capitalism needed new spaces for the global flows of capital and integrated the countries of CEE in its sphere of interest. The paper revisited the Great Transformation from state socialism to neoliberal capitalism at the semiperipheries of the EU. It supplemented the existing knowledge on the changing housing sector and deindustrialization in Romania with a perspective that described the linkages between the two as they led to a REDD-HR.

I observed that in parallel with the country's deindustrialization by dismantling the former state-owned industrial platforms, as well as with reindustrializing it through small- and medium-sized private enterprises, including multinational companies, the economic transformations of this country created new investment opportunities for local and global capital via real estate development. The consolidation of a private sector in the industry, alongside construction and banking, was needed for this to happen. The sites of bankrupt industries became locations for real estate development, and the capital gained from new companies established on the ruins of destroyed industries could be invested in real estate. Due to the temporality, geography, and rhythm of the formation of capitalism out of the collapse of the socialist political economy, deindustrialization in Romania created the conditions for a dualist capital accumulation regime in which the new forms of (industrial) productive economy coexisted with financialized real estate development. The country became attractive for investors both due to its cheap labor force employable in the new industries and the emerging service economy, as well as because its emerging real estate market displayed a growing demand for new buildings (with residential, retail, office, and industrial functions) and the potential to increase prices/profits. State policies created a friendly environment for capital investment in all economic sectors.

Furthermore, I emphasized the changing role of housing in larger political economies. On the one hand, I highlighted how during state socialism, the Romanian housing regime served industrialization by creating affordable housing for workers and by distributing homes based on the criteria to possess jobs created in the new industries. Moreover, on the other hand, I stressed that the privatization, commodification, and financialization of land and housing had a crucial role in the constitution of the unregulated real estate market as a condition for real estate development. In addition to a predominantly private property regime and capital to be invested outside the first circuit of capital, real estate development was supported by a new housing ideology. The latter reified access to adequate homes as personal merit and celebrated housing financialization as an achievement of local capitalism.

After 1990, the emerging REDD-HR was sustained by transforming property relations in industry and housing. The parallel and interconnected privatization of factories, land, and housing created the real estate market and new asset classes for capital investment. The reintegration of Romania into the global market as a capitalist country and its accession to the EU opened its borders to foreign investors. Looking for large and quick returns, the foreign investment funds acquired substantial (including former industrial) lands across the country primarily used for retail, logistics, and office buildings. At the same time, local entrepreneurs with less capital invested in residential real estate of smaller sizes. Nevertheless, some of the latter grew gradually and, alone or in collaboration with foreign capital, began to make larger residential or mixed real estate assemblies. All these actors could only be successful in their businesses with the contribution of a governmental politics that created market-oriented legislation, permissive urbanism, and a business-friendly fiscal system, and withdrew the state from investments into public housing.

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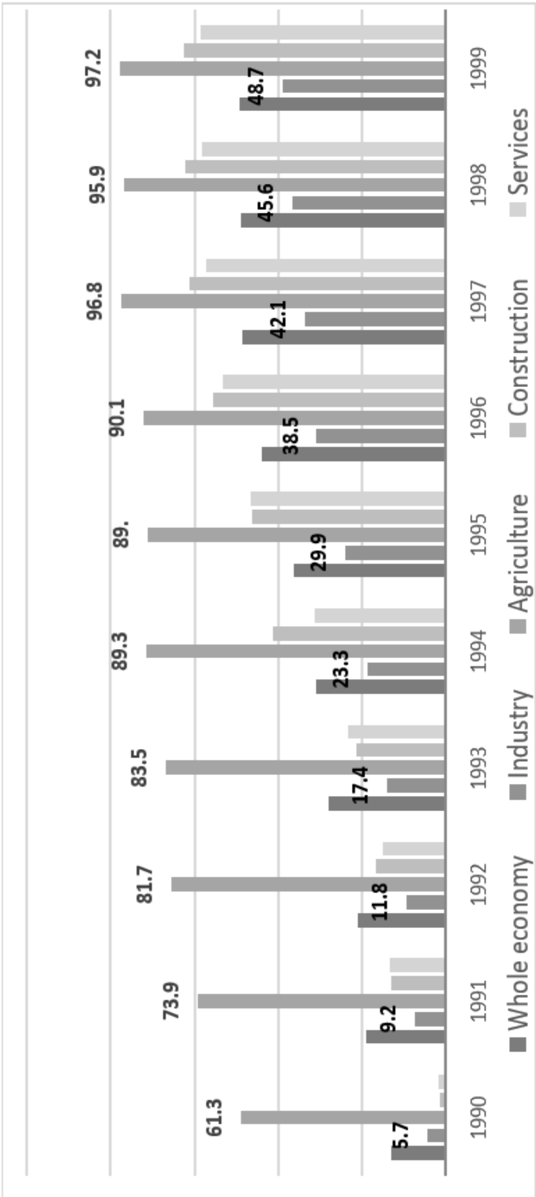
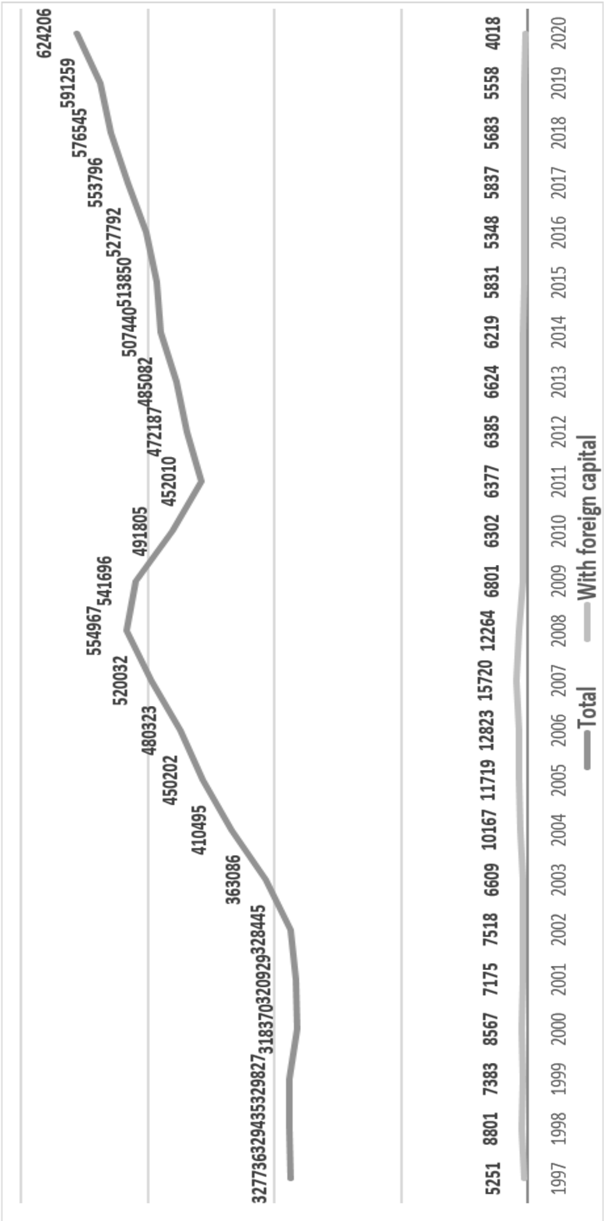
APPENDIX

Figure 1. Percentage of the private sector in the Romanian economy



Data Source: National Development Strategy of Romania 2000, the author

**Figure 2. Number of active enterprises in Romania, total,
Source: National Statistical Institute, Institutul Național de Statistică (INS), and enterprises with foreign capital registered yearly**



Data Source: National Trade Register Office, Oficiul Național al Registrului Comerțului (ONRC), the author

Figure 3. Evolution of the unemployment rate, Romania, Source: INS, the author

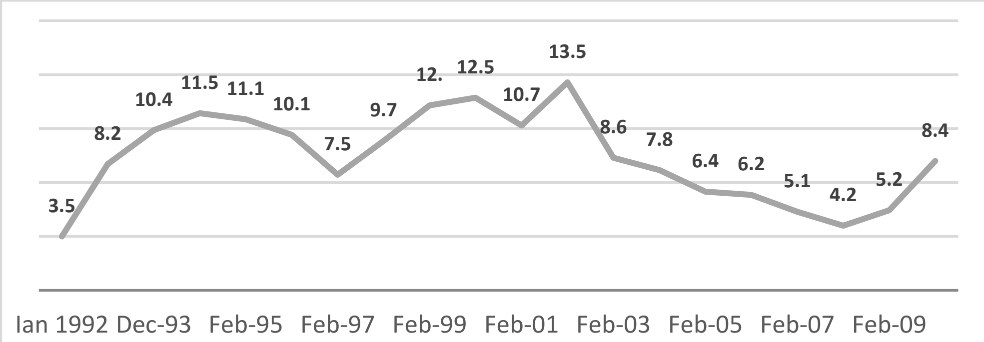
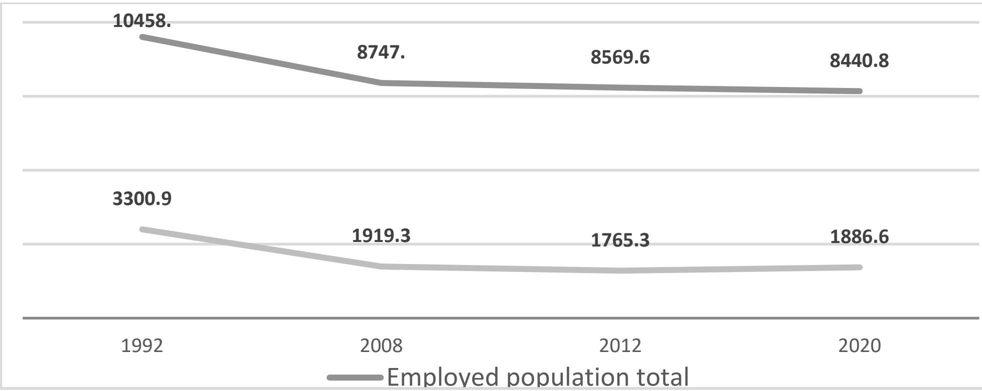
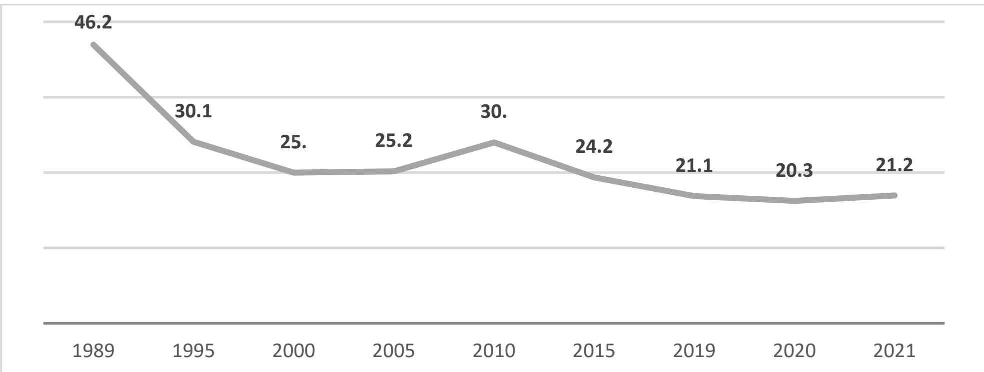


Figure 4. Evolution of the employed population, in total and in the industry, thousands of persons, Romania



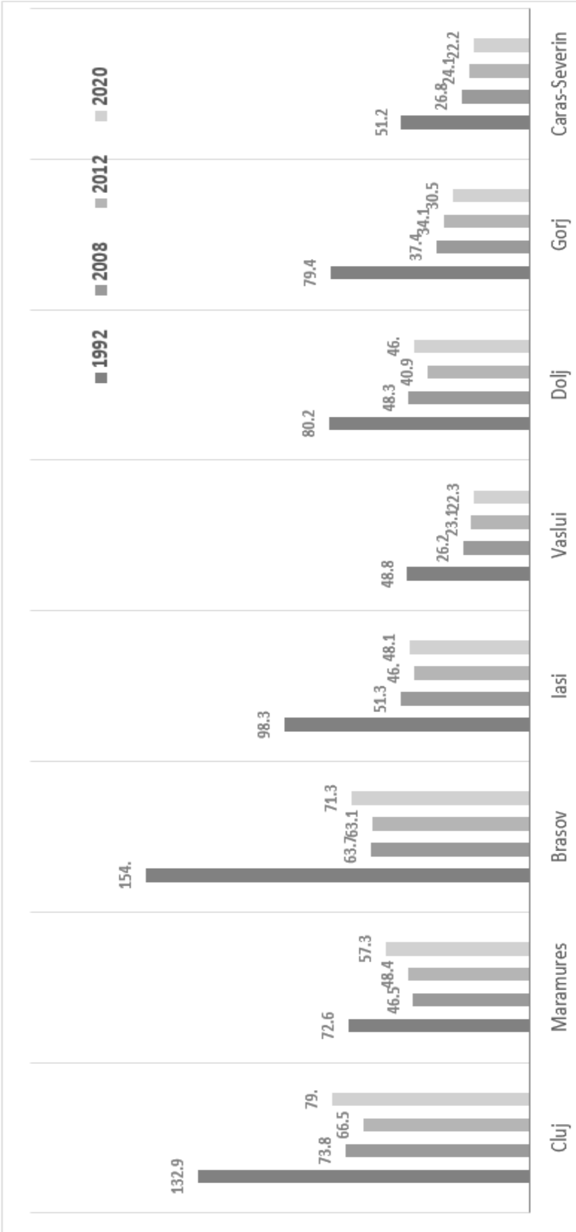
Data Source: INS, the author

Figure 5. Evolution of the percentage contribution of the industry to GDP, Romania



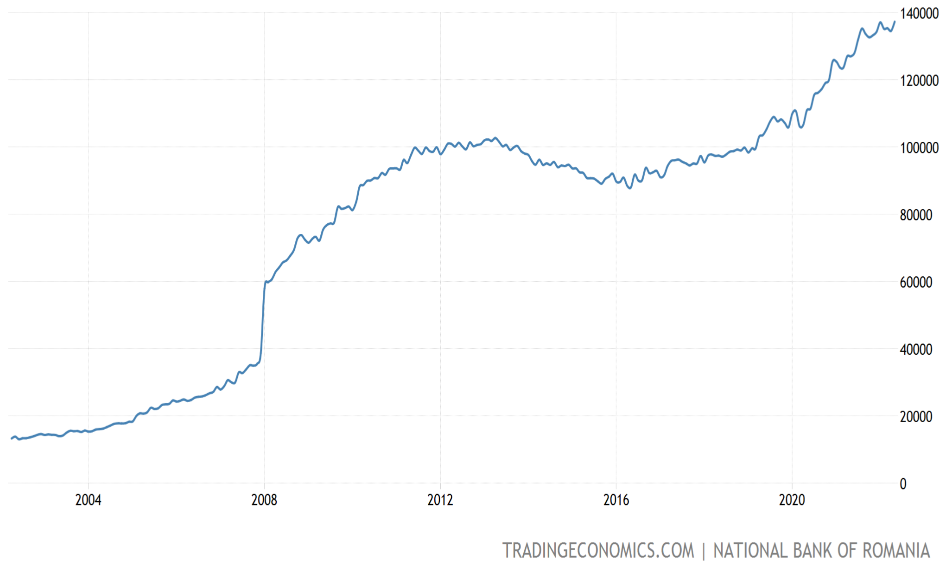
Data Source: Eurostat, the author

Figure 6. Evolution of the employed population in the industry, selected Romanian counties, thousands of persons



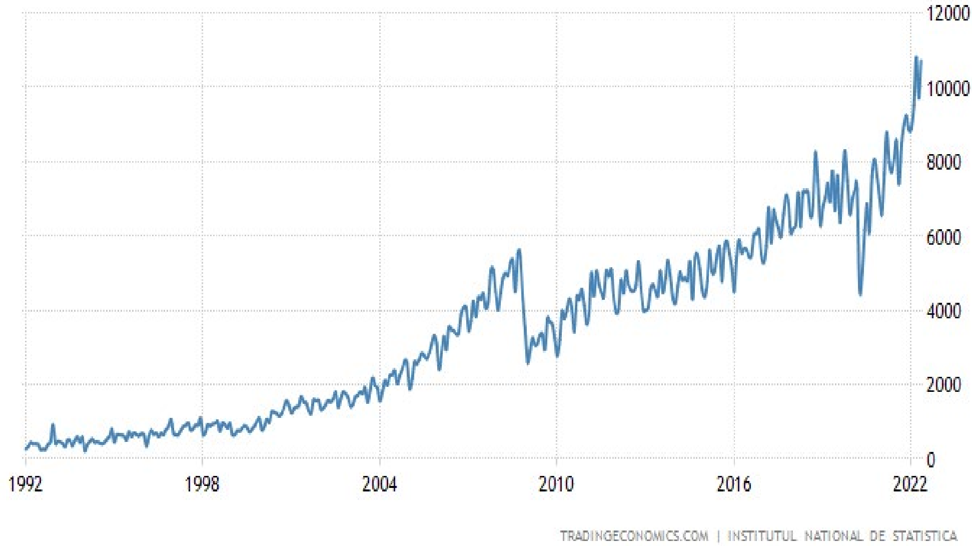
Data Source: INS, the author

Figure 7. External debt in Romania, 2004-2022, million Euros



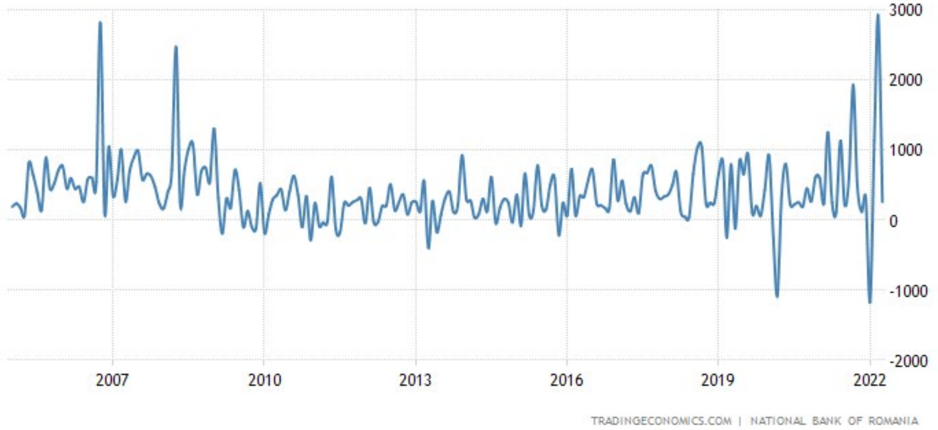
Data Source: UN Statistics

Figure 8. Imports made by Romania, million Euros



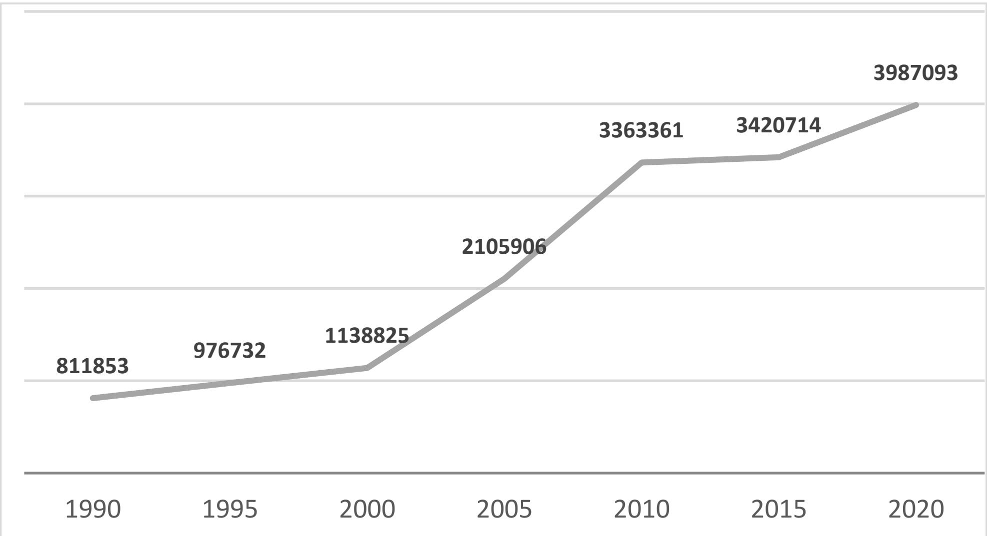
Data Source: UN Statistics

Figure 9. Foreign direct investment in Romania, million Euros



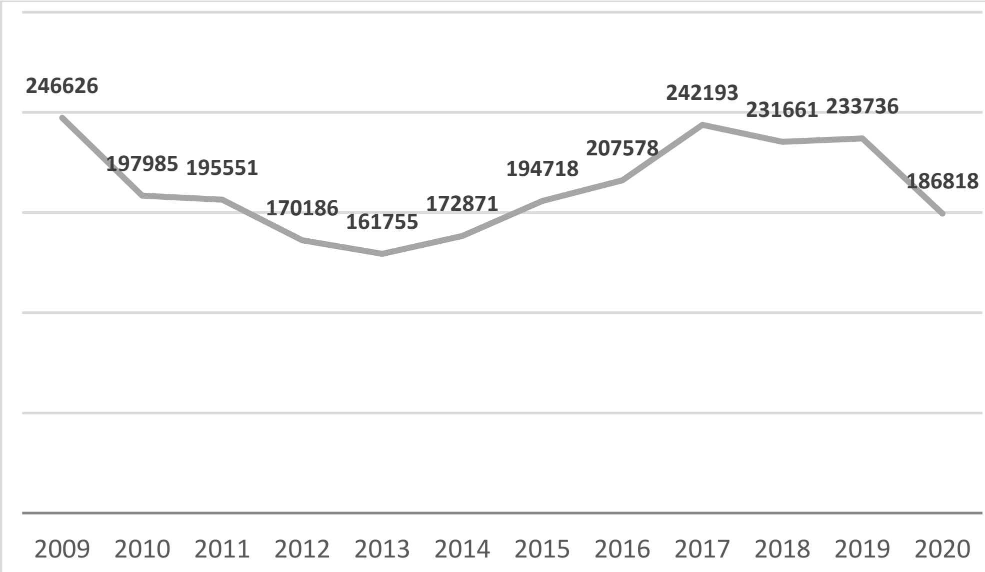
Data Source: UN Statistics

Figure 10. International migrant stock, country of origin: Romania



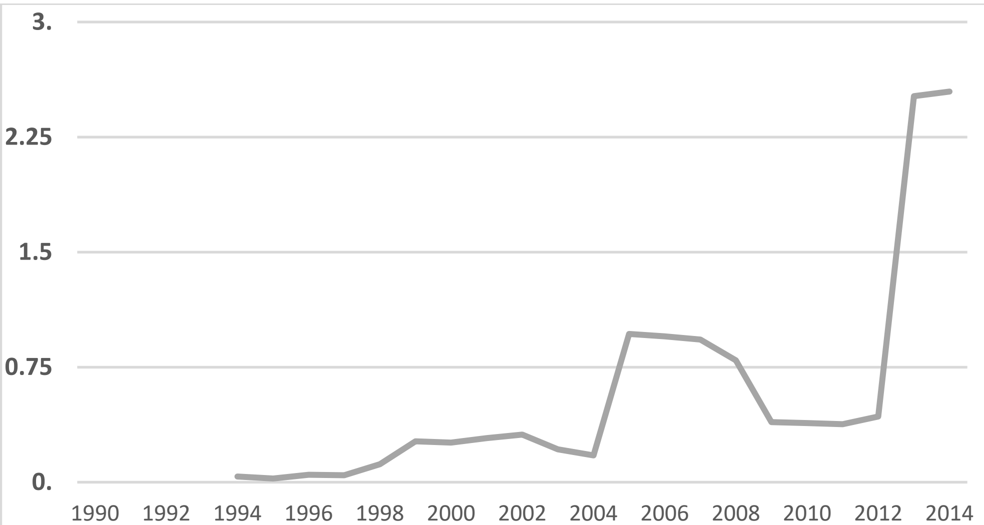
Data Source: UN Population Division, the author

Figure 11. Total number of long-term emigrants leaving Romania yearly, 2009-2020



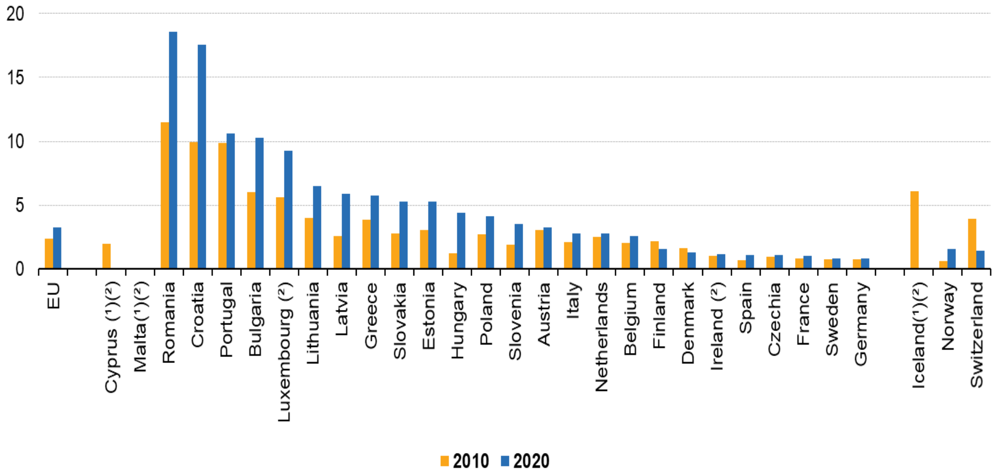
Data Source: Eurostat, the author

Figure 12. Percentage of the inflow of personal remittances of GDP, Romania



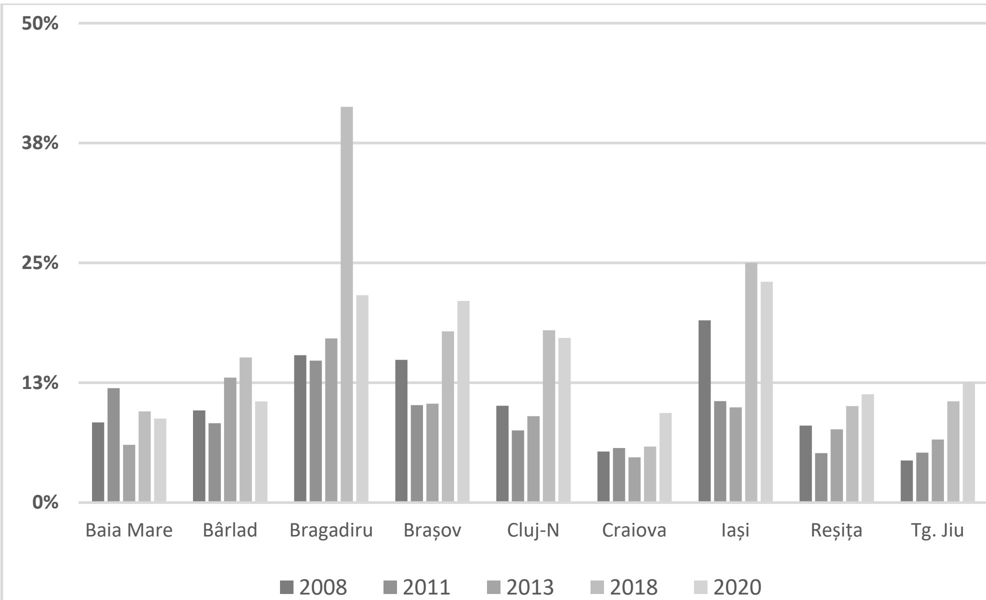
Data Source: UN Statistics

Figure 13. EU mobile citizens of working age (20-64), by country of citizenship, % of their home country resident population



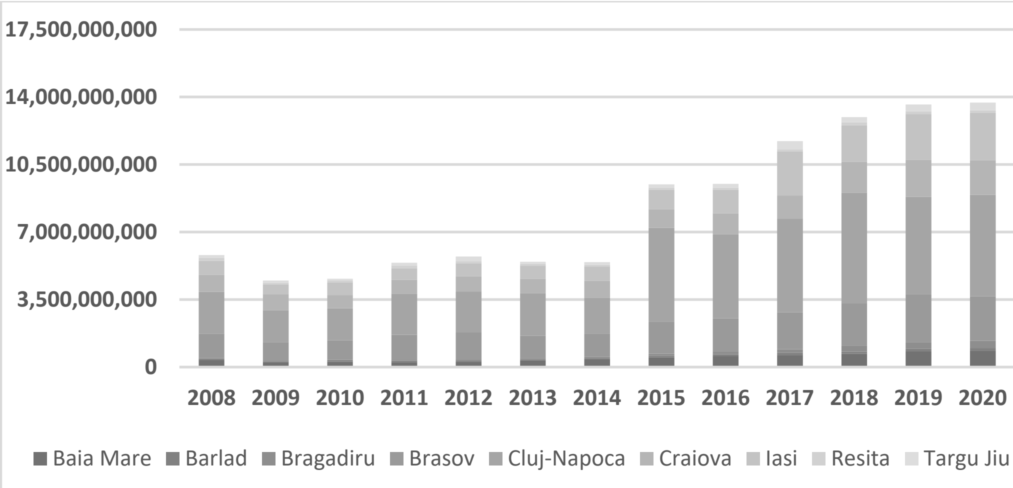
Data Source: Eurostat

Figure 14. Percentage of profit made in construction and real estate transactions of all sectors, selected cities



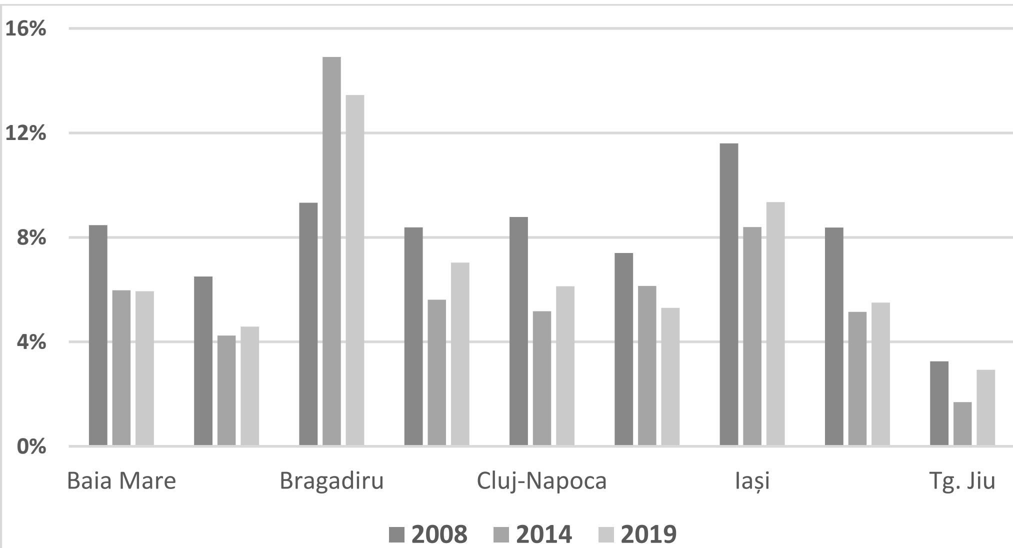
Data Source: datagov.ro, author

Figure 15. Share the yearly profit made in selected cities from the total profit produced in the nine cities, 2008-2020



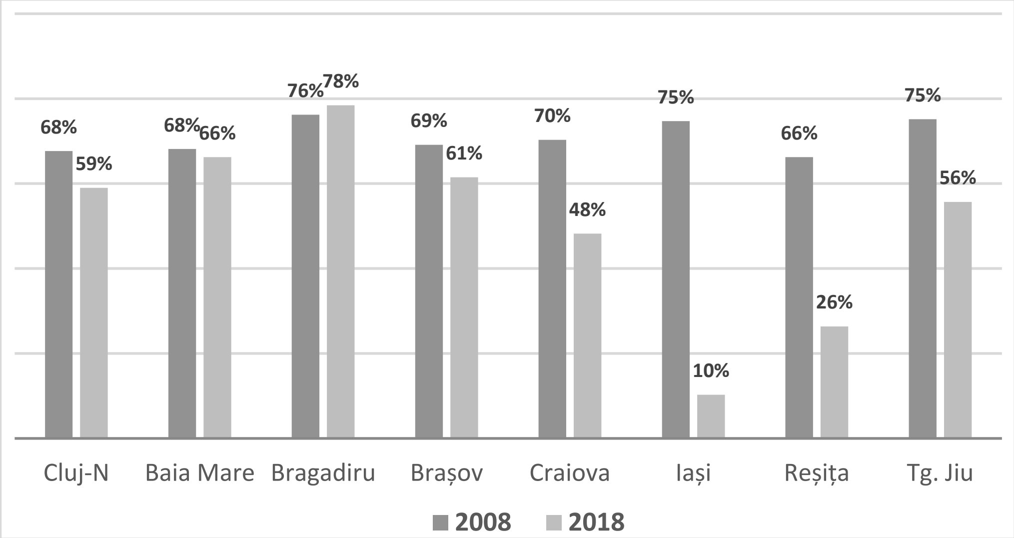
Data Source: datagov.ro, author

Figure 16. Percentage of employees in construction and real estate transactions of the total employees, selected cities



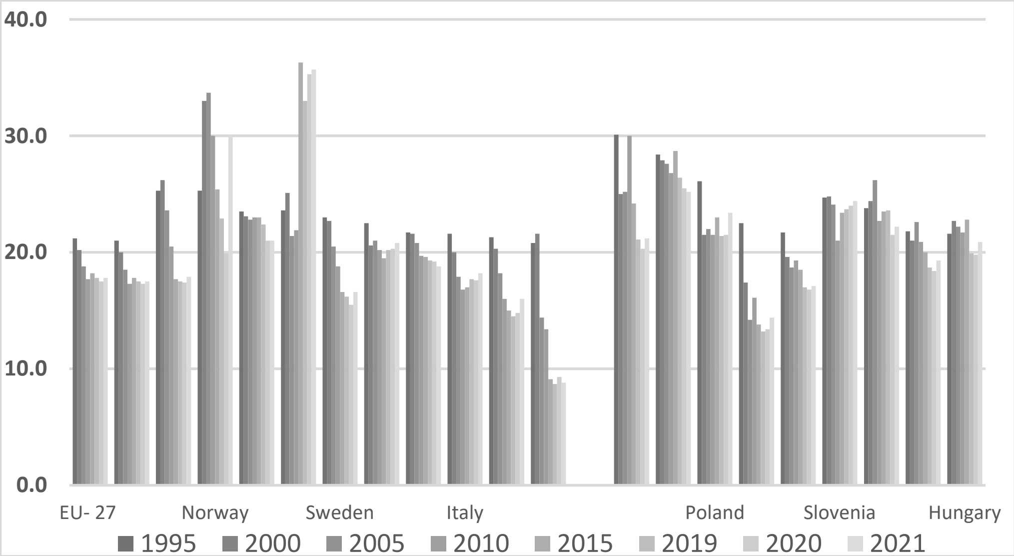
Data Source: datagov.ro, author

Figure 17. Percentage of profit made in the construction sector out of total profit in constructions and real estate transaction, selected cities



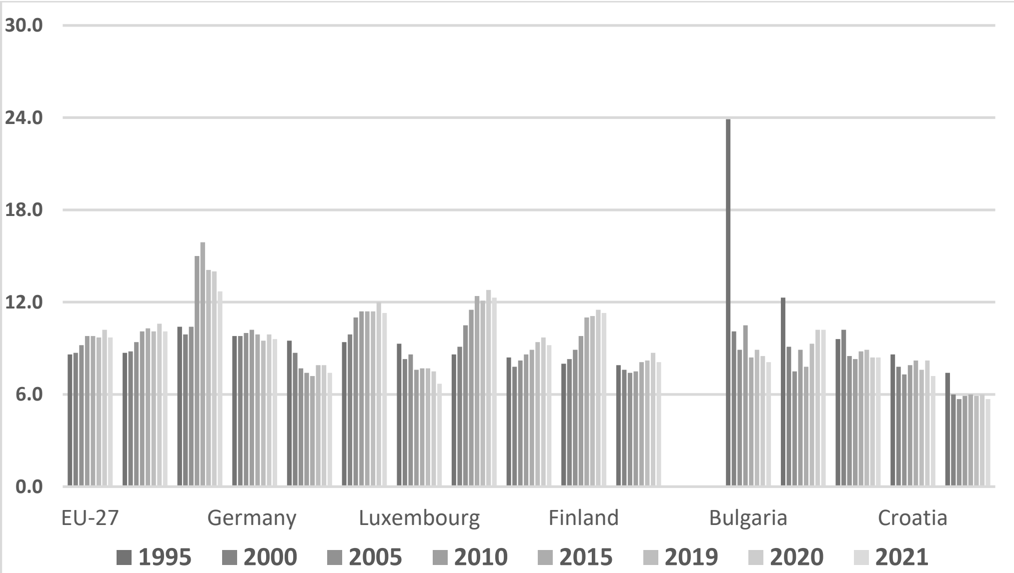
Data Source: datagov.ro, author

Figure 18. Percentage of gross value added by industry in U&EEA states with above 20% in 1995



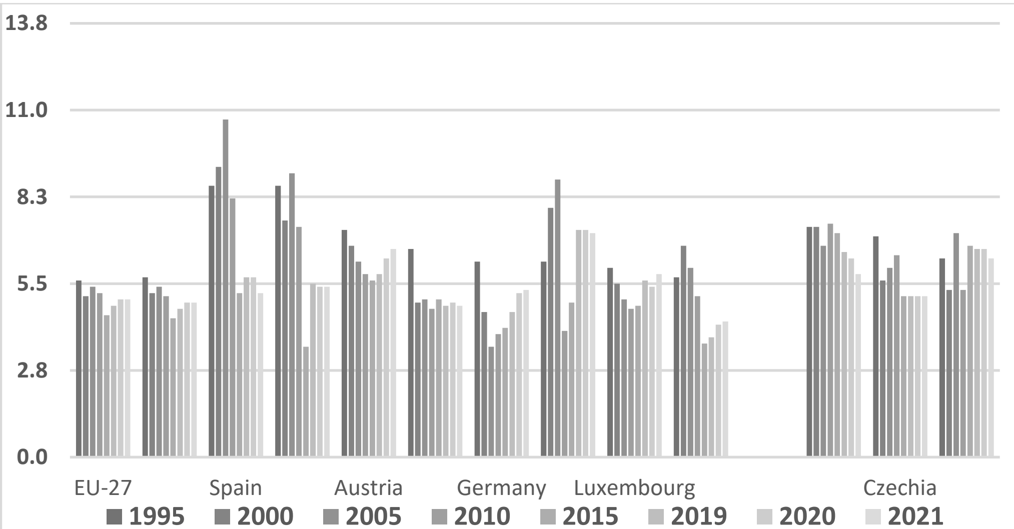
Data Source: Eurostat, the author

Figure 19. Percentage of gross value added by real estate transaction, EU & EEA states with above 7% in 1995



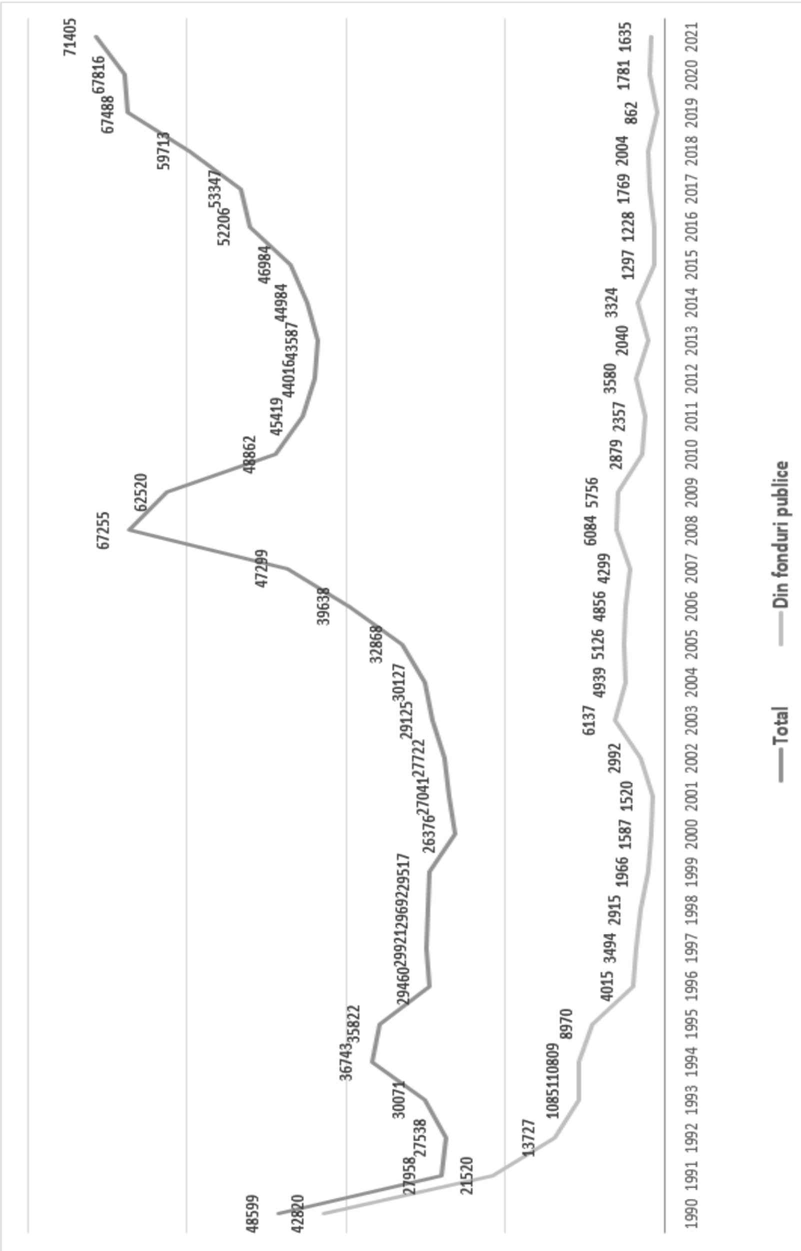
Data Source: Eurostat, the author

Figure 20. Evolution of gross value added by constructions, EU & EEA states with above 6% in 1995



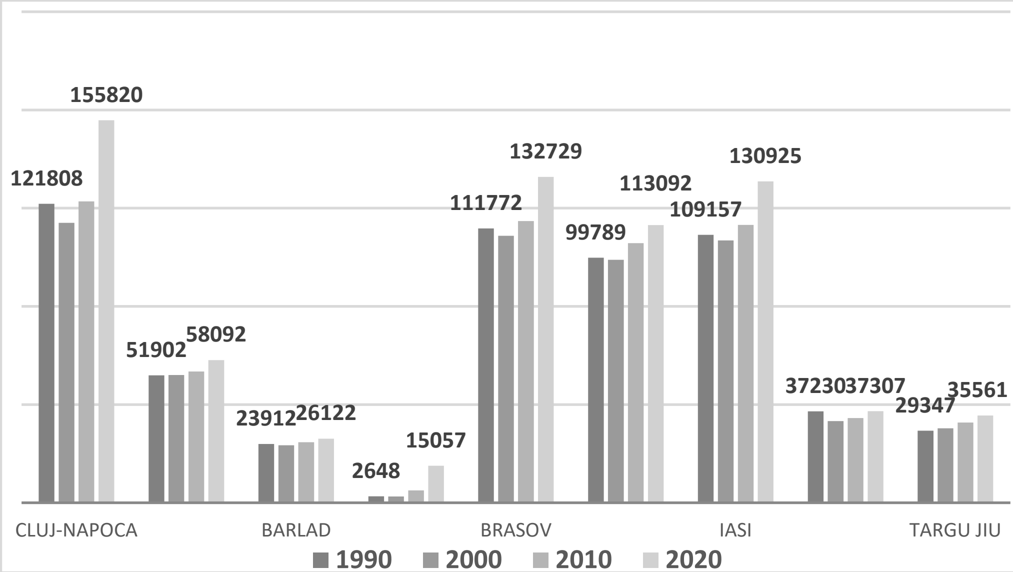
Data Source: Eurostat, the author

Figure 21. Number of finished homes, yearly, total, and from public funds, Romania



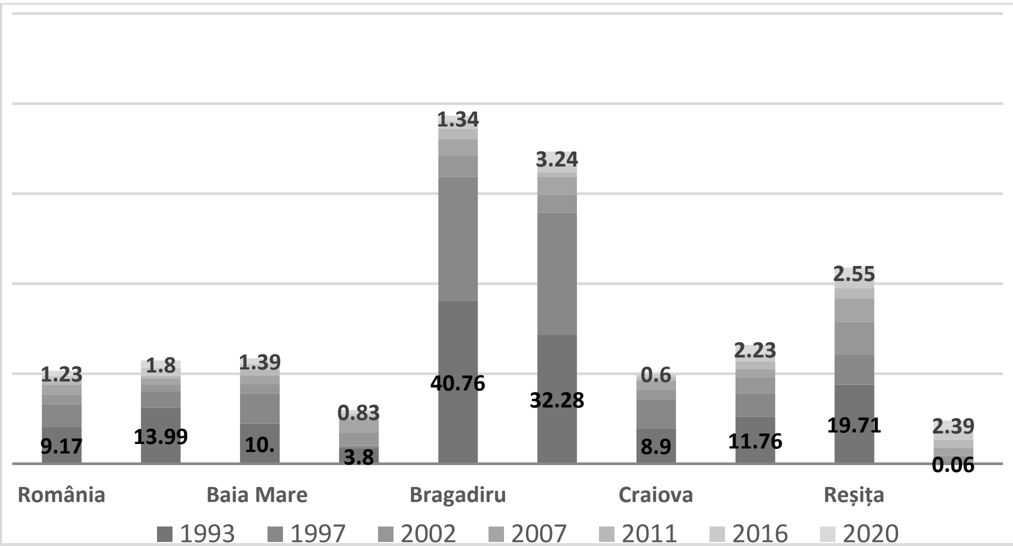
Data Source: INS, the author

Figure 22. Number of existing homes in selected cities



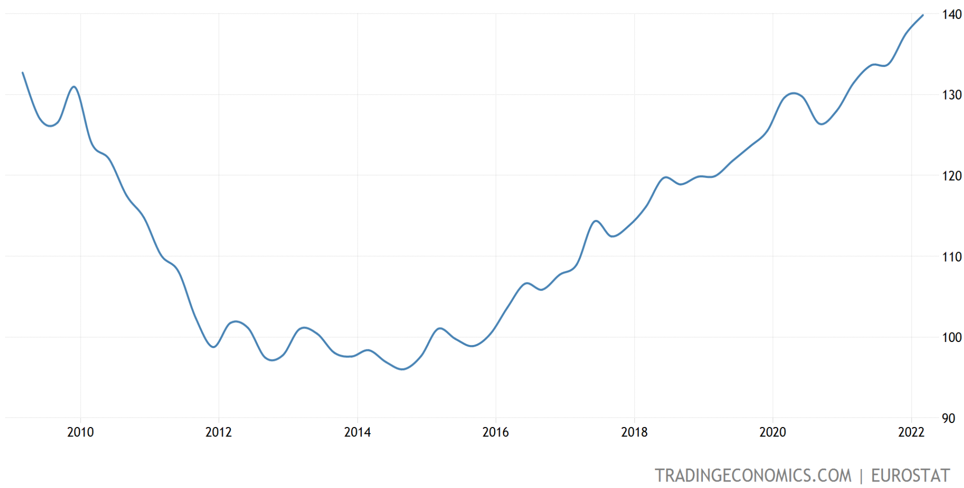
Data Source: INS, the author

Figure 23. Evolution of the percentage of public housing from the total existent housing stock in Romania and selected cities



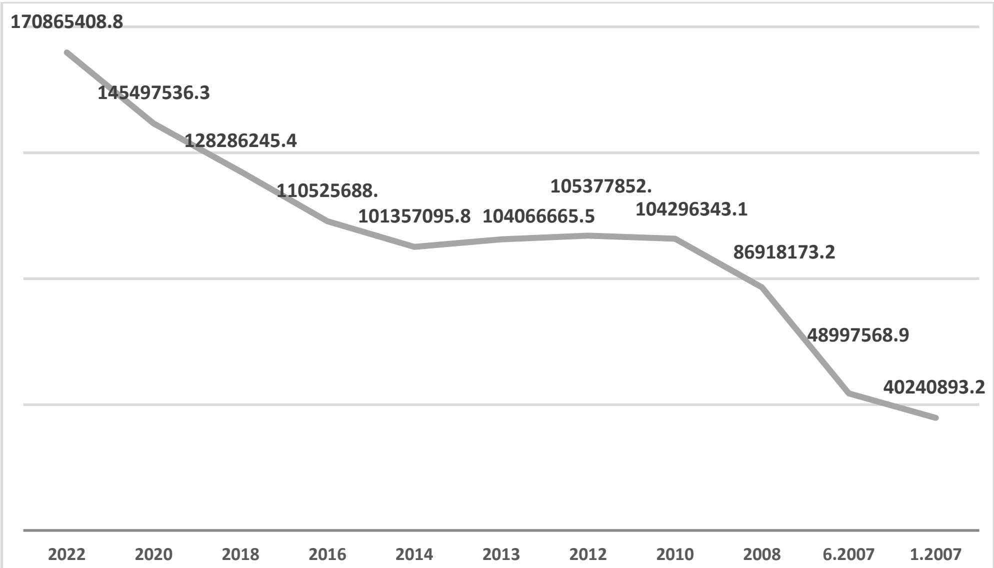
Data Source: INS, the author

Figure 24. Housing price index in Romania (2015=100)



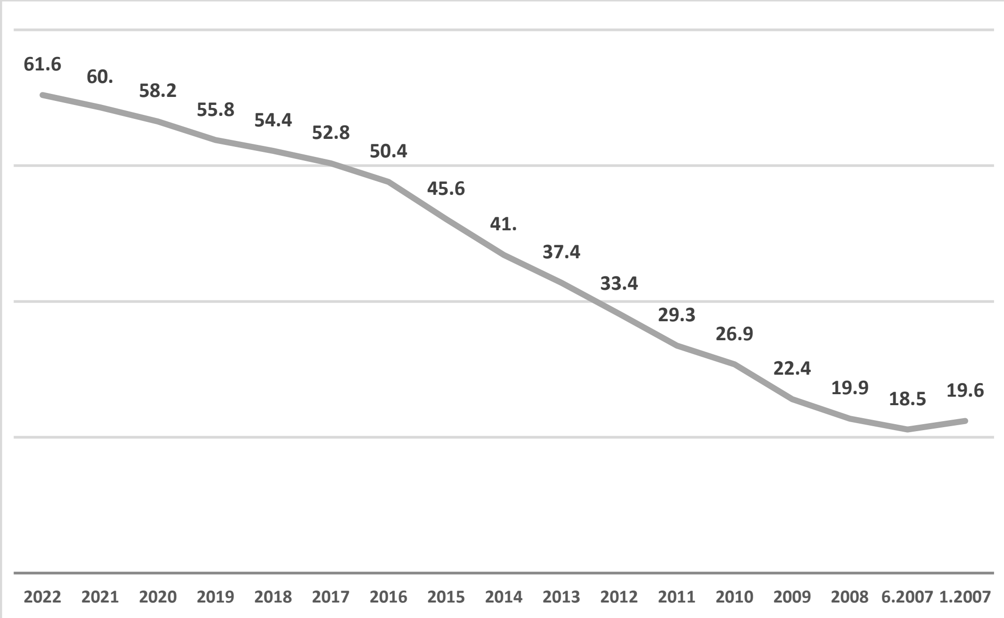
Data Source: Trading Economics

Figure 25. The total amount of loans granted to the population, thousands of Lei, Romania



Data Source: National Bank of Romania, Banca Naţională a Românei (BNR), the author

Figure 26. Percentage of mortgages from the total amount of loans granted to the population



Data Source: BNR, the author

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SEARCHING FOR AUTHENTICITY: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER ROLES AND RADICAL MOVEMENTS IN PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Elena TRIFAN[1]

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ABSTRACT. Personal development has become an industry in neoliberal capitalism, used to help employees adapt to the constant pursuit of growth, such as increased productivity, creativity, time management and business development. As part of my doctoral research, I documented how this type of practice works and how it restructures individuals' social lives and their perspectives on the world. Personal development, as shaped by neoliberalism, serves as a tool for personal empowerment and adaptation to the restructuring of the welfare state. It is also a means of promoting neoliberal values among people. However, during the containment measures during the pandemic, criticisms of this growth-based approach emerged, leading to a resurgence of ideas about personal care. Self-care developed particularly in marginalised communities, where it was defined as a form of resistance to capitalism through caring for oneself as a member of an oppressed community, with Audre Lorde (1988) defining the concept as having a power of resistance to capitalism. In this presentation, I will explore what happens to personal development, which is a key factor in the construction of capitalist ideology, if neoliberalism is coming to an end. I will also consider whether this is a good time to reclaim personal development and how it can be used to create tools for self-building beyond the intrinsic individualism of the process.

Keywords: Personal Development, Gender Dynamics, Social Change, Manosphere, Radical Personal Development

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Introduction

The question of who or what is responsible for driving social change has been a central topic in the field of social sciences. This question has significantly influenced how theories are categorized. Emile Durkheim attributed the entirety of social change to society itself (Durkheim 1997). According to his view, changes in social structures, norms, and values are the driving forces behind societal transformations. On the other hand, thinkers like Max Weber (1965) and similar scholars, argue that individuals play a crucial role as agents of social change. They emphasize that individual actions, decisions, and innovations are significant contributors to shaping society. Karl Polanyi (2013) positions Marx's viewpoint somewhat in the middle. He notes that Marxism emphasizes the working class as the key actor in driving social change. However, Polanyi critiques this idea and instead advocates for political reform as the catalyst for achieving a more improved society, drawing from Durkheim's perspective.

I argue that personal development is a relevant case study for these theoretical discussions. Seen as a tool for the formation of self-governing citizens in the spirit of neoliberalism (Rimke, 2000, Hazleden, 2003, Tie, 2004, Erjavec and Volčič, 2009, Binkley, 2011, 2014) through which they come to manage social problems, but also update their selves to suit the demands of the capitalist labour market (Trifan, 2016a), the concept of personal development is deeply intertwined with the cultural context of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ideology that gained prominence in the late 20th century, emphasizes individualism, market-driven solutions, and limited government intervention within social care (Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberalism places a strong emphasis on individual responsibility (Brown, 2015). In this context, personal development is framed as a means for individuals to take control of their lives, make choices, and improve their circumstances. The focus shifts from collective solutions to personal empowerment. Neoliberalism aligns with a market-driven approach to personal development (Rose, 1996). It views personal development as a commodity that individuals can invest in to enhance their skills, productivity, and overall well-being. Neoliberalism promotes entrepreneurial values, encouraging individuals to develop skills and competencies that are valuable in the capitalist labour market. Personal development often includes elements of skill enhancement, productivity improvement, and entrepreneurship training. Neoliberalism forwards a consumer culture where individuals are encouraged to seek self-improvement through consumption (Foster, 2016). This can manifest in the purchase of self-help books, courses, seminars, and lifestyle products. Personal development becomes a market-driven industry. Neoliberalism's emphasis on adaptability and flexibility in the face of economic changes aligns with the idea of personal development (Harvey, 2002, Beck, 1992). Individuals are encouraged to continually update their skills and knowledge to meet the demands of the ever-changing job market. Neoliberalism is associated with globalization (Harvey, 2005), which has facilitated the global spread of personal development ideas and programs. Personal development is not limited by geographical boundaries and has become a global phenomenon creating its own international language (Nehring, 2016). Neoliberalism often promotes the idea of meritocracy, where individuals can achieve success based on their efforts and abilities (Littler, 2013). Personal development is seen as a way to enhance one's merit and competitiveness in a globalized, competitive world.

It's essential to understand that personal development can take various forms, catering to different individual goals and aspirations. Whether it's spiritual well-being, skill enhancement, or wealth accumulation, personal development is framed within the neoliberal context as a means for individuals to navigate and succeed in an increasingly market-oriented and individualistic society.

While the notion of 'betterment' is subjective and varies from one person to another, it does not take infinitely diverse forms. As my previous research (Trifan, 2016a) revealed, personal development can generally be categorized into three main types: spiritual, primarily centred on enhancing well-being; scientific, with a focus on skill enhancement and increased productivity; and financial, emphasizing wealth accumulation and entrepreneurial competencies. These categories may occasionally overlap, yet they serve a valuable purpose in providing clarity to the diverse landscape of personal development pursuits. While it was primarily shaped by prevailing neoliberal ideology, the personal development industry exhibits certain aspects that can occasionally be viewed as acts of resistance against the dominant system. In the 80s and 90s individual responsibility replaced systemic and state build social solutions. These were the glory years of neoliberalism enshrined in the Washington Consensus and the measures that states took as consequence. Tested with countless victims in South America, neoliberalism has moved its experimental grounds in the former communist countries. The consequences of these experiments have been tragic. Millions of people have lost their jobs, their physical and mental health. After the 2008 crisis, neoliberalism still remains the dominant ideology, although serious cracks have started to develop.

In 2023, it appears to have evolved towards nationalist expressions, fuelling the ascent of far-right movements that are gaining popularity. The era of globalist neoliberalism seems to have passed. It's noteworthy that this metaphorical demise of neoliberalism aligns with growing disillusionment regarding its effectiveness in addressing issues like racism and economic inequalities. Thus, in recent times there has been talk of a 'culture war', especially on the conservative and far right spheres. The term was employed by conservative politicians and intellectuals to attack gender theory and critical race theory. Personal development became part of the 'culture war' early on, critiqued by conservative voices like James Nolan (1998). Nolan identified a therapeutic ethos characterized by an emancipated self, pathologizing of human behaviour, victimization, and an emotivist ethos. These changes were seen as displacing traditional values and expanding state intervention in citizens' lives. Simultaneously, progressive groups employ personal development for resilience and advocacy, reflecting broader cultural polarization. Thus, personal development has become a battleground in the cultural and political debates of our time. In this article I will present how personal development has been rearticulated in this context of the alleged culture war by focusing on three types of personal development: personal development for masculinity and femininity and radical personal development. I will describe each one in the following sections.

Methodology

The present study employs a multifaceted research methodology to explore the dynamic evolution of personal development ideologies over a defined temporal span. With a specific focus on the past couple of years, the research examines the intricate interplay between personal development discourses and their implications for societal change. Central to this exploration is the question of whether personal development serves as a transformative tool for societal advancement or inadvertently diverts attention from prevailing societal issues.

This study addresses the following research questions:

- In what ways has personal development transformed within the context of emerging discussions surrounding traditional masculinity, and what consequences does this transformation hold for both individuals and society?
- How has personal development evolved within the framework of traditional femininity, and what repercussions does this evolution entail for individuals and society?
- What transformations has personal development undergone within the sphere of radical personal development movements, and what are the ramifications of these changes for both individuals and society?

To elucidate the multifarious dynamics at play, the study adopts a combination of content analysis, case studies, comparative analysis, and thematic examination. The primary goal is to glean insights into the evolving nature of personal development and its resonance within distinct sociocultural contexts. This approach facilitates a holistic understanding of the potential impact of personal development ideologies on sociopolitical paradigms. The content analysis aspect of the research involves a comprehensive examination of various textual and visual sources. These sources encompass a range of mediums, such as written works, speeches, videos, and online discussions, emanating from prominent figures within the personal development sphere. Notable among these figures are Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, whose ideologies have gained prominence over the past years. This analysis delves into the essence of their messages, the evolution of their perspectives, and their implications for societal discourses.

Furthermore, the study integrates case studies to offer in-depth insights into the cultural specificity and ideological nuances that underlie personal development trajectories. By selecting comparable figures within the Romanian context, the research explores manifestations of personal development ideologies in diverse sociopolitical environments. This comparative approach enriches the analysis by highlighting cross-cultural variations and shared themes that underpin personal development's global discourse.

The study undertakes a thematic analysis of the identified content and case studies. This analytical process unveils recurring themes, ideologies, and discursive patterns embedded within the personal development discourse. By critically engaging with these themes, the study aims to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which personal development ideologies may influence, challenge, or reinforce societal narratives.

Research Limitations

Content analysis relies on the availability of textual and visual materials. There may be limitations related to access, especially to proprietary or subscription-based content. The materials selected for content analysis may not fully represent the diversity of personal development resources available, potentially leading to a partial view of the field. Content analysis captures a specific moment in time, and changes or developments in the field may not be fully reflected. Case studies are employed to explore how personal development is rearticulated in the context of masculinity, femininity, and radical personal development.

Findings from case studies may not be easily generalized to the entire population due to their qualitative nature and focus on specific contexts. They provide insights rather than statistical representativeness. Case studies involve interpretation, and the researcher's subjectivity can influence findings. Efforts are made to mitigate bias through triangulation and reflexivity.

Theoretical framework

This study employs a conceptual framework rooted in sociological and cultural theories, particularly drawing from the perspectives of neoliberalism, gender studies, and cultural studies. The theoretical lens of neoliberalism is central to this study. Neoliberalism, as an economic and political ideology emphasizing individualism, market-driven solutions, and limited government intervention, informs the exploration of how personal development has evolved within this cultural context. It offers insights into the emphasis on individual responsibility, market-driven approaches, and the commodification of personal development.

Gender studies theories help analyse the rearticulation of personal development in the context of masculinity and femininity. They offer a framework for understanding how gender norms and expectations influence personal development practices and how personal development, in turn, reinforces or challenges these norms.

Cultural studies theories provide a lens for examining how personal development is situated within broader cultural shifts, such as the rise of far-right movements and responses to issues like racism and gender discrimination. Cultural studies perspectives highlight the role of personal development as part of a broader cultural discourse. Historical perspectives inform the research questions by highlighting the evolution of neoliberalism and its impact on personal development. The dominance of neoliberalism in the 80s and 90s and its adaptation in response to global crises set the historical context for understanding how personal development has been influenced.

Many investigations into personal development often begin with the Foucaultian notion of governmentality, defined as the state's method of shaping citizens to adhere to its principles (Foucault, 2008). Building upon this concept, Nikolas Rose introduces the idea of neo-governmentality, where the capitalist system and the market shapes citizens in alignment with their principles (Rose, 1996). According to Rose, psycho-sciences, including personal development, play a pivotal role in shaping citizens who can self-govern. In Romania, recent discussions on this topic, alongside my own research (Trifan, 2016b; Trifan, 2019; Trifan, 2020a) have been explored by Sorin Gog (2020), Anca Simionca (2016), and Sergiu Bortoș (2017). They have examined how the formation of the neoliberal subject in Romania is influenced by spirituality programs, as observed in Gog's work, or through participation in personal development courses. As well, I have addressed the impact of neoliberalism in feminist movement in Romania who employ on personal development as a mean for empowerment (2020b). However, there remains a research gap in understanding the nuanced intersections between personal development, gender, and cultural shifts, especially in response to contemporary challenges such as far-right movements and debates on discrimination.

This study aims to address this research gap by examining how personal development has been rearticulated in response to changing cultural dynamics, with a particular focus on gender roles, and social change and critique. By doing so, it aims to shed light on the unexplored questions and issues related to the role of personal development in contemporary society.

Personal development and gender

Examining personal development literature within the broader context of self-improvement reveals its consistent implications for gender dynamics throughout history. Greek philosophy focused on men, and the correspondences of rulers addressed their male heirs. Women's writings often focused on enhancing their roles as wives. Puritan literature focused on men's financial success, while New Thought literature similarly addressed mostly men.

Self-help literature in United States has evolved in response to changing cultural norms and societal values. In the colonial era, self-help books were influenced by Puritan beliefs, emphasizing values like a strong work ethic and spiritual closeness to God. These texts provided guidance for achieving success in both financial and spiritual aspects. During the 1700s, a more secular perspective emerged, focusing on upward social mobility as a key aspiration. Victorian-era self-help books on marriage delved into the intricacies of marital roles, duties, and sexual dynamics within a rigid moral framework (Jones 2009; Starker 1989)

The history of marriage advice literature can be traced back to 15th-century England. Early marriage manuals were strongly influenced by religious beliefs, addressing various aspects of marriage, including legal elements, marital roles, home management, and comparisons from secular and religious viewpoints. These manuals predominantly targeted middle-class audiences, offering guidance for married couples (Gordon and Bernstein, 1970).

The cultural history of seduction in Europe provides insights into the evolution of seduction techniques. Historically, women used physical charms and erotic dances to seduce warrior-type men. However, during early modernity, this dynamic shifted as aristocratic warriors transformed into refined courtiers. This transformation replaced violence with ceremonial interactions, with men assuming the role of seducers. This shift gave rise to the Gallant archetype, embodied by figures like Don Juan. The 18th century witnessed the systematic development of seduction, particularly among the Parisian aristocracy, characterized by emotional flexibility and calculated behaviour (Kray, 2018).

Contemporary Pickup Artists (PUAs) considers themselves successors to famous seducers, grounding their discourse in cultural heritage. Unlike traditional seducers, PUAs position themselves as teachers helping those with social difficulties. Commitment's role has shifted in PUA philosophy, with PUAs advocating avoidance as a means to increase desirability. Key elements of PUA strategies include reading non-verbal cues and manipulation techniques like 'push-pull'. (ibid). The evolving Manosphere, a collection of online communities focused on men's issues, includes milder groups like Pick Up Artists (PUAs) and Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) to more extreme ones like Incels and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW). Users are migrating from milder communities to more extreme ones, displaying increased toxic behaviour. This migration raises concerns about potential online radicalization. Additionally, the Manosphere exhibits a higher volume of hateful speech compared to other online communities, contributing to online harassment and real-world violence. The PUA community's focus on 'game' can involve objectification and potentially negative perceptions of masculinity and men's relationships with women (Ribeiro et al., 2021). The manosphere is connected with rise of the alt-right movement that focuses on its connection to the nostalgia for a past characterized by fixed gender roles and racial homogeneity. This movement foregrounds these ideals and combines them with rhetoric portraying its followers as victims of betrayal (Kray, 2018). The PUA movement instrumentalizes emotional discourse to promote hegemonic masculinity and oppose feminism. Male suffering is attributed to the perceived threat of feminism and the 'feminization of society', with anti-feminist ideologies serving as a coping mechanism (Crăciun, 2019).

Awaking the real men

One very popular example of character teaching personal development from the 'Manosphere' is Emory Andrew Tate III, a media personality, entrepreneur, and former professional kickboxer of American-British nationality. Tate's kickboxing journey began in 2005, culminating in his first championship victory in 2009. His profile garnered more attention in 2016 following his appearance on the British reality show, Big Brother. However, he faced controversy and subsequent removal from the show due to a video where he was seen striking a woman with a belt; both parties later claimed the act was consensual.

Tate transitioned into the realm of paid courses and memberships on his website, achieving fame as an internet figure promoting an "ultra-masculine, ultra-luxurious lifestyle." His commentary, often criticized for its misogyny, led to his suspension from various social media platforms. Tate's ventures included Hustler's University, where members paid a monthly fee for instruction on unconventional money-making avenues, employing affiliate marketing and pre-recorded videos. Following the program's shutdown, he launched a rebranded version named 'The Real World'. As of August 2022, its website had amassed over 100,000 subscribers. Tate also established a private network called 'The War Room', touted as a global initiative to liberate men from societal constraints.

In December 2022, Tate and his brother Tristan were arrested in Romania, along with two women. The quartet was suspected of human trafficking and forming an organized crime group, allegedly coercing victims into generating paid explicit content. Tate and his brother faced charges of rape, human trafficking, and forming an organized crime group. In a landscape where personal development and advice purportedly carry no real-life consequences, the alleged crimes committed by Tate provide a counter-narrative. Despite the potential impact of personal growth ideologies, Tate's actions challenge the notion that such guidance inherently leads to positive outcomes.

Andrew Tate has garnered a substantial following in Romania, particularly evident through the emergence of numerous masculinity camps over the past few years. Notably, Cezar Ionașcu is a prominent figure in this context. Presently, Cezar Ionașcu, along with his wife Oksana Ionașcu, markets 'knowledge' through lectures and books on various subjects such as health, womanhood, manhood, and financial success. The pricing for their courses and books varies widely, catering to a diverse range of individuals, spanning from 30 euros to 7500 euros.

An intriguing facet of these initiatives mirrors the affiliation program adopted by Andrew Tate. A pivotal element of this program entails participants incorporating links into video clips specifically designed for social media platforms. If someone completes a purchase through one of these links, the participant receives a percentage of the course's price. While the primary emphasis remains on education, participants inadvertently become promoters of Cezar Ionașcu's content. This method was also employed by Andrew Tate to propagate Hustler's University, which significantly boosted his online visibility. Cezar Ionașcu has likewise found success through this approach, notwithstanding platform restrictions stemming from his contentious remarks about vaccinations and the Covid-19 pandemic. This was explicitly described in a PressOne article by Răzvan Filip who attended Ionașcu seminar's[2].

To further understand this phenomenon, let's take a critical look at what Cezar Ionașcu is teaching. Ionașcu predominantly targets men, emphasizing the need to increase masculinity in an "authentic way". This raises questions about the meanings of 'authentic masculinity' as masculinity varies across cultures, races, and ethnicities. Ionașcu's programs inherently reinforce traditional gender roles by framing masculinity as something that needs to be increased. This perspective perpetuates the harmful idea that there's a fixed definition of masculinity that men should adhere to, neglecting the vast diversity of gender identities and expressions. Ionașcu's emphasis on fulfilling the needs and beliefs of women regarding physical appearance and masculine style is problematic. It objectifies women by implying that a man's worth or success hinges on how he presents himself to women.

Ionașcu's portrayal of money and women as 'sensitive and debated' topics suggests that men need guidance in navigating these areas. While his programs aim to challenge destructive beliefs, it actually perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes promoting self-worth and confidence regardless of gender. Moreover, it's essential to consider how these issues intersect with societal power dynamics. The discussion around money is presented in asocial void without taken into consideration economic inequalities and disparities, and gendered aspects without its roots in patriarchal structures.

The cost of these private sessions, set at 2,500 Euros for 6 sessions or 5 sessions, is considerable. Cezar Ionașcu's individual consultation service is a prime example of commodifying personal development. Ionașcu's offer promotes the idea that individual success and improvement can be bought, which aligns with the capitalist narrative that personal growth and self-improvement are commodities to be purchased. This commodification of self-improvement underscores how capitalism thrives by selling not only material goods but also intangible concepts like personal development.

While Tate is often revered as an icon for those seeking a stereotypically masculine image, seen in the Pickup Artist (PUA) community, Jordan Peterson's influence has become intertwined with the incel (involuntary celibate) community—a group often associated with introverted individuals lacking social skills. Peterson, a psychology professor, and clinical psychiatrist, gained prominence after 2016, when he released a series of YouTube videos critiquing

[2] https://pressone.ro/incursiune-in-lumea-pastilelor-rosii-partea-intai-am-participat-timp-de-o-luna-la-cursul-de-barbatie-si-facut-bani-predat-de-cezar-ionascu/ (23 august 2023)

Canada's Bill C-16, which aimed to prohibit discrimination based on "gender identity and expression." Peterson argued that the bill would enforce "compelled speech" by mandating the use of specific gender pronouns. This argument extended to his broader critique of political correctness and identity politics, garnering both praise and criticism. In 2018, Peterson temporarily stepped away from his clinical practice and teaching to publish his self-help book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, which achieved widespread popularity and success.

In the subsequent years, Peterson faced health challenges due to benzodiazepine withdrawal syndrome. He published his third book, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life*, in 2021, resigned from the University of Toronto, and resumed podcasting. Peterson's lectures and discussions, mainly available on platforms like YouTube and podcasts, have garnered millions of views. In 2023 an Ontario court upheld a regulatory body's order for Peterson to undergo social media training due to complaints about his controversial online statements, rejecting his argument that political commentary falls outside the college's purview.

Peterson has visited Romania on two occasions. The first time was during BrandMinds, branded as the largest business summit in Central and Eastern Europe, with many managers from the region attending. His second visit to Romania aimed to promote his latest book, *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life.* Notably, Bucharest was just one of 11 European stops where Jordan Peterson introduced his new international bestseller.

Critics of Peterson's ideas have taken issue with his views on subjects such as global warming, his opposition to feminism and transgender rights, and his strict adherence to a beef-only diet. Conversely, for his supporters, these criticisms seem to have only strengthened their affinity for him. In Romania, Peterson has garnered a considerable following. This is evident by looking at how many public individuals met with him George Buhnici, independent MEP (formerly AUR) Anamaria Gavrilă, while other MPs such as PNL MP Titus Corlățean's and other Liberals Sebastian Burduja, Pavel Popescu, and Robert Sighiartău have met with him at Parliament building. There's also a Bucharest-based Jordan Peterson Meetup Group that holds gatherings on a monthly or bimonthly basis, boasting 493 members and having successfully hosted 27 social events.

Jordan Peterson tends to attract a more educated audience. According to a Libertatea article, a significant portion of attendees at his second event appeared to be well-educated and of middle-class background, which is notable given the relatively high-ticket price of around 100-150 euros[3]. On the other hand, the PUA (Pick Up Artist) community caters to a less educated demographic, offering a plethora of free online content. This contrast is reflected in the themes they address – the PUA community offers straightforward advice such as sleeping on the floor and abstaining from masturbation to enhance masculinity. In contrast to Andrew Tate, Jordan Peterson's appeal lies in his ability to engage an elitist middle-class audience by tackling complex subjects. However, it's important to note that his approach might involve grappling with topics he may not fully comprehend and catering to a conservative audience.

Supporters of Jordan Peterson also exist among Romanian intellectuals, Mihail Neamțu is arguably the most similar figure to Jordan Peterson. Particularly in recent years, following the success of Peterson, whom he openly admires, Neamțu began offering courses through an organization called the Neamțu School. These courses delve into various subjects including Rhetoric and Leadership, Science and Faith: Did we genuinely experience evolution, and Babel Tower: Nationalism, globalism, catastrophe. Neamțu and Peterson both touch upon the idea of generational shifts in values and behaviours. They highlight how newer generations may have different priorities and beliefs compared to their predecessors. They both allude to changes in culture, morality, and societal norms. Jordan Peterson often discusses how contemporary culture has evolved, sometimes questioning the impact of these changes. Mihail Neamțu critiques certain values and behaviours of the younger generation, just as Jordan Peterson has critiqued aspects of modern society, particularly when it comes to political correctness and free speech.

There's an implication in both Mihail Neamțu and some of Jordan Peterson's work that traditional values and practices are being replaced or eroded in favour of newer trends and lifestyles. Neamțu engages in a critique of contemporary culture. They point out perceived negative aspects and changes in society, such as shifts in values and behaviours. They both express concerns about the impact of modern ideologies on young people. Jordan Peterson often discusses how political correctness and radical ideologies might affect the younger generation, while the passage criticizes the transformation of young individuals into activists who are seen as misguided. Both are critical of political correctness and its role in stifling free speech and fostering ideological conformity. Both emphasize the significance of tradition, values, and timeless principles. Jordan Peterson frequently explores the worth of religious and philosophical traditions, while

[3] https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/reportaj-fenomenul-jordan-peterson-in-romania-cu-ce-discurs-a-tinut-in-scaune-4-000-de-spectatori-mesajele-lui-ii-vor-folosi-in-viata-fiului-meu-4533209 (23 August 2023)

Neamțu, who holds a Bachelor of Arts in Orthodox Theology and has authored books published by the Publishing House of the Metropolitanate of Moldavia and Bucovina, as well as created numerous videos on religious subjects, similarly expresses concern about the abandonment of these values.

Another significant commonality they share is their strong opposition to communism. Neamțu has a substantial body of videos and public opinions on anti-communism in Romania, as well as leftist movements globally. Additionally, his close association with the former Romanian President, Traian Băsescu, another staunch anti-communist, during a period when numerous neoliberal policies were implemented in Romania, is noteworthy and helped him gain a spot as the scientific director at the Institute for the Condemnation of Communist Crimes.

The section portrays societal structures and expectations related to gender roles, traditional values, and economic disparities. These structures influence individuals' choices and opportunities. For example, the pricing structure of personal development programs can be seen as a structural constraint that limits access based on economic privilege. Traditional gender roles and expectations are presented as influencing individuals' behaviour and self-perception. The section also acknowledges the agency of individuals in seeking personal development and self-improvement. It discusses how people from various backgrounds choose to participate in programs like those offered by Cezar Ionascu and Jordan Peterson. These individuals exercise agency in their pursuit of personal growth and self-discovery.

The conservative and traditional views of gender roles tend to emphasize the importance of adhering to established societal norms and traditions. In this context, the section portrays conservative views that reinforce traditional gender roles, such as the idea that men should conform to a specific definition of masculinity and women should focus on fulfilling the needs and beliefs of men. These views can be seen as emphasizing structural constraints on individual behaviour, limiting agency. Traditional gender roles themselves are a societal structure that can constrain individual agency. They prescribe specific roles and behaviours for men and women, potentially limiting their choices and opportunities. For example, traditional views of femininity may constrain women's agency by suggesting that their primary role is to attract and please men.

In summary, the section indirectly addresses the structure vs. agency debate by depicting how societal structures, particularly conservative and traditional views of gender roles, influence individuals' choices and opportunities for personal development. It highlights the tension between conforming to traditional norms (structure) and pursuing personal growth and self-discovery (agency) within the constraints of these norms.

Find your true feminine self!

The contemporary notion of personal development imported some of its values from the countercultures of the 60s and 70s. As well, feminism shifted its focus towards personal development starting with that period. An example of this shift can be found in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, which bears significant resemblances to self-help literature. However, in its teachings and values, is somewhat different then the boss-babe stereotype of personal development of today. Besides, with the advent of feminism, self-help literature on relationships took a new direction. Authors like Cuauhtémoc Sánchez and Elizabeth Cantú presented contrasting perspectives on traditional intimacy, with Sánchez advocating for conservative forms of intimacy as part of a wholesome life plan, while Cantú critiqued feminism and advocated for traditional gender roles based on religious doctrine (Gordon & Bernstein 1970).

Conversely, several studies have critiqued the approached based on personal development as mean of liberation and equal representation. Laura Berlant (1988) coined the term 'female complaint' to describe how women in 1980s America expressed grievances while navigating a male-centric ideology that marginalized them. This concept paradoxically allowed women to voice opposition without challenging their alignment with men, recognizing the limits of their struggle (ibid: 243-244). Expanding on this, Schrager (1993) argued that self-help writings acted as channels for female anger. They enabled women to position themselves against men without fearing a loss of status, yet these writings often didn't fundamentally alter societal structures. Additionally, linguist Deborah Cameron (2007), adopting a feminist perspective, explored the link between therapeutic culture and the workplace, emphasizing the role of language. Cameron argued that the issues didn't stem from speech itself but from the commercialization of a form of language attributed to the female gender.

However, Wendy Simonds (1992) delved into how women consume self-help books and found that female readers approached them with scepticism. They often found these books too simplistic, exaggerating their promises, relying on sensationalism, or making overly general claims. Simonds posited that self-help books promoted the idea of the self as a malleable entity open to improvement and transformation, becoming tools for self-modification that aimed to shape individuals into predetermined ideals (Simonds, 1992: 25).

While conservative self-help books for women were not absent during this period, a recent emergence of this discourse, in conjunction with that aimed at men, suggests a growth. To illustrate this, I will introduce two individuals in the realm of femininity in Romania who advocate for conservative ideals: Oksana Ionașcu and Camelia Filip.

Oksana Ionașcu is a coach and an instructor specialized in addressing women's issues and she is also Cezar Ionașcu's spouse. Her system of monetization operates in a similar manner as her husband's. In an interview with her for Luxury Magazine [4], her viewpoints reflect an alignment with traditional gender roles. Analysing the interview with Oksana Ionascu from a sociological perspective, several key themes and ideas emerge that shed light on societal attitudes towards happiness, relationships, and sexuality. Oksana discusses distinct energies and roles between men and women, asserting that women are 'predestined' in a feminine manner, while suggesting that men waste time by insisting on being weak. Her focus lies on catering to men. Oksana proposes that women must embody sexuality and attractiveness to sustain male attention and engagement. This notion could potentially imply that a woman's worth is tied to her ability to gratify or captivate a man. She employs stereotypes regarding both genders. In the interview includes phrases such as 'men and money come to women through the same channel', an oversimplification of the intricacies of relationship dynamics and financial matters, Oksana's explanations tend to frame women's actions in terms of attracting or retaining men, positioning women as sources of energy for men. She places a significant emphasis on sexuality and physical appearance, her perspective might imply that a woman's value primarily hinges on her sexual allure and physical looks. Ionașcu's message centres around the idea that personal happiness is a fundamental driver for achieving one's desires. This perspective aligns with broader individualistic values often associated with neoliberalism, where personal empowerment and fulfilment are highly prioritized.

Ionașcu highlights that the most sought-after topics in courses and books are money and sexuality. This emphasis on self-improvement and the pursuit of wealth and pleasure can be seen as reflective of consumerist values and the commodification of personal development. Ionașcu discusses the relationship between women, men, sexuality, and money. Her perspective suggests a complex interplay between gender roles, empowerment, and attraction. It underscores the influence of societal expectations and dynamics on relationships and individual success. Ionașcu delves into the concept of destiny and free will, emphasizing the role of choice in shaping one's life. This aligns with neoliberal ideas of personal agency and the importance of individual decision-making. The interview explores how individuals can manage crises and hardships in life, highlighting the role of acceptance and gratitude emphasizing the importance of resilience and the ability to adapt to challenges. Ionașcu challenges the notion that perpetual happiness is a utopian ideal, emphasizing that happiness is about perception

[4] https://luxury.ro/09/oksana-ionascu/ (23 August 2023)

and the ability to find joy in life's experiences. This perspective questions the conventional view that continuous happiness is unattainable. She also addresses the resistance to change and the comfort of familiarity, suggesting that some individuals find unhappiness and suffering more manageable than embracing new possibilities, that again is not taking into consideration the influence of societal factors on happiness. The interview touches on the dynamics of long-term relationships, eliminating divorce as possible pathway, stressing the importance of maintaining passion and novelty, of communication, mutual respect, and maintaining a healthy sexual connection.

To ensure consistency and relevance, I selected a relationship coach who closely aligns with Mihail Neamtu's views. Camelia Filip, a relationship coach who was promoted on a religious platform, which has critical perspectives about the LGBTQ+ community. The platform also stands as a proponent of traditional family values, a stance harmonious with Mihail Neamțu's beliefs. In one of her blog articles, Filip talks about three types of women, while she repeatedly invokes the concept of God, associating it with femininity. This connection could be seen as reinforcing traditional gender roles where women are often portrayed as nurturing, self-sacrificing, and spiritually inclined. The text suggests that a woman's relationship with God is pivotal to her understanding of herself and her femininity.

The text presents three types of women - the 'real woman', the 'fatalistic woman', and the 'feminist'. Of these, the 'real woman' is portrayed as the ideal, embodying qualities of kindness, unconditional love, and spiritual depth. This portrayal aligns with traditional gender roles that emphasize women's nurturing and sacrificial nature. In contrast, the 'fatalistic woman' and 'feminist' are depicted as less desirable, with the former seen as resigned and unfulfilled and the latter as assertive but lacking in certain qualities.

The text indirectly reinforces traditional gender roles by suggesting that a woman's ultimate fulfilment is tied to her relationship with God and her acceptance of these roles. It implies that women should be self-sacrificing, empathetic, and deeply spiritual to be considered 'real women'. This perspective may be seen as limiting, as it doesn't allow for a broader range of expressions of femininity.

The text also touches on the role of men in women's lives. It suggests that a man's practical emotional involvement is crucial for a woman's development. However, this places the responsibility for a woman's fulfilment on her partner rather than acknowledging her agency in defining her own identity.

The text can be viewed as reflecting traditional gender norms where women are expected to fulfil certain roles and qualities, often tied to their relationship with God. While it emphasizes the importance of women's inner peace and self-acceptance, it can be critiqued for limiting the diversity of women's experiences and roles. Additionally, it places significant responsibility on men for women's well-being, which can be seen as problematic from a feminist perspective.

This section of the article highlights the conservative turn in personal development that reinforces traditional gender roles and promotes a quest for an 'authentic self' often undermined by modernity. It discusses figures like Cezar Ionașcu and Jordan Peterson or Camilia Filip, who have gained prominence by addressing issues related to masculinity, self-improvement, and societal power dynamics. All of the examples presented reinforce traditional gender roles by suggesting that masculinity and femininity needs to be increased and framing men's and women's worth in terms of their adherence to specific definition of masculinity and femininity.

It objectifies women by implying that a man's success is linked to how he presents himself to women, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes. It oversimplifies complex issues like family dynamics, relationships, and success by attributing them solely to individual choices, neglecting societal influences. The commodification of personal development, where success and improvement can be bought, aligns with capitalist ideals. The discussion around money and gender does not consider their intersections with broader societal power dynamics and economic inequalities. Overall, while these figures and programs may seem to offer individuals personal development opportunities, they actually enforce traditional gender norms, economic privilege, and capitalist values, potentially reinforcing inequalities and limiting the scope of authentic self-discovery and empowerment.

These conservative perspectives reflect a turn in personal development that reinforces traditional gender roles and seeks an 'authentic self' often perceived as eroded by modernity.

Radical personal development

The connection between capitalism and contemporary self-help literature is evident in Max Weber's analysis of Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, regarded as one of the earliest self-help books (Blum, 2020), as a means to examine and characterize the essence of capitalism (Weber, 2007). However, Blum (2020) discusses the historical origins, global dissemination, cultural nuances, and critiques of the self-help industry. It highlights how the concept of self-help was not uniquely American, as it had been a feature of the English character over time. She also argues that the term "self-help" was popularized in the UK through guides to working-class radicalism. Despite the misconception that self-help emerged in the mid-20th century, it had a rich history dating back to the early

20th century, with international influences and cross-cultural exchanges. The analysis delves into how self-help evolved as a genre, impacting social class dynamics, and contributing to the middlebrow movement. While critics have challenged self-help's influence on individualism, anxiety, and its erasure of systemic issues, feminist scholars and some marginalized communities have found political potential in the genre. The excerpt explores the African diasporic perspective on self-help as both a tool for empowerment and a means of perpetuating oppressive ideologies.

The text further examines how the self-help ideology resonated in Japan during its modernization period, where it aided industrialization and societal progress, the narrative contrasts in the collective aspirations of early self-help with the compulsive and episodic failures depicted in Flaubert's work 'Bouvard and Pécuchet' and Marxist perspectives on self-help that reveal the tension between the individual's desire for self-assertion and the structural constraints imposed by capitalism. Marx envisions a future communist society where genuine self-help can thrive within a community-driven context (ibid.).

The concept of personal development within the framework of capitalism raises complex and nuanced considerations, particularly in relation to mental health and its connection to leftist ideologies. Under capitalism, the pursuit of personal development has been closely tied to the idea of self-improvement and individual success. While personal development can provide tools for individuals to enhance their skills and achieve their goals, it can also perpetuate the notion that success is solely determined by individual effort and ability. This can create unrealistic expectations, intense competition, and feelings of inadequacy, contributing to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Mark Fisher's assertion that mental health is influenced by capitalism points to the ways in which the pressures of an exploitative system can contribute to deteriorating mental well-being (2022). Fisher (ibid) argues that mental health should be considered a domain for revolutionary change. Leftist movements can address mental health as part of a broader critique of capitalism and its impacts on individual and societal well-being.

The pandemic highlighted the pitfalls of toxic positivity – the expectation to maintain a positive attitude in the face of genuine struggles. Though the concept of unrealistic optimism had already been explored by psychologists at least as early as 1980, the term toxic positivity first appeared in J. Halberstam's 2011 *The Queer Art of Failure* to critique the toxic positivity of contemporary life. Beginning in about 2019, the term toxic positivity became the subject of a greater number of Internet searches. Toxic positivity is a psychological phenomenon characterized by the tendency to suppress or deny negative emotions, particularly feelings of anger and sadness, in favour of maintaining a relentlessly positive outlook. It involves the belief that one should always exude positivity, regardless of the circumstances, even when facing adversity or distressing situations. This concept revolves around the idea that people should avoid negative thoughts and emotions at all costs. Even when faced with events that naturally elicit sadness, such as loss or hardships, toxic positivity encourages individuals to mask these genuine emotions with a facade of unwavering positivity. In essence, it dismisses the importance of acknowledging and processing authentic feelings, which can be detrimental to one's mental and emotional well-being.

While positivity is generally considered a valuable and uplifting attitude, toxic positivity arises when there's an unrealistic expectation of maintaining a perpetually happy and trouble-free existence. When people fail to meet this unrealistic standard, they may experience feelings of shame or guilt for not attaining the level of positivity desired. What makes toxic positivity particularly concerning is that individuals who constantly strive for positive experiences might inadvertently stigmatize their own negative emotions, such as depression, or suppress natural emotional responses, like sadness, regret, or stress. Furthermore, the ability to distinguish between controllable and uncontrollable situations is essential when considering the effects of positivity. In situations where individuals can exert some control, overly positive thinking may hinder their ability to address and rectify negative circumstances. Additionally, one's attitude toward happiness plays a role in their ability to cope with life's inevitable downsides.

In response, especially to the lockdowns during the pandemic there was an upsurge in the self-care movement, which emphasizes the importance of prioritizing one's well-being in a system that often neglects it. Audrey Lorde's (1988) concept of self-care recognized that marginalized individuals must take care of themselves within an oppressive society. However, for privileged classes, it can become a form of indulgence that fails to address systemic issues. She emphasized the importance of self-care as a form of self-preservation and resistance against societal injustices and oppressions, particularly for marginalized communities. One of her famous quotes related to self-care is: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'. This quote underscores the idea that taking care of one's physical and emotional well-being is not selfish but rather a necessary act of resistance against the systemic forces that can harm individuals from marginalized backgrounds.

The anti-work movement challenges the capitalist notion that productivity defines an individual's worth. It advocates for a re-evaluation of work's role in our lives and pushes against the narrative of constant productivity. Similarly, the idea of 'silent quitting' – embracing moments of rest and reflection – counters the capitalist pressure to be constantly active.

The subreddit known as r/antiwork is closely associated with contemporary labour movements, critiques of conventional work, and the broader anti-work movement. Its motto, 'Unemployment for all, not just the rich!' underscores its core ideology. Posts on this platform frequently detail employees' negative work experiences, dissatisfaction with working conditions, and discussions on unionization.

Among the actions advocated by the subreddit are consumer boycotts, such as the 'Blackout Black Friday' movement, and unconventional protests like submitting fake job applications to companies like Kellogg's during the 2021 strike. In 2020 and 2021, r/antiwork witnessed a significant surge in popularity, gaining an impressive 900,000 subscribers in 2021 alone, accumulating nearly 1.7 million subscribers by year-end. It's often linked with ideologically similar subreddits like r/latestagecapitalism and has been likened to the decentralized ethos of the Occupy Wall Street movement, in 2023 it reached over 2.4 million members.

Originally created in 2013 as a platform for discussing anti-work concepts within post-left anarchism, the subreddit has evolved into a broader space encompassing discussions on labour activism and working conditions. The subreddit's rapid growth can be attributed to the upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in massive layoffs and reduced work hours for millions. The number of subscribers, which was 13,000 in 2019, skyrocketed to 100,000 in early 2020. This surge in popularity coincided with posts of employees sharing their resignations with employers, reflecting a growing sentiment against traditional employment.

The subreddit witnessed significant milestones in 2021. 'Blackout Black Friday'emerged as a movement initiated by its members, and the subreddit played a role in unconventional protests, such as printing anti-work manifestos through receipt printers. In response to Kellogg's announcement of hiring permanent workers to replace striking employees, the subreddit organized a campaign encouraging the submission of fake job applications, which garnered widespread attention.

For working-class and minority individuals, self-care and personal development can indeed be revolutionary acts. However, as economic pressures intensify due to inflation, job insecurity, and demands to return to the office, the capacity for such practices can diminish. The struggle to meet basic needs makes the pursuit of personal development a secondary concern. Education can be considered radical when it challenges traditional norms, systems, and power structures to bring about significant social, political, or cultural change. Radical education encourages students to question established norms and beliefs. It challenges the dominant narratives and encourages critical thinking about societal issues, power structures, and inequalities. Radical education aims to empower individuals, especially marginalized groups, by providing them with the knowledge and tools to advocate for their rights and effect change. It often focuses on issues related to social justice, equity, and human rights. It promotes inclusive education that welcomes diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences. Radical educators strive to create an inclusive environment where everyone's voice is valued. Radical education often extends beyond the classroom. It encourages students to engage with their communities, address local issues, and work towards positive social change. It challenges hierarchical structures within educational institutions and advocates for more democratic and participatory forms of decision-making. Radical educators often draw from critical pedagogy, a teaching approach developed by Paulo Freire, especially his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000). Critical pedagogy focuses on the learner's critical consciousness and their ability to analyse and challenge oppressive structures.

Radical education goes hand in hand with activism. It encourages students to act on the issues they care about, whether through advocacy, protests, or community organizing. Several other authors and educators have written extensively about radical education and its principles, such as bell hooks, in books like *Teaching to Transgress: and Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994) where she explores the intersection of education, race, class, and gender; although not often categorized as a "radical" educator, Dewey's progressive educational philosophy, has outlined in works like *Experience and Education* (1938), laid the foundation for many later radical educational theories or Maxine Greene's work in books like *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988) emphasizes the role of the arts and imagination in education and its potential to promote social change.

Hick and Furlotte (2010) employed Radical Mindfulness (RMT) in an exploratory study with severely economically disadvantaged people they discovered that exhibited positive effects on participants' well-being, as indicated by increased well-being scores. Qualitative results suggested that this increase in life satisfaction might result from a positive shift in how individuals relate to oppressive societal structures. While these findings are promising, the study involved a small number of participants, and further research with a larger sample and a control group is necessary to confirm the results. Conceptually, the RMT program differs from conventional mindfulness programs in two significant ways. Firstly, RMT places a strong emphasis on mindfulness training for addressing personal, interpersonal, and societal issues concurrently. This approach aligns with social work theories that advocate for addressing power differentials, oppressions, and societal structures while assisting individual clients, promoting a transformative and social justice-oriented perspective.

Secondly, RMT includes sociological education to help individuals comprehend the systemic roots of their poverty, while MBSR primarily focuses on psychoeducation and physiology related to stress and the fight-or-flight response. RMT and classical mindfulness programs share common goals of enhancing positive health, wellness, and resilience, as well as increasing overall life satisfaction. RMT, however, represents an expanded version of mindfulness approaches, particularly tailored to its target population.

In Romania, these currents are not notably prevalent, making it challenging to establish a visible social movement. While attempts have been made through small left-wing organizations or NGOs, regrettably, they have not surpassed a certain threshold and have failed to gain widespread public awareness.

As society grapples with the complexities of capitalism, these diverse perspectives on self-help, positivity, work, and education provide valuable insights into the ongoing discourse surrounding personal development within the framework of capitalism. These discussions offer pathways for individuals and communities to navigate and, in some cases, challenge the societal structures that shape their lives.

This section touches on the tension between individual agency and structural constraints, which is a central aspect of the structure vs. agency debate. For example, when discussing personal development within the framework of capitalism, it highlights how personal development can be closely tied to individual success, implying that individuals are expected to exercise agency in self-improvement. However, it also points out that this emphasis on individual effort can create unrealistic expectations, contributing to mental health issues. This reflects the debate's essence - the interplay between individual agency and external structures (capitalism in this case). Radical and leftist politics contribute to the structure vs. agency debate by emphasizing the role of structures, particularly systemic ones like capitalism, in shaping individual experiences and opportunities. These ideologies often argue that the structural constraints imposed by capitalism limit the agency of individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. This perspective aligns with the critical examination of capitalism's impact on personal development and mental health in the text.

In essence, radical and leftist politics contribute to this discussion by highlighting the structural inequalities that can impede individual agency. They often advocate for systemic change to create a more equitable environment in which individuals can exercise their agency more effectively.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this comprehensive exploration into the multifaceted realm of personal development within the context of evolving gender roles and radical movements has unveiled a complex tapestry of transformation and consequences for individuals and society at large.

Firstly, in the realm of masculinity, there has been a reactionary movement arguing for traditional gender roles and rigid masculinity. The emergence of figures like Jordan Peterson and Mihail Neamtu, while very controversial, reflected this evolution by addressing issues related to masculinity and self-improvement. This transformation encourages men to revert to a notably restricted and conventional understanding of gender, one that confines individuals within narrowly defined roles and behaviours. Instead of embracing the diverse spectrum of human experiences and expressions, it steers them toward a more rigid and traditional conception of what it means to be a man. This can manifest as a return to stereotypical gender roles, where men are expected to conform to predefined notions of stoicism, dominance, and emotional restraint, ultimately limiting their capacity for personal growth and self-expression. Furthermore, it also raises questions about the commodification of personal development and the potential reinforcement of traditional gender norms.

Equally, within the framework of femininity, personal development has undergone a somewhat complementary evolution. While feminism’s earlier wave emphasized collective empowerment and resistance to traditional gender roles, contemporary self-help literature has, in some instances, perpetuated conservative ideals. Figures like Oksana Ionascu and Camelia Filip advocate for traditional gender roles, emphasizing the importance of women’s roles in catering to men’s desires. This evolution has implications for women’s agency and how their worth is perceived in society, highlighting the tensions between empowerment and conformity.

Lastly, the study delved into the realm of radical personal development movements, unveiling their profound impact on the intersection of capitalism, mental health, and societal structures. These movements, from the anti-work subreddit to concepts like Radical Mindfulness Training, challenge conventional narratives around work, positivity, and self-improvement. They encourage critical thinking, activism, and a re-evaluation of societal norms. However, they also raise questions about the balance between individual agency and structural constraints within capitalism.

In light of these transformations, it is evident that personal development has not remained static but has adapted to changing cultural dynamics, gender roles, and social critique. These changes come with both promise and challenges. The consequences for individuals include greater opportunities for self-expression and self-improvement, breaking free from confining gender norms, and embracing a broader range of emotions. However, they also entail the risk of reinforcing traditional stereotypes, unrealistic expectations, and the commodification of personal growth.

Societally, these transformations reflect broader shifts in how we perceive gender, work, and well-being. They challenge traditional power structures, encourage a more inclusive and diverse understanding of identity, and offer avenues for resistance against oppressive systems. However, they also underscore the ongoing tension between individual agency and structural constraints, particularly within the capitalist framework.

In conclusion, this study has illuminated the intricate interplay between personal development, gender roles, and radical movements, showcasing how these dynamics continue to shape contemporary society. It is clear that personal development is not merely an individual pursuit but a reflection of the larger cultural, societal, and economic forces at play. Understanding these transformations and their consequences is essential for fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and mindful society where personal development serves as a tool for empowerment rather than conformity.

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PROS AND CONS OF ONLINE SOCIAL SUPPORT EXCHANGE ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: A USER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. The article dissects the subject of online social support exchange on social networking sites, or SNS (mostly Facebook and Instagram) through the eyes of the platforms' active users. Drawing on 20 semistructured in-depth interviews with SNS users from Ukraine, it discusses both the benefits of support exchange in the online realm, such as speed, resilience, unobtrusiveness, and its drawbacks, such as depersonalization, 'ghosting,' and privacy concerns. The text also explores the sentiments towards some of the main digital instruments of exchanging support on SNS, in particular posts and various forms of "likes," as well as the perceived effectiveness of online social support in general. Additionally, it provides some context on how the phenomenon has been impacted by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: online social support, social networking sites, paralinguistic digital affordances, social support effectiveness.

Introduction

The exchange of social support – a term encompassing all forms of help obtained by an individual from their interpersonal network (Li et al., 2015: 106) – is preeminent in our daily lives. The availability of social support (especially its perceived availability (Dai et al., 2021: 1)) is integral to our functioning as part of a social group (Cobb, 1976). In recent decades, social networking sites, such

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as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, have emerged as the largest communication platform in human history, serving billions of users around the globe daily (Mohsin, 2022). This, in turn, made them one of the primary modern media for receiving and providing social support. Consequently, terms such as 'online social support' (Nick et al., 2018) and 'computer-mediated social support' have gained currency in academic discourse (Mikal et al., 2013).

On social networking sites (also known colloquially as social networks), communication takes a variety of forms, as does social support exchange. Most obviously, SNS offer functionality that emulates pre-existing, non-digital communication media – private messages and public comments provide an alternative to corresponding in writing that used to require the services of a post office, and audio messages and calls substitute landline and cell phone communication. This trend arguably culminates in video calls, which can be seen as a simulacrum of face-to-face interaction. SNS also provide a surrogate for phatic communication through so-called paralinguistic digital affordances or PDAs (Carr et al., 2016: 387). PDAs comprise various non-verbal signals that can be exchanged via the user interface (or UI) of SNS – the most prominent among them is the 'Like' button and its many evolutions.

This abundance of options provided by social networking services creates a rich and novel vocabulary of social support signals as well as the potential for a practically infinite number of strategies for attaining and offering support in an online setting. As the role of social networking sites in our lives continues to increase (since recently, driven also by massive disruptions in the physical world, such as infectious disease pandemics or wars), many people find the ability to negotiate the evolving functionality of these new tools essential to maintaining their social life.

In light of the above, it is relevant to investigate the views and perceptions of SNS users on exchanging social support online in a systematic manner. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to explore the positive and negative aspects of online social support exchange as formulated by SNS users, the main ways in which they utilize principal SNS functionalities in supportive scenarios and, ultimately, how they compare the SNS social support experience as a whole to exchanging social support offline, specifically from the perspective of perceived effectiveness. To achieve this goal, 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with active SNS users were conducted throughout the winter of 2022–2023. The analysis of their reflections forms the bulk of the article. Hopefully, it presents a helpful snapshot of the current user opinions on online social support, which will inform further discussions and serve as a starting point for more narrow-focused and in-depth investigations of perceived strengths and weaknesses of digital social support affordances.

Method and sample

The study employs qualitative methodology, namely semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 20 people over slightly more than two months (December 2022–February 2023). The interviews lasted from just under an hour to over an hour and a half and were primarily conducted via audio and videoconferencing software. All the conversations were recorded to ensure a faithful and accurate analysis of the statements. The respondents had been informed of their rights to data privacy and confidentiality before the interview began.

The resulting convenience sample consists of people aged 22 to 40 (M = 30,2), all originally from Ukraine, but a minority living outside of Ukraine at the time of the interview, either temporarily or permanently, having relocated either pre- or post-full-scale Russian invasion of 2022. The majority of the sample (70%) is female. The list of respondents correlated to the codes used to identify quotes throughout the text can be found in Annexe 1. Those who frequently posted personal content to their accounts (at least weekly) were preferred for inclusion in the sample, but overall, the minimum qualification for participation was spending at least an hour daily on social networking sites on average.

The sample is also heterogeneous in terms of the intensity of daily SNS usage as reported by the participants, as well as their preferences towards specific SNS platforms and motivations for using them. The size of the users' networks of online ties within the sample is also a differentiating factor, varying from a few hundred (corresponding to an almost complete overlap with the offline network) to a few thousand. A few had experience using social media instruments and engagement metrics professionally.

Social networking sites: definition and adoption in Ukraine

According to a classic definition (which was also shared with study participants at the beginning of their interviews, along with examples), social networking sites are web-based systems that allow users to create public or semi-public profiles and articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection within a given system as well as view the connections made by others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007: 211). Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are by far the most popular platforms that fall under that definition, each having over a billion monthly users (Dixon, 2023). These big three have a commanding presence in Ukraine, boasting over 10 million users each, according to a local communications agency (Дослідження Facebook та Instagram, 2023). Mirroring global trends, the Ukrainian audiences of Instagram and TikTok are distinctly younger on average than that of Facebook; the latter's users are concentrated in the 30–40-year range, while Instagram is most popular among twenty-somethings. TikTok's audience skews even younger: nearly half of its Ukrainian user base is under 25. In nearly all age categories, female Instagram and Facebook users outnumber male ones (Сомова, 2022). It is safe to assume that, by now, most internet users are deeply familiar with how SNS work. For this reason, and in the interest of saving space, detailed explanations of the general nature of digital communication affordances, such as posts, direct messages, and 'likes,' are omitted from this text.

Benefits of SNS as a medium for social support exchange

The respondents were unanimous in calling social networking sites their source of finding social support. However, the extent of using them for this purpose varied ('I receive support [on SNS], probably, once every two weeks… at most.' [2]; 'It seems that every time I use social networks, I get social support in one form or another.' [17]). Notably, many acknowledged that they often acted unconsciously, receiving or providing support online without realizing it [17].

Collectively, the respondents indicated having exchanged all the traditionally differentiated types of social support on SNS (Hayes et al., 2016: 6), including emotional support ('When I am touched by something, I leave a comment to show that I care.' [1]), informational support ('I love sharing useful information… if I find out that there is a place in Lviv that is conducting free HIV tests… I am going to [tell others about it].' [19]), instrumental support ('When I was launching a new project, I asked people to subscribe [to it], to share information.' [20]) appraisal support ('I think any 'story' expresses an overt or covert desire to be told that you look cool, to get 'likes.'" [12]), and network support ('Sometimes, I publish something to check that my reaction to some event is adequate.' [9]).

By far, the most frequently mentioned advantage of using online social networks for social support was their ability to collapse the distance between people and enable users to communicate across borders and continents seamlessly: 'I live in Canada… [SNS] allow me to keep in touch with my parents… with my friends who are scattered all over the world.' [17]. By making the distance factor irrelevant, SNS have greatly expanded the reach of social support messages. 'Now, during the war, when we are all in different cities, with different electricity outage schedules, we can remain connected only due to the online [services]. I would not manage in this time of war without [them].' [8]. As one respondent who first moved to Kyiv and more recently relocated to Germany pointed out, SNS allow her to remain in touch with her friends while moving around [9].

In addition to helping retain friends, social networks radically expand people's capabilities for making new ones. 'The majority of my acquaintances in Kyiv come from social networks… Thanks to them, I found my first new friends [after moving to] the city…' [9]. The same respondent also told how after she had moved abroad, she was able to find a "new best friend" by replying to a post in a Ukraine-themed Facebook group: '[The path] to two dozen new acquaintances started from a single comment on Facebook.' [9]. She also described occupation-based Facebook groups as a source of finding new friends through the exchange of informational support: 'Groups for comms people, for SMM people, I was getting responses to my questions there, also answering other's questions myself, and this way I made friends [with other group members].' [9].

As one respondent observed, 'Despite putting people into 'bubbles'[2], social networks also let you transcend your offline 'bubble.' [12]. This has significant implications for the provision of social support. Since the usage of social networks has become highly prevalent in some regions, the availability of highly specific, niche types of social support has the potential to expand dramatically. A respondent made this argument using the context of Reddit, which is a news aggregation and discussion website (Anderson, 2015) and not fully a social network, but the point applies in the SNS context, too: 'You can find a particular subreddit… for people suffering from some sort of a [rare] disease and find the specific support that you would not get by just… going onto the streets' [5]. 'Offline, I probably would not be able to talk to people with such different views, in such a safe environment.' [6].

The online social networking ecosystem also significantly expedites the delivery of support: 'On social networks, you can quickly reach out to people who you think might provide you with support.' [3]. Obviously, there are many ways to communicate online in essentially or literally real time using private messages or audio calls, but posts can accumulate support quickly as well, owing to the fact that nowadays, the majority of SNS users, especially in the age cohort of this research, spend upwards of one hour daily on average on the platforms (Buchholz, 2022). 'I can engage, like, 20% of my friends with a post in my feed, while meeting or calling this many people would take longer.' [2]. 'You can receive support from 15 people [at a time].' [10]. The speediness is also promoted by the fact that SNS bias towards showing recent posts: according to one estimate, an average Facebook post garners 75% of its lifetime impressions

[2] Slang for "opinion echo chamber"

(times it is shown to other users) within the first two and a half hours since publication (Papeman, 2022).

What is more, there is no practical limit on the audience size for any given support request shared on SNS since the digital environment does not impose meaningful structural constraints on the dissemination of information ('The transaction cost is massively decreased… It is a game-changer.' [16]). This constitutes another fundamental shift in social support dynamics.

The near-zero marginal cost of gaining attention on SNS is combined with the radical democratization of interaction vectors: 'I do not follow this closely, but I am certain that… my Tweets are being read by our Western partners [and] I have been retweeted by 'Ukrayinska Pravda,' 'Focus'3 and the like… it is a unique thing.' [11]. This occurred because, for most of their existence, general-purpose social networking sites have been devoid of hierarchies, and all of their users enjoyed essentially identical privileges and functionality within a site. This has had an equalizing effect on online communication, if only among the people who could afford regular access to the Internet. Interestingly, multiple high-profile departures from this trend have taken place recently, such as Twitter's "Blue" subscription (Beykpour & Gupta, 2021), "Snapchat Plus" (New Features For Snapchat+, 2022), and "Meta Verified" (Roth, 2023). Still, they occurred only many years into the lifecycles of the respective services.

Hence, SNS can be credited with fostering a culture of significantly lowered barriers in terms of whom one can contact for support: 'Nowadays, you can reach opinion leaders directly, as opposed to [the pre-SNS era].' [8]. One respondent related a story of how, in the first weeks of the full-scale Russian invasion, she was able to directly request and obtain instrumental support from the so-called "bloggers" – people with a significant online following (in this case, around 10-40 thousand users): 'I started reaching out to [medium-sized] bloggers… At the start of the invasion, everyone was very active, the bloggers actually responded to me and shared the information, the fundraisers… without asking additional questions… [even though] we didn't know each other.' [8]. 'On social networks, you can get through to almost anyone if you are persistent enough… you can even communicate with services… like Pryvatbank[4], and you will get a response because [other] people are also seeing [the request].' [20].

Along with wide reach, SNS also provide a host of metrics for analysing the performance of the posts using aggregate data about user behaviour and demographics: '[On our organization's page], we can immediately see statistics about the reach of the post, the response to it.' [11]. This information may be used to help improve the effectiveness of support requests.

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[3] Names of mainstream Ukrainian news outlets

[4] Ukraine's largest bank.

The massive spike in activity from Ukrainian users during the initial stages of last year's Russian invasion was a stark reminder of the resilience of SNS as a communication channel. Their digital-only nature allows them to withstand real-life crises – up to a point, at least: 'Before power outages, I was in regular contact with my friends in Kyiv… these days, it is less frequent, because electricity is not always available, and you have to save the charge.' [2]. This fact was widely appreciated during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the context of armed aggression demonstrated the point even more compellingly: 'When Covid and then the war started, it has become very difficult to do offline activities, [and SNS] were a good solution.' [20]. In 2022, the speed factor of online social support exchange proved unambiguously vital:

> [In the early days of the invasion], there was a big desire to do something, but no way to do anything. So, since I had the time, I was monitoring social networks for requests like delivering medicine to Brovary[5] and then writing to volunteer groups or people I knew who could do it… this way, I actually helped with medicine deliveries within Kyiv a few times [8].

Another recollection from that time pertained to an instant messenger but captured the power of social networks too: 'Many group chats sprang up on Telegram with volunteers… you could find anyone there – a designer, a communicator, a courier.' [8].

Importantly, along with many ways to broaden the audience of a given post, social networks also provide a wide array of tools that can limit its exposure to other users. Facebook offers the ability to set the posts to be seen only by 'friends' or 'friends and their friends' with a couple of clicks. Instagram has the 'Close friends' feature, which allows users to easily limit the reach of Instagram "stories" to a circle of the most trusted accounts (Newton, 2018). More granular controls for customizing the posts' audience also exist. However, multiple people mentioned that setting up audience limits for posts is onerous: 'Frankly, it is too burdensome… it requires effort.' [9]. As one respondent explained, the 'Close friends' function on Instagram (described earlier) is useful, but one has to continuously monitor the membership of those lists, adding or removing people over time. 'These lists change over time; you have to remember who is in them; someone I might've added three years ago may no longer be relevant to me, and this creates additional mental load.' [10].

By default, most of the privacy-enabling controls are not applied, however, which led to many people having detailed representations of themselves online, accessible even by those beyond people's friend groups. As one interviewee explained, this is useful because it allows her to form a general impression of

[5] A city in the Kyiv metropolitan area.

another person before contacting them for the first time, be it online or offline: ‘It is important for me before opening a conversation… to see the person’s representation on the social network.’ [1].

The respondents also praised the asynchronous nature of SNS communication. When reaching out to someone online, generally, there is no expectation of getting a response right away (in contrast to the synchronous or real-time nature of offline communication). This affords social support providers the time to better plan their response: ‘You have time to think. You can write something, delete, start over.’ [6]; ‘You can answer more thoughtfully.’ [4]; ‘…[T]ake a pause at any moment without the need to explain yourself.’ [12]. It also saves time for those who reach out for support. One respondent said that she can post an appeal for support whenever it is convenient for her and move on with other tasks while it passively collects responses: ‘It is like a box of chocolates that you can open whenever you need.’ [13]. Another respondent echoed this opinion: ‘I like that on Facebook, for example, I can post a few lines in the evening when I feel sad and see the reactions and comments by the morning.’ [6]. People tend to log into SNS when they have spare time, so it is reasonable to assume that they will generally be more amenable to responding to requests they will encounter. The response might even become quite predictable: ‘I know that if I upload a new profile picture, I will receive at least one hundred and twenty ‘likes,’ and that is pleasant.’ [1].

The on-demand nature of social support on SNS dovetails with its another pertinent characteristic: unobtrusiveness. This is most strongly manifested in public posts. Their audience is, in essence, open-ended, and users typically do not feel obliged to respond to a given post or even read it unless they are mentioned or tagged in it (since, if it is not a “story,” the author cannot know who saw their post). Therefore, when appealing for support through a public feed, a user is seen as appealing to no one in particular, and this lessens the others’ burden to respond, leaving it as just an option – ideally, for those who are best placed to offer support. One respondent told the following story:

> I haven’t talked to my university groupmate in ten years, ever since we graduated… but we were friends on Facebook, and [recently] I noticed that she had started posting some sad and depressive things. I wrote to her, we talked very openly right from the start, she visited me the next day, and we have kept in touch since… it was a cool experience, all of a sudden, [it seemed] like ten years haven’t passed [6].

It is implausible that the respondent’s ex-classmate would have reached out to her directly, given they were not in regular contact, but the Facebook posts allowed her to communicate her need for support, if possibly unintentionally, and find someone who was ready and willing to address it.

Other respondents also commented on the unobtrusiveness factor: 'I wouldn't call this person on the phone, but on SNS, I [was able] to receive support from him [in a comment].' [9]. Another respondent verbalized the aspect of choice: 'Any communication about a problem [online] can be ignored because there are a lot of problems… I can categorize people into close or not close… and problems into the ones to which I can provide support and those I cannot.' [4].

An SNS user can also utilize public updates on their profile page to establish a basic level of awareness about their life or current situation, which is helpful when reaching out to someone directly about social support:

> With a post, I can inform my circle [of SNS friends about something] without writing to each of them directly and hope that in a future interaction [with a member of this circle], I won't have to begin from scratch… I can communicate with the assumption that this knowledge is already the basis [of our interaction] [4].

This detail was poignantly illustrated by a respondent who recounted one of the Russian rocket strikes on residential buildings:

> This was after the Dnipro attack[6]… I have a lot of acquaintances from Dnipro… and I was hesitant. Should I write to them right away or wait… the explosion was very loud, and people even multiple kilometres from the epicentre could be in distress… [but] when I saw that the person posted an Instagram 'story,' I knew that she must be okay since she was able to post, so I checked in with her [12].

SNS are also distinguished by the fact that they maintain a record of most of the user's activity, which is, in most cases, permanent by default. Posts, which are not in the 'story' format, comments, and the bulk of private messages all lack an expiration date, and unless their author deletes them, they will always be accessible (until the company running the service remains operational). Some services actively surface past content to users (Kosoff, 2015). '[Social support exchanges] remain in the history of the social network… and this way, we can return to those messages… and remember certain emotions associated with… receiving those messages… So, we can, in a way, relive the support.' [4]. 'As a forgetful person, I appreciate the ability [to re-read messages] a lot… it is a great option for reflection.' [18].

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6 Reference to the Kh-29 Russian rocket strike on January 14th, 2023, which killed 46 people.

The ability to edit posts after publication was also mentioned in a positive light: ‘Correction is possible… one can change the picture or text itself, add an update.’ [11]. Meanwhile, the inability to do so was presented as inconvenient: ‘Twitter for a long time hasn’t had such functionality, and I frequently had to delete my Tweets [because I wanted to adjust the phrasing].’ [18].

The fact that the bandwidth for online communication is much higher compared to offline was also cited: ‘Social networks provide the opportunity to exchange large volumes of information… that would be impossible to exchange verbally.’ [16]. Indeed, doing so is much easier and faster on SNS, which mainly influences informational support. Social networks also support a vibrant gamut of information formats: ‘[Social support on SNS] is more diverse’ since users can enhance their text interactions with ‘other types of content, such as songs, memes, and so on.’ [8]. ‘This makes it interesting… adds fun.’ [19].

Supportive functionalities of SNS

Private messaging was repeatedly called the main channel of exchanging support in the context of social networking sites. ‘Most of the receiving and the giving of support happens in private communication.’ [15]. Many cited this as the main reason to switch from SNS to instant messengers, as their primary online communication platform and, consequently, the medium for exchanging social support: ‘My support needs are mostly served via messengers.’ [16]. Privacy allows people to be franker and discuss sensitive issues, in addition to the aforementioned benefits of asynchrony. ‘Private messages… are mostly about emotional support.’ [20]. ‘I reach out through private messages if I can help [someone] with some concrete action.’ [13]. The default is the text message, which may be upgraded to other formats depending on the required intensity of support: ‘[Provision of support] usually starts with [text] messages, later it may grow into audio or video calls if there is a need for something more substantial.’ [16].

Views on private audio messages were divided. ‘I am sending [them] very often… they bring people a little bit closer [than text messages]’ [7]. ‘Audio messages are the worst idea ever.’ [19]. ‘I am ambivalent… on the one hand, it is an opportunity for a more real communication; on the other, they are [harder to access and reply to]… [especially] if the message is five minutes long and contains five different thoughts.’ [19].

Public posts on personal pages were described as decisive in mobilizing social support from a broad group of contacts. Their publication also often catalysed conversations in private messages [8]. Temporary posts, namely the

Instagram 'stories,' were often the favourite format of publication: 'Stories' are convenient, and the experiences you describe in them will vanish after 24 hours.' [8], while a post is considered a more substantial piece of communication that requires more effort: 'With 'stories,' you don't have to think too much, [contrary to] the posts… I prefer to do everything quickly.' [19]. Also, the stories format has been significantly enhanced with new features: 'You can create a poll, an answer field. [This way,] it is easier for people to interact.' [19]. Not everyone shared this positive view, though: 'I am not a fan of 'stories' because they disappear.' [6]; 'If you've seen a 'story,' you have to react to it somehow. I am worried people will see that I'd viewed their 'story' but didn't react in any way…' [1]. Using posts to provide support was also mentioned, but much less frequently: 'I can think of isolated cases… where I would write a post of appreciation or a post that brought attention to some topic… I do this very rarely.' [12].

The users also occasionally mentioned posting to specialized discussion groups. '[When I have some accounting question], I don't throw it to my followers; I go to a private group where a ton of excellent accountants hang out.' [11]. Sometimes, due to their "blanket" nature, the posts were seen as an undesirable method for gathering support: 'When I ask for something in a post, people reply with a lot of stuff that isn't relevant, but you have to go through it and thank them, and this takes a long time…' [1].

Comments were generally not favoured as an instrument of providing social support. They were described as the strongest form of public supportive reaction to a post: 'If I feel that I can provide some support to a person, I do not simply 'like' [a post], but also leave a comment, because I know from experience that mere reactions, without words… are a bit different.' [12]. From this stems its more selective usage: 'I don't think I am going to post a comment under a post from someone I don't know' [7]. 'I will write a comment if something has really touched me, and I want to express support… [and only] if I am close to this person.' [8]. Multiple respondents were uncomfortable with such a public way of exchanging support: 'If something I wrote may potentially get seen by many people, I prefer not to do it… I will say what I want to say in private.' [16]. However, one respondent preferred comments to private messages: 'I am not good at keeping up communication in private messages… so I seek interaction in the feed.' [6].

The interviews showed that paralinguistic digital affordances, mentioned at the beginning of this article, are a major avenue for providing signals of social support. Almost all the participants in the study said they perceived "likes" and other reactions to the content on SNS as a way to demonstrate support. However, they clearly considered PDAs one of the weaker expressions of support on SNS, in contrast to private messages and comments. 'I prefer to use words instead of reactions.' [18]. 'I've never paid attention to [the reactions].' [3].

Yet, many respondents said that they did follow the reactions to what they posted and found them important. '[You get] 20–40 'likes,' and life feels better for some time.' [2]. '[T]hese small things do contribute to the mood.' [8]. The ease of PDAs was mentioned time and again: "This is an easy way… to stay in the lives of people I care about." [10]. One respondent said of the reactions to private messages: "This is a super function; when you don't want to reply, you can just hit 'like.' " [15]. Another respondent said that when she encounters a person in need of support but lacks the mental capacity to post a comment or write a text, she uses "hearts" [9]. The unobtrusiveness of the default reactions was singled out: "[Since Instagram added 'likes' in 'stories,'] you don't have to send a clunky emoji [here referring to the set of six 'quick' emoji reactions]… you simply press 'like,' which is less intrusive for the other person." [16]. However, there is also a flipside: 'It depends on how many subscribers the person has, but your 'like' might not even get noticed.' [14]. Additionally, since these reactions are so lightweight and generally not associated with a deep, emotional response, some scenarios might not be appropriate for their usage: 'If a person [is posting about] a bereavement, I am not going to react with an emoji, because it doesn't adequately convey the level of empathy.' [14].

Today's social networks have no shortage of different types of quick reactions, and the users clearly take this into account: 'I pay attention to the number of 'likes,' who left which type of reaction.' [9], "…What the proportion of different reactions is." [6]. The respondents acknowledged that they attached somewhat different meanings to different reaction options, such as "Like," "Love," and "Care" (which exist on Facebook): " 'Likes' do not feel like something special anymore… ['Liking' posts] is like brushing teeth in the morning." [6]. 'When your message receives a 'heart' instead of a soulless 'like,' that is already a sign of caring.' [12]. " 'Care' is like a figurative pat on the shoulder." [6]. Stronger reactions are reserved for friends, while weaker ones are used more or less indiscriminately: "I use 'Celebrate' on LinkedIn only for those whom I know… but I can give 'Support' to anyone." [20].

Additionally, the supportive potential of a reaction may differ substantially based on the sender. 'When I get 'likes' from people from my village, I am, like, 'Okay'… because I am not sure they understood what I had written about, but when it is [from] someone from the expert environment, then it is [more meaningful].' [9]. Taking into account the author of a reaction is important also because their conceptualizations of the reactions and strategies for deploying them will likely diverge in some way. 'Some people are very passive online…

and in their case, even a simple 'like' is… something major… for others, a 'heart' is a standard reaction.' [12].

On their part, the respondents also voiced a broad spectrum of supportive motivations that underlie pressing the 'heart' or 'thumbs up' against others' content. 'To keep in touch… to demonstrate that I exist in your life, I am interested in it, if you want to start a dialogue, I am there…' [10]. 'To express admiration at [the content of a post]' [4], 'to express agreement with the thought being expressed' [5], 'to help amplify [the message], make it more visible.' [3]. Another interviewee said that she had "anxiety" about comments that were not "closed," i.e., did not get any interaction from her, so she felt compelled to at least "like" all the comments she received if she did not have anything other to respond with [6].

The latter anecdote hints at the important fact that not all use cases for PDAs are of supportive variety: many respondents mentioned that they "liked" posts to save them for later reference or merely indicate that they have read them ('I try to 'like' only the things I would potentially want to return to later.' [14]). A desire to indicate to the SNS recommendation engine that a particular post should be promoted more was also mentioned several times among motivations for giving "likes," but whether or not this act is intended as supportive towards the poster depends on the situation. The main aim is to create a positive feedback loop that leads to more people engaging with the post, but this may be done not so much for the benefit of the poster but rather for their audience. Taken together, these scenarios highlight yet another significant way in which the non-verbal nature of PDAs engenders ambiguity in communication. In this regard, one respondent provided a great hypothetical example:

> For instance, one of my acquaintances publishes an angry post about how he is fed up with feminists or whatever… and someone may leave an 'angry' emoji under his post because he is also fed up and wants to express solidarity. But I am going to leave an 'angry' emoji because I am a feminist, and this post has offended me [19].

This nexus of factors is likely why the respondents generally resisted the idea that a set of rules for using PDAs could exist and be consistently applied: 'I wouldn't say that I have criteria, a dictionary of emojis… I act according to the situation, according to the person… to my mood… it is all very subjective.' [14].

This section does not contain an exhaustive list of the SNS functionalities, merely those that recurred through multiple interviews. Other affordances, such as events that exist on Facebook [1] and reposts ('I like it a lot when any of my content gets reposted. It means that someone shares my values.' [20])

were also mentioned, but only intermittently. The respondents usually did not conceptualize their social networking experience as going through a sequence of various SNS functions but rather saw it through the lens of goals and motivations, which possibly made the discussion of this chapter's topic (which did not refer to a predetermined list of functions) less fruitful than it could have been otherwise.

Effectiveness of social support on SNS compared to traditional support

The majority of the people interviewed did not compare favourably the experience of exchanging social support online to the experience of exchanging social support offline. One respondent called it a 'mere echo' [18] of the face-to-face experience and said that he primarily sought offline support interactions. The latter were also predominantly described as 'more authentic' [5] and 'more sincere' [9]. '[When you are offline,] you are constantly reading the other person's state through non-verbal clues, and that is impossible online… even video does not substitute it.' [7]. In an offline setting, one can judge by 'body language, facial expressions, whether the person is being genuine in their willingness to help' [5]. 'You have much more non-verbal information which helps determine whether the goal of the [supportive] communication was achieved.' [12]. Also, 'in offline interactions, all of your attention is focused on the other person… while online, many things can distract you.' [16].

Consequently, many people rated offline social support as more effective vis-à-vis SNS support. One respondent compared the effectiveness of offline and online social support the following way: 'You need to gather support for one hour online [whereas] offline ten minutes would suffice.' [9]. 'Offline, the amount of support exchanged [per unit of time] is higher.' [3]. The respondents also put an emphasis on its completely different quality: 'The kind of emotional support you can get offline, you won't get online, no matter which [SNS] functionality you use.' [14]. Offline social support is still perceived as foundational to human relationships: 'If I am experiencing a deep sense of loneliness, I won't be able to lower it by trying to get support through social networks… loneliness [can't be addressed] with a 'heart' reaction on a 'story.' [19]. 'If you are interacting over just messengers, without seeing each other with some regularity, you will feel less close over time.' [16]. "It is very hard to sustain a relationship without seeing the [person's] face [in real life]." [17].

That being said, multiple respondents acknowledged that, on its own, they viewed the exchange of social support online as effective enough or at least convenient. 'Offline social support is better than online… but [the latter] is cheaper from the cost-benefit point of view.' [20]. '[Exchanging support] is more convenient online, but, in the end, more effective offline.' [12]. 'It is easier to reach out to someone through private messages than meet them offline.' [10]. Some posited that SNS social support is just as effective as offline when considering all the advantages and drawbacks of both forms on balance. '[In terms of effectiveness], I would say that private messages are on par with communicating offline' [8]. '[Since I live abroad,] communicating online is just as meaningful as doing it offline… I can't say that one works better than the other for me.' [2].

Some respondents were reluctant to make a call on the effectiveness comparison one way or the other [4]. As one respondent put it, which of the two kinds of social support would prove more effective "depend[ed] on the situation" [15], 'on the group of people, on the goal of the support' [3]. Many respondents pointed out scenarios in which online social support would be more effective than offline, emphasizing the numerous benefits of SNS support discussed earlier. For example, the asynchrony of the online realm was explicitly mentioned as the advantage over the real world more than once: 'With some of my friends, I can be more candid online since the ability to react to a message later provides… a sense of safety [during] heavy discussions' [8]. 'You can be more open. You have the time to correctly phrase what you really want to say.' [6].

One respondent said that exchanging social support online was "better" since 'online, you may be anonymous or just not show your face, which makes [exchanging support] easier… [takes away] social anxiety.' [5]. Another said that offline communication in the form of meetings with her friends sometimes felt mentally exhausting for her since those meetings could be sporadic and infrequent, while online, the communication was more predictable, and you could more easily 'regulate its intensity' [8]. '[Online, you don't have to engage in small talk,] you can get right into it.'[6]. '[Online] support is more focused, you are after some particular thing, while offline interaction [does not have a strictly defined purpose].' [1].

One study participant summed up her attitude thus: 'Of course, [SNS] won't replace real-life communication, you won't get the same experience there, but [due to the war,] I am grateful for the existence of [SNS]; at least we have this much, and it really helps.' [8]. Another said something to a similar effect: 'Offline support is not always possible… if it was all I had, I would be pretty unhappy.' [16]. Ultimately, social networks are just a tool, and it is up to the users how effective it will be in satisfying their social support needs [1]. 'All the advantages of online social support are also its drawbacks… people can both call me stupid and give me support from any place on Earth.' [18]. Overall, as this chapter illustrates, the experience of exchanging social support online is heavily context-dependent; for example, in some contexts, online social support can also be "exhausting," a descriptor used for offline support in the previous paragraph: ‘For the first few months [of the full-scale war] some people wrote to me every two or three days, and that was… exhausting… I started ignoring them’ [10].

The negative impact of SNS on social support exchange

One of the dominant motifs in the criticism of social support on SNS is the depersonalization of interaction. ‘In my view, social networks completely dehumanize others.’ [9]. On SNS, ‘you can’t see the other person, may not know who they are, can block [their account] at any moment…’ [9]. This makes people “more impulsive.” “[T]hey don’t take the time to reflect’ [20] and are more prone to negative comments since they cannot see other people’s reactions [7]. Meanwhile, the genuineness of positive reactions might be in doubt. ‘You don’t know if the reactions are real, what the person is really thinking.’ [7]. ‘I can’t tell if the person is sincere online’ [9]. At the same time, the very fact that a user can completely refrain from revealing their identity online was mentioned earlier in a positive light as decreasing the anxiety from asking for the kinds of support that may lead to prejudicial treatment (Hayes et al., 2016: 7).

Expanding on the theme of having less information on SNS, the respondents often found fault with the general ambiguity of digital conversations. ‘Sometimes… you can’t tell what people mean and have to ask them again. You didn’t put a smiley at the end, and your words already have a different air.’ [6]. ‘Since people can’t see you, everyone will read into your words something different.’ [20]. ‘A lot of my friends say to me that were I to communicate in real life the way I do online, they wouldn’t be friends with me. In messages, [unlike offline,] I come across as awkward, rude, unclear.’ [19].

A recurring issue, which stems from the depersonalization, is the relative ‘shallowness’ of the communication encouraged by SNS: ‘The emoji comments… detract from the depth [of the exchange].’ [8]. The decline of “in-depth communication” was also blamed on the ubiquity of “likes” [19]. ‘Everything happens very fast… it does not leave an emotional trace.’ [19]. A related problem is “ghosting” – unexpectedly breaking off a conversation without an explanation or just leaving a message unanswered. Respondents reasoned that on SNS, it is easy to avoid a response since the other person cannot see you and does not engage with you directly: ‘It is much easier to ignore [a support request on SNS].’ [16]; ‘You can easily run away from a conversation.’ [15].

Some expressed privacy concerns over asking for support online, since any conversation, even a one-on-one, can be preserved in some way and subsequently reshared without the knowledge or consent of all the parties: ‘Even private conversations can be vulnerable because screenshots exist; you don’t know whom people can send this to.' [10]; 'You have to filter your words through the understanding that there may be more than two people in this conversation.' [12]. A benevolent example of this possibility was offered by another respondent:

> Once I wrote some thoughts on self-acceptance [on Facebook]… how I acknowledge… that I'll never be perfect, and one of my friends got scared that I was developing depression, made screenshots of my posts and sent them to my mom saying: 'Look what your daughter has written, she is probably hurting'… and my mom [then] calls me and wonders… [if I am okay] [6].

Social media algorithms that punish inactivity may place a burden on people who rely on SNS for support. One respondent said that she felt pressure to post something on Facebook regularly since if she did not, then she would probably find her next post, which might be an appeal for support, receiving limited exposure [6]. Another respondent endorsed this account by saying that he regularly posted various updates to his page so that his audience was primed to respond to support-related posts whenever they would come: 'Social networks want us to be constantly engaged with our audience." '[11].

Despite the earlier mentioned fact that most of the interactions on social networks are designed to leave a permanent record, their UIs in most cases do include the "undo" option. "Likes" can be withdrawn, messages unsent (ordinarily within a limited time period), and comments deleted. This received criticism from a respondent:

> Personally, I don't like the ability to delete messages because when someone writes to me and then unsends the message, I have to wonder what is the reason… For example, on Strava[7], you can't withdraw 'Kudos' [to someone's workout]… it is actually their philosophy since if you say, 'Well done' in real life, you can't then say, 'No, I am taking it back,'… and that is a cool philosophy [19].

An interesting side effect of the way in which social networks encourage public interactions is that, to an extent, they expose the relative amount of social support available to other people. Friend counts, view counts, and "like" counts have become crude indicators of one's social capital. This can have both positive and negative effects (Marengo et al., 2021; Fioravanti et al., 2021). A positive example was cited by a respondent who mentioned that she factored in the number of comments under a post in her decision of whether to leave her own ("For some person, my comment will constitute just one-hundredth of the support

[7] An internet service for tracking workouts with built-in SNS features.

they've received, while for another, it will be a half… I am more likely to comment under the latter person's post because then it will be more impactful.") [9]. The same applies to "likes": "I don't always understand what my activist friend talks about in her Facebook posts because she writes for the other activists, but I always 'like' her posts because I see that they receive few 'likes.'" [6].

Speaking of the negative effects, estimates of someone's support using purely quantitative online metrics are often inaccurate. "It is very difficult to come to a definitive conclusion… about how another person perceives their level of online support." [16]. 'Sometimes it may look like a person has a huge amount of support online, but then when push comes to shove, it does not translate into real actions… SNS may create an illusion of support.' [12]. Some respondents said that it was difficult for them to predict the level of response their social support request would garner, which in some cases discouraged them from publishing it: 'Sometimes I stop myself, [thinking,] what if I won't get any advice, and I will be shouting into the void… what if I am lonely?' [20].

Continuing the discussion of the adverse effects, the 'transparency' of social support exchange on SNS may also lead to negative social comparison: "I posted a cool photo, but it got fewer 'likes' than my friend's." [19]. The respondent from the previous paragraph shared how she had felt conflicted about a very particular but common scenario of public social support exchange on SNS – that of birthday greetings. On Facebook, the latter tend to accumulate as posts on the person's page or in their comments, making them visible to not only the recipient but most of the other well-wishers – as are the responses from the person receiving the greetings. The interviewee posited that responding with different intensities to different posts essentially created a hierarchy of birthday greetings in which everyone could see their place.

> I may 'like' or 'heart' [a comment], write 'Many thanks' or something lengthier… and I thought about how this may look from the outside, why [someone] gets just a 'like,' and someone else gets [a comment]… but I decided that I needed to react authentically [based on the perceived level of sincerity]… if somebody gets upset, so be it [20].

Effects of the 2022 Russian invasion

The Russian war in Ukraine has deeply impacted nearly all aspects of the Ukrainians' lives, and online social support was no exception. In the wake of the 2022 invasion, social networks rapidly became an indispensable tool in crowdfunding resources for both Ukraine's military and humanitarian needs: 'Essentially all volunteering is predicated on social networks.' [12]. Within the sample, at least half a dozen people have mentioned raising money for the

Armed forces of Ukraine over the last year, and still more used their accounts to repost military support requests from others. The phenomenon of facilitating material social support online on such a scale as happened in Ukraine from 2022 onwards merits a separate examination, but the topic could not be avoided in the interviews for this study. The respondents said that SNS were very effective at consolidating financial support for military gear: 'They are 100% effective… both for small-scale fundraisers when you join forces with friends and more [significant] ones… It is quick and easy.' [8]. As usual, the knowledge of the algorithm proved advantageous: 'I made a post on my birthday, which was also a crowdfunding announcement, and replied to every single comment so that the post was pushed harder [by Facebook], and I saw the waves of transactions [which coincided with latest responses].' [12]. 'When you include a link in the [Facebook] post itself, its impressions collapse, therefore you see things like, 'All details in the first comment!'' [11].

At the same time, some supportive sharing on SNS has also become more socially fraught since the war has placed people in vastly different circumstances and made even their near future highly uncertain. Since every day may bring some devastating news, some people may find positive content inappropriate:

> People have become very sensitive… I understand that everyone has a ton of problems… and if you want to share something positive… and are counting on support, [it is difficult] to pick the right timing. [For example,] in the morning, you post a happy 'story,' and in the afternoon, a tragic shelling takes place, and your 'story' receives indignation instead of support… Personally, this has been significantly restraining me from being more active in public [12].

Conclusions

Over the past two decades, exchanging social support online has assumed a pivotal role in many people's lives. Billions have come to rely on SNS for social support on a daily basis. Social networks have enabled people to access and provide social support in novel and often unexpected ways, mitigating the effects of economic disruptions and humanitarian crises. Ukrainians, in particular, have harnessed the power of social networks to their full potential since February 2022, using them to pool together resources, show unity in the face of the invading Russian army, and retain a sense of national community while being scattered around the world.

The effects of the war on online social support provision are far-reaching and continue to unfold (and will hopefully be part of a dedicated exploration later on), but they do not fundamentally alter the gist of the sentiments toward social support on SNS derived from the interviews.

The respondents described the medium of social networking sites as having a generally positive impact on the process of social support exchange, endowing people with new and powerful capabilities in this department. SNS combine the ability to seamlessly communicate with hundreds of people spread around the globe at the speed and pace of one's choosing with a high degree of resilience to physical shocks and an extensive set of digital affordances that can be used to successfully emulate most of the support interactions that take place offline. They are generally considered an effective medium for social support exchange, even if in some important respects they fall behind the experience of interacting and exchanging support in real life. Still, online social support has its drawbacks, such as data privacy issues, heightened risk of negative social comparison, and the encouragement of shallow, depersonalized interactions.

The exchange of social support on social networks is a phenomenon as varied and multifaceted as its real-world counterpart, evidenced by the fact that even the relatively small sample of participants interviewed for this study have produced wide-ranging and even contradicting opinions on the same limited set of topics, while rarely repeating each other. This is due, in part, to the significant context-dependency of the experience, which sometimes makes even separating the features of online social support into unambiguously positive and negative ones a challenging task. Therefore, further studies, particularly those using a qualitative design, will undoubtedly uncover many more fascinating details on the topic. Moreover, since SNS as a technology and a part of online culture continue to be in a state of constant flux, new rules and norms for online behaviour are expected to continue to develop, naturally sustaining the importance of this kind of research.

Limitations

This article is not intended to be an all-encompassing review of the phenomenon of social support online, but it does endeavour to offer a well-rounded perspective informed by the opinions of a small but diverse group of young and middle-aged Ukrainians. However, besides the modest number of participants, other factors might inhibit this research's epistemological power. One of the chief difficulties in conducting it was that, as some respondents have admitted, the subject was difficult to discuss comprehensively without significant preparation. As was briefly touched on earlier, support provision is often unconscious, and a substantial number of interview participants did not initially recognize many of their online behaviours as having a dimension of social support. Even though the respondents were informed in advance about the interview topic, this gap in understanding persisted and usually had to be bridged during the interview itself. As one respondent noted, an hour into his interview, 'The more we talk, the more I see some elements where I can show or receive support [on SNS]… without realizing it.' [4]. Another said, in relation to online social support in general (and also towards the end of her interview), "I have never thought about this." [1]. Additionally, it should be stressed that as opposed to the early research on socializing online (Kraut et al., 1998), most of the people interviewed for this study have grown up with access to social networking sites as a fact of life, which may have had a limiting effect on the analytical distance from which they could approach the topic during the interview, especially the comparison with offline social support exchange.

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Annexe 1

List of respondents: [1] – woman, 35 years old; [2] – woman, 37; [3] – man, 34; [4] – man, 27; [5] – woman, 22; [6] – woman, 34; [7] – woman, 25; [8] – woman, 25; [9] – woman, 31; [10] – woman, 26; [11] – man, 40; [12] – woman, 33; [13] – woman, 38; [14] – man, 25; [15] – woman, 26; [16] – man, 26; [17] – woman, 25; [18] – man, 26; [19] – woman, 34; [20] – woman, 35.

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