

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATIONS ON THE LEVEL OF SOCIAL TRUST AMONG THE POPULATION IN ROMANIA

FELICIA ANDRIONI, GABRIELA CORINA SLUSARIUC,
DIANDRA-ISABELA ANDRIONI *

ABSTRACT: *Social trust constitutes a key indicator of social cohesion and the effective functioning of democratic societies. This article analyzes the impact of socio-economic transformations on the level of social trust among the population in Romania during the post-communist period, using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework and an empirical analysis based on a review of the specialized literature, comparative analysis, and secondary data analysis. The study highlights that economic transition, European integration, economic and social crises, as well as migration dynamics, have significantly influenced both interpersonal and institutional trust. The results obtained emphasize that in Romania, interpersonal trust remains high and robust despite widespread dissatisfaction with economic and social conditions and profound socio-economic transformations, while trust in institutions and subjective life satisfaction remain more fragile, revealing a significant dichotomy between the relational and institutional dimensions of social capital.*

KEY WORDS: *Social trust, population, socio-economic transformations, Romania, post-communist transition*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social trust has become a central topic of analysis in recent decades, being recognized as a fundamental element of social stability and sustainable economic

* Prof., Ph.D., University of Petroșani, Romania, felicia_andrioni@yahoo.com
Assoc Prof., Ph.D., University of Petroșani, Romania, ellaslusariuc@gmail.com
Mara Foundation, Romania, andrioni_diandra@yahoo.com

development. Trust facilitates cooperation between individuals, reduces transaction costs, and contributes to the efficient functioning of public institutions (Putnam, 2000). In the absence of an adequate level of trust, societies face social fragmentation, reduced civic participation, and diminished institutional legitimacy.

Romania represents a relevant case for analyzing the relationship between socio-economic transformations and social trust, due to the profound structural changes that occurred after 1989. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy, institutional restructuring, European integration, and exposure to global economic crises have profoundly reshaped the social structure and public perceptions. Numerous studies indicate that post-communist societies are characterized by lower levels of trust compared to Western countries, as a result of historical experiences and persistent institutional dysfunctions (Sztompka, 1999).

The objective of this article is to analyze how major socio-economic transformations in post-communist Romania have influenced the level of social trust, with a focus on the dynamics of interpersonal and institutional trust. The study combines theoretical analysis with an empirical approach.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK - THE LEVEL OF SOCIAL TRUST IN ROMANIA

2.1 Social trust: conceptual delimitations

In the specialized literature, social trust is defined as a generalized expectation regarding the honest and predictable behavior of other members of society (Fukuyama, 1995). It is not exclusively an individual trait but a social phenomenon, historically and culturally constructed, dependent on collective experiences and institutional performance. In this sense, trust contributes to the consolidation of democracy, increases economic efficiency, and reduces transaction costs, facilitating voluntary cooperation and adherence to social norms.

Social trust manifests both as interpersonal trust and as trust in institutions, and these dimensions are closely interconnected. Levels of trust vary significantly across countries and regions, influenced by historical, economic, and political factors, such as experiences with political regimes, the performance of public institutions, or the degree of social inequality.

The distinction between interpersonal and institutional trust is essential for understanding social mechanisms. Interpersonal trust reflects relationships between individuals and is influenced by cultural norms, socialization, and everyday experiences. Institutional trust, on the other hand, is related to perceptions of the fairness, efficiency, and integrity of state institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

Social trust is a fundamental element of social life, considered an indispensable precondition for cooperation between individuals and social groups (Hirschman, 1982). Without a minimum level of trust, social relationships tend to be marked by suspicion, high monitoring costs, and a reduced capacity to coordinate collective action. In this sense, trust facilitates not only everyday interactions but also broader processes of

community development, contributing to the consolidation of social capital and the effective functioning of social institutions (Putnam, 2000).

At the individual level, the functioning of a modern society requires people's ability to cooperate with individuals outside their immediate circle of relationships. Gambetta (1988, 2000) emphasizes that trust becomes especially essential in situations characterized by uncertainty, where the behavior of others cannot be predicted with certainty. Thus, trust in strangers allows the expansion of social networks beyond family or local ties, fostering large-scale cooperation and the emergence of complex social structures. In this context, the level of generalized trust is considered an important indicator of a society's potential for social and economic development (Bădescu et al., 2019).

2.2. Interpersonal Trust in Romania and other European Countries

Contrary to traditional perceptions that associate Eastern European societies with low levels of interpersonal trust, recent statistical data indicate an atypical situation in Romania. According to Eurostat data, in 2024 Romania recorded the highest level of interpersonal trust among all European Union member states, with an average score of 7.3 on a scale from 0 to 10, significantly surpassing the EU average of 5.8 (Eurostat, cited in Edupedu.ro, 2025). This result places Romania in the upper ranks of the European chart regarding trust in others - an indicator of generalized trust toward strangers - and suggests that, in everyday social interactions, the Romanian population demonstrates a relatively high level of openness and trust compared to the European average.

These findings are also supported by other journalistic reports based on Eurostat data, which position Romania first in the European Union for this indicator, ahead of countries such as Finland or Poland (Veridica.ro). This reality, seemingly contradictory to dominant theoretical expectations, can be explained both by socio-cultural mechanisms specific to the Romanian context and by the methodological particularities of the measurement tools used. International literature highlights that high levels of interpersonal trust can be observed in societies where local solidarity and mutual aid remain strong, even in conditions of low trust in public institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008).

According to the most recent Eurostat data for 2024, Romania records the highest level of trust in others among all EU member states. This is the first year in which Romania occupies the top position for this indicator, with Finland previously holding the leading spot. The "trust in others" indicator measures individuals' trust toward strangers - excluding relatives, friends, or neighbors - using a scale from 0 ("total lack of trust") to 10 ("complete trust"). In Romania, the average interpersonal trust score reached 7.3 in 2024, significantly exceeding the European Union average of 5.8 (Table 1).

According to Eurostat methodology, interpersonal trust constitutes a key indicator of the quality of social relations and the functioning of society. The available data show that Romania, alongside Finland and Poland, ranks among the top European countries, with values of 7.0 or higher. At the opposite end are countries such as

Cyprus, France, Lithuania, Slovenia, and Greece, where interpersonal trust levels remain below 5.

Table 1. Ranking of European countries by level of interpersonal trust, by age, measured on a scale from 0 to 10, for the year 2024.

Country 2024	16-65+ years	16-29 years
Romania	7,3	7,8
Finland	7,2	6,9
Polond	7	7
Irland	6,7	6,8
Netherlands	6,7	6,4
UE Average	5,8	6

Source: Eurostat, 2024

The evolution of the level of interpersonal trust in Romania over the past decade highlights a clearly upward and relatively stable trend. In 2013, the average value of this indicator was 6.4, reflecting a moderate level of trust in others. Subsequently, a significant increase can be observed in 2018, when the average score reached 7.0, marking a notable change in the dynamics of social relationships. This positive trend continued in the following years, culminating in a peak of 7.7 in 2021. After 2021, the level of trust did not experience sharp declines but instead stabilized within a relatively narrow range, with values between 7.1 and 7.3 (Table 2). This stability suggests the consolidation of a high level of interpersonal trust, which remains constant over time and is rarely encountered in the context of Central and Eastern Europe. The persistence of these values indicates not just situational fluctuations, but rather a process of maturation of social relationships, possibly supported by informal mechanisms of solidarity and social adaptation in contexts of uncertainty.

Table 2. The evolution of the level of interpersonal trust among the population of Romania between 2013 and 2024 on a scale from 0 (“no trust at all”) to 10 (“complete trust”)

Romania	16-65+ years	16-29 years
2013	6,4	6,7
2018	7	7,3
2021	7,7	8,1
2022	7,1	7,6
2023	7,2	7,7
2024	7,3	7,8

Source: Eurostat, 2024

Another relevant aspect highlighted by Eurostat data refers to the level of interpersonal trust among young people. At the level of the European Union, individuals aged between 16 and 29 generally display a higher level of trust in others compared to the total population. Thus, in 2023, the EU average for this age group was 6.1, exceeding the average value of 5.8 recorded for the entire population.

In this context, Romania stands out significantly. In 2023, Romanian young people recorded the highest level of interpersonal trust in the European Union, with an average score of 7.7, ahead of countries such as Croatia (7.2) and Poland (7.0). The data for 2024 confirm the maintenance and even consolidation of this upward trend: for the 16-29 age group, the average level of trust in Romania reached 7.8, according to the Eurostat dataset. This value represents not only the highest score recorded by a member state within this age category, but also a level higher than the national average calculated for all age groups, highlighting a distinct feature of the trust profile of young people in Romania (Eurostat, 2024).

2.3 Trust in Institutions: Romania vs. other European States

The analysis of institutional trust, beyond the level of interpersonal trust, reveals much more pronounced differences. Older but still relevant data from a comparative perspective indicate that the population of Romania shows a higher level of trust in European institutions, such as the European Union, than in its own national institutions. According to the results of the 2017 Eurobarometer, 57% of Romanians stated that they trusted the EU, compared to an average of 42% at the European Union level, while trust in Parliament and Government was significantly below the European average.

More recent studies confirm this trend, suggesting a relatively high level of trust among Romanians in international institutions such as NATO (approximately 70% in 2025) and the European Union (over 60%), according to surveys conducted by INSCOP Research. These values are comparable to or even higher than those recorded in many EU member states and highlight a distinct pattern in which external or supranational actors enjoy greater trust capital than domestic institutions. This phenomenon may be explained by enhanced perceptions of efficiency, stability, and protective capacity associated with organizations considered more credible. However, the level of trust in national institutions remains, in most areas, below the European average, especially in the case of the Government and Parliament.

Data from Deliu's 2024 analysis also indicate more pronounced fluctuations in trust from one research wave to another, suggesting higher instability compared to trends observed at the level of the European Union. Another study also highlights that Romanians rank below the European average in terms of the proportion of people who tend to trust institutions in general, with the exception of the European Union, where the level of trust in Romania consistently exceeds the EU-28/27 average-this is emphasized in Deliu's 2024 analysis. According to this study, which examines developments between 2017 and 2023, the percentage of Romanians who expressed trust in institutions decreased from 57% to 52%, reaching a maximum of 58% in the winter of 2020/2021 and a minimum of 49% in the winter of 2021/2022. During the same period, the European average increased from 42% to 47%, with a significant rise from 43% in autumn 2019 and summer 2020 to 49% in winter 2020/2021, then stabilizing at this higher level until the end of the data series (Deliu, 2024).

The institutions with the lowest level of trust identified by Deliu (2024) are political parties, both for Romanians and Europeans. Generally, the share of those

expressing trust in political parties remains below 25%, both at the European average level and in Romania. In Romania, the highest level was 30% in the summer of 2022, while the lowest, 13%, was recorded in autumn 2017, down from 18% in the spring of the same year. Between 2017 and 2022/2023, the percentage of those who tend to trust political parties increased slightly, both at EU level (from 19% to 21%) and in Romania (from 18% to 22%). As with other indicators of trust in various institutions, the data for Romania indicate high sensitivity to context and pronounced instability, with trust in political parties showing sudden rises and declines (Deliu, 2024, p. 95).

In the study *“Institutional Trust - a Victim of the Post-Communist Transition,”* Cătălin Tufiş analyzes the evolution of public trust in Romania’s institutions between 1993 and 2006, using national values survey data. The author places institutional trust at the core of the democratic consolidation process, considering it an essential indicator of political legitimacy and the effective functioning of state institutions. One of the study’s central conclusions is that the post-communist transition had a profoundly negative impact on trust in public institutions.

According to the author, the collapse of the communist regime was not followed by a rapid consolidation of new institutional structures but rather by an extended period of uncertainty, instability, and inconsistent institutional performance. In this context, key institutions such as Parliament, Government, and political parties consistently recorded low levels of trust, reflecting the difficulties encountered in the process of democratic legitimation. Tufiş highlights that the decline in institutional trust cannot be explained solely by the communist legacy but must be understood as the result of the interaction between the population’s high expectations and the perceived performance of institutions during the transition period. Promises of economic prosperity, social equity, and democratic functioning were often contradicted by realities such as corruption, administrative inefficiency, and political instability, contributing to increased social disappointment.

Another important aspect of the analysis is the differentiation of trust levels across various types of institutions. The author shows that institutions with symbolic or coercive roles, such as the Army and the Church, benefited from relatively higher levels of trust compared to representative political institutions. This asymmetry suggests the existence of a selective trust relationship, in which the Romanian population tends to grant legitimacy to institutions perceived as stable and separate from political struggle, to the detriment of those directly associated with decision-making and daily governance.

From a comparative perspective, Tufiş emphasizes that the low level of institutional trust in Romania fits within a broader pattern typical of post-communist societies but is amplified by Romania’s specific transition, marked by slow reforms and a persistent perception of corruption.

3. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

The economic and social transformations in post-communist Romania constitute the structural framework within which the evolution of social trust levels can

be understood. After the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, Romanian society entered a broad process of economic, political, and institutional restructuring, marked by deep discontinuities compared to the previous model. These changes affected not only economic mechanisms but also social relations, norms of cooperation, and the population's perceptions of the state and of other members of society.

The economic and social transformations in post-communist Romania represent a complex process of reconstruction and readaptation of Romanian society after the fall of the socialist regime in 1989. After decades of centrally planned economy and social services provided within a paternalistic state, Romanian society and economy entered a profound restructuring process, characterized by the shift from a socialist state model to a market economy and democratic institutions, with multiple simultaneous social and economic effects.

One of the main aspects of this process was the development and diversification of social services in a changing socio-economic context. Felicia Andrioni shows that, in the early post-communist period (especially between 2000 and 2009), social services in Romania evolved from an unequal and centralized model to one in which both governmental institutions and non-governmental organizations began to respond to the increasingly diverse social needs of the population. This evolution was driven by the necessity to compensate for the gaps left by the withdrawal of the state from certain areas - as a result of economic reforms - and by the growing complexity of social problems such as poverty, marginalization of vulnerable groups, and demographic changes (Andrioni, 2011). Overall, the economic and social transformations in post-communist Romania can be understood as a transition between two models of social organization - from a socialist state with a planned economy to a capitalist market model, a process characterized by multiple structural challenges but also opportunities for development. In this context, the evolution of social services - a key focus in Felicia Andrioni's research - reflects both adaptation to new economic realities and the need to create efficient social mechanisms for the protection and inclusion of citizens in a society undergoing transformation, thereby increasing the level of social trust among vulnerable populations in Romania.

The economic and social transformations in post-communist Romania were generated by several factors, such as the transition to a market economy, the reconfiguration of the social structure and the rise of inequalities, European integration and institutional modernization, international migration and its effects on social cohesion, all of which influenced the dynamics of the population's level of social trust.

In this context, the early years of the transition (1990-2000) were characterized by a major structural rupture, determined by the abandonment of the planned economy and the implementation of market reforms. Price liberalization, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and industrial restructuring generated significant social effects, including rising unemployment, declining living standards, and increased economic insecurity (Verdery, 1996).

Specialized literature emphasizes that this period was perceived by the population as one of social and institutional disorganization, in which old norms were rapidly delegitimized without being immediately replaced by new functional mechanisms (Sztompka, 1999). In this context, trust in state institutions eroded

significantly, and social relations became increasingly dependent on informal networks based on personal relationships and survival strategies. At the same time, there was a reconfiguration of the social structure and a rise in inequalities, as economic transformations were accompanied by profound changes in the social structure. The emergence of a market economy led to income polarization and the increase of social inequalities, a phenomenon confirmed by the evolution of the Gini coefficient and by sociological studies on social stratification in Romania (Voicu & Voicu, 2011).

The increase in economic inequalities had a direct impact on social capital, as perceptions of injustice and social inequity tend to undermine interpersonal trust and the sense of collective solidarity. Societies with pronounced economic disparities often face reduced social cohesion, reflected in lower civic participation and more limited involvement in community initiatives. As Stiglitz (2012) points out, heightened inequalities negatively affect social trust and community cohesion-phenomena also observable in contemporary Romania, where persistent economic differences influence citizens' perceptions of social justice and collective solidarity.

The process of accession to the European Union, finalized in 2007, represented a turning point in Romania's socio-economic development. European integration required the adoption of institutional and legislative standards aimed at strengthening the rule of law, increasing administrative transparency, and stimulating economic development (Sandu, 2011).

Socially, this period was associated with a higher level of optimism and a slight improvement in trust in public institutions, particularly those perceived as being directly influenced by European mechanisms. However, numerous studies highlight that the positive effects of integration were uneven, and the persistence of corruption and administrative dysfunctions limited the sustainable consolidation of institutional trust (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

One of the most significant post-accession social phenomena is the massive external migration of the active population. The departure of a considerable number of individuals to other European Union member states has had positive economic effects, through remittances, but also negative social consequences for the communities of origin (Sandu, 2011).

Migration has contributed to the fragmentation of local social networks, the weakening of community solidarity, and the decline of civic participation-factors that negatively influence the level of interpersonal trust. Studies on social capital in Romania indicate that regions with high emigration rates display lower levels of social cohesion and generalized trust (Voicu & Voicu, 2011).

Another essential aspect of post-communist transformations concerns external migration and the deterioration of public education and healthcare systems. After 1990, Romania experienced a significant wave of emigration, particularly among young people seeking better employment opportunities and living conditions abroad. This phenomenon led to substantial losses of human capital and increased pressure on social systems. At the same time, traditional public services, previously centrally state-funded, experienced reductions in resources and capacity, which affected their quality and accessibility. Furthermore, economic crises and political instability represent major factors disrupting social trust, with profound effects on relationships between

individuals and on the legitimacy of public institutions. In post-communist Romania, these phenomena have recurred, amplifying the structural vulnerabilities of society and contributing to the persistence of a relatively low level of social capital.

The global economic crisis of 2008-2012 represented a critical moment for the Romanian economy and for the relationship between citizens and the state. The drastic reduction of public spending, salary cuts in the public sector, and rising unemployment generated an intensified sense of economic and social insecurity. Specialized literature emphasizes that such economic shocks directly affect institutional trust, as the state is perceived as incapable of ensuring social protection and economic stability (Stiglitz, 2012). In Romania, the austerity policies implemented following agreements with international financial institutions were perceived by a significant part of the population as unfair and insufficiently explained, which contributed to the erosion of governmental legitimacy. Sociological studies conducted during this period indicate a sharp decline in the level of trust in the Government, Parliament, and political parties, alongside an increase in political cynicism and civic disengagement (Voicu & Voicu, 2011).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the level of social trust in Romania outlines a complex and, to a certain extent, paradoxical picture. Despite dissatisfaction with economic and social conditions, interpersonal trust remains at surprisingly high levels, exceeding the European average and placing Romania ahead of some states with more consolidated democratic traditions. This situation shows that people can maintain relationships of cooperation and trust even during periods marked by profound socio-economic transformations, such as economic modernization, labor market restructuring, or tensions generated by economic inequalities.

At the same time, trust in national institutions remains more fragile and variable, reflecting the difficulties of the public system in quickly adapting to economic and social changes. Perceptions of well-being and subjective life satisfaction remain low, highlighting a strong contrast between interpersonal trust and dissatisfaction with material conditions. This dichotomy suggests that social trust does not depend exclusively on economic prosperity or institutional performance, but also on how people experience socio-economic transformations in their everyday lives.

Thus, Romania offers a relevant example of a society in which interpersonal trust can remain robust even in the context of rapid and complex economic and social changes. This situation underlines the need for a nuanced and comparative analysis of social capital, one that integrates relational, institutional, and subjective dimensions of trust, in close connection with the dynamics of socio-economic transformations.

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