



4. *Social work and welfare policy in Romania: history and current challenges*

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Keywords

Social work, Romania, social work education, history of social work, welfare

Introduction

Situated in South-Eastern Europe, Romania became independent in 1866 and on the 1st of January 2007 joined the European Union (Eu). The majority of population is Christian Orthodox (86.5% in 2011) and according to the most recent census from 2011 (National institute of statistics, 2013) besides Romanians (88.9% in 2011) there are two main ethnic minorities: Hungarian (6.5%) and Roma (3.3%). The total population residing in Romania is of 20.1 million inhabitants, down from 21.7 in 2002 and 23.1 in 1990. In 2012 its Gross domestic product (Gdp) per capita (Pps) reached half of the Eu average (Eurostat database). Administratively, Romania is divided in 41 counties plus 6 districts of the capital city, Bucharest (Nuts 3 level) and 8 regions (Nuts 2).

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1. A historical perspective on social work in Romania

Bordering the Eu to east, Romania is placed somewhere between the East and the West, at the gates of the Middle East. Historical, geographical and cultural factors alongside economic, political and social ones influenced the early forms of social work. The current territories of Romania (with the three provinces Moldova, Valachia/Wallachia and Transylvania) were for long periods of time conflict areas, even occupied (the Roman empire, the Ottoman empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire) or a quasi-colony of an empire (e.g. the Ottoman empire). As a result, many people were in need of assistance (Livadă-Cadeschi, 2002).

Analyzing the evolution of social work in Romania in the contemporary era Buzducea (2009: 123-124) identifies three stages: the development stage (after the 1st world war), the communist stage (1945-1989) when social work was demolished/dismantled and the post-communist stage of re-building/reconstruction (1990-present). Lambru (2002: 61-69) identifies four stages in the history of social work in Romania:

- 1) 1800-1920, when the structure bases of the social work system were created;
- 2) 1920-1945, when the institutional structure matured and diversified;
- 3) 1945-1989, the decline of the social work system;
- 4) after 1989, the restructuring and modernization of the social work system. Combining the two perspectives it is possible to add a pre-modern era when social work was carried out mainly as a charity, by the church, but with increasing role from the state/public authorities.

1.1. First stage: the early years, the charity era

In 13th century, under the influence of Christian religion, the first forms of social assistance for the poor were created alongside monasteries, being called «infirmaries» (in ro. *Bolnite*). In 14th century the support for the poor was mentioned as an attribute of the prince (in ro. *voievod*) who required the lords/noblemen to contribute to this work of charity. In 1295 in Transylvania an institute of the poor from Bistrita is



registered (Lambru, 2002). In 1365 near Campulung Muscel a village for those in need and/or ill (e.g. blind, disabled, crippled) was mentioned and the locals were exempted from paying taxes to the prince court (Prince Radu Negru). The same village was also mentioned in 17th century (1639) during the reign of Matei Basarab (Buzducea, 2009: 115). In 1480 in Moldova (Stefan the Great) began the work of charity. In 1524 a social assistance institution was mentioned near Bucharest (Curtea de Arges monastery) where poor people could benefit of shelter, food, clothes and money. Also in 16th century regulations were created: for instance a poor card (authorization) was allowing begging only for the disabled; the poor able to work were receiving help only if they could prove that the gains from work were insufficient, thus begging was forbidden. In Bucharest, prince Negru Vodă is creating similar institutions (called *calicii*) in 16th century, the funding coming from the Charity box (in ro. *Cutie Milei*) (Manoiu, Epureanu, 1996).

Similarly to the Elizabethan poor law from 1601 in England the responsibility is placed to the church (Pop, 2005), but with some involvement from the authorities. The control of the social assistance recipients was important, in 1686 a list of the poor receiving money from the city hall budget was available at the dean (clerical) of Bucharest (Buzducea, 2009). In 18th century more and more social assistance institutions are created next to monasteries and hospitals (e.g. Coltea, Pantelimon, Domnita Balasa girls' boarding school). In late 18th century (1775) prince Alexandru Ipsilanti is creating the Charity/poor box, in the same year a law on child protection being promoted (Livadă-Cadeschi, 2002). More institutions for children in need/orphans, for teenage-mothers, for the elderly, for the ill and the poor are created in the following years (Mănoiu, Epureanu, 1996). In 1831-1832 the organic regulations are establishing social assistance institutions and their functioning, the funding being secured from the orthodox church, from the prince court, but also from donations from the boyars/landlords (in ro. *boieri*). However, only in 1881 a social assistance service of Bucharest city hall is to be found, in charge with the protection of orphans and missing children, by placing them to foster-mothers/nannies (in ro. *doici*) or «raising mothers» (Mănoiu, Epureanu, 1996: 7; Livadă-Cadeschi, 2001). Similar services and social assistance institutions are subsequently created in rural areas, the communes being also responsi-



ble of caring for the disadvantaged (from 1894 with the law on reorganization of communes).

1.2. Second stage: the development of social work

The end of the first world war witnessed the creation of Romania as a nation-state (December 1st, 1918), which created the premises for developing the social policies, including the area of helping the disadvantaged. In 1920 the Ministry of labor, health and social welfare is established, including a Social assistance department with representatives at county and local (commune/village) level. Some 13,000 beggars and vagabonds/trumps are to be found in Bucharest alone around 1920 (Mănoiu, Epureanu, 1996: 9). The Social services act from 1930 is created the premises for decentralized social services at local level. A first census of social assistance institutions at national level from 1936 revealed only 50 public ones (Mănoiu, Epureanu, 1996: 6) the great majority (830) being private institutions (Lambru, 2002: 67). In 1941 a first database of social assistance beneficiaries from Bucharest was designed with the aim of improving the efficacy of social work interventions (Lambru, 2002). The creation of «Principesa Ileana school of social work» in 1929 was another step in the development of social work in the interwar period. In 1943 a new law organised the social assistance activity within the Ministry of labor, health and social welfare in three departments: social assistance, family protection and mother and child protection (Lambru, 2002: 71).

1.3. The third stage: the communist era, the dismantling

The new regime established after the end of second world war attempted to reduce the role of social work, mainly for ideological reasons. In a communist society, where people were expected to be equal, poverty and inequalities were not foreseeable, thus social work had a marginal role. A series of reorganisation measures started in 1947 with the division in two separate departments of health and social welfare within the former Ministry of labour, health and social welfare



(Lambru, 2002). Slowly the well developed social work system was dismantled, reorganised and responsibilities divided between various departments and ministers. The dissolution of social work education (at university level in 1952 and completely in 1969) was the final step in demolishing the profession. Professionals were replaced by civil servants, performing administrative activities and filling in forms for some emergency benefits (Zamfir, 1999). Social assistance institutions for abandoned children, people with disabilities and the elderly were the only ones surviving, but in precarious conditions. Pro-natalist measures and family friendly policies started with a decree from 1966 forbidding abortion. This measure led to many illegal abortions, a deterioration of women's reproductive health and increased child abandonment. Social policies were largely work-related and families with children were receiving support (e.g. generous child allowance, free kindergartens and education, etc.) from the state (Zamfir, 1999). The deterioration of the standard of living in the 1980s created the premises for the popular uprising in December 1989.

1.4. The fourth stage: the post-communist era, the reconstruction

After more than 25 years of oppression by the communist regime the process of reconstruction of social work started in early 1990. The Ministry of labor and social protection takes over social assistance measures in August 1990 and in November a State secretariat of handicapped is created to coordinate the social assistance activities (Lambru, 2002). Social work and sociology education are re-established in the same year at university level, but without taking into consideration the interwar heritage (Mănoiu, Epureanu, 1996). After the fall of the communist regime the images with children living in institutions/orphanages in degrading conditions broadcasted in international media revealed a shocking reality, unknown for the majority of Romanians. There were over 100,000 children estimated in residential care in 1990 (Zamfir, 1999). Given this situation and the lack of trained staff (although there were still a few graduates of social work from the communist period, before the banning of education), much of the work in the first years after 1989 was humanitarian and charity work (as in



the early times). Some of the first measures referred to people with disabilities (in 1992 a first law to protect people with disabilities/handicap was passed), but a law on social welfare/minimum income was issued only in 1995, with support from the World bank (Wb) (Zamfir, 1999). Attempting to reform the old type institutions for children proved to be a difficult task, largely undertaken as a result of pressures from the international community. Many international Ngos (e.g. Holt international, Save the children, World vision, etc.) and institutions (e.g. Eu, Usaid, Unicef, Unpd, Wb, etc.) were involved in the development of social work system (albeit the majority in child protection area) in the last decade of the 20th century. The first law of social assistance (Law n.705/2001) was only a declaration of good intentions, being replaced in 2006 (Law n.47/2006) and then in 2011 (Law n.292/2011). With the first reform in child protection which started in 1997 (ordinances n.25/1997 on adoption and n.26/1997 on children in need) a new system is slowly created. In the second decade after the fall of communism the general framework of social work services was further developed. Measures such as the establishment of the social services law (Ordinance n.68/2003), a law on prevention of social exclusion and marginalisation (Law n.116/2002) together with the introduction of several cash benefits (guaranteed minimum income, in ro. *venitul minim garantat*, in 2001, single parents allowance in 2003, heating allowance, etc.) contributed to the repositioning of social assistance. The most important provision was the creation of the National college of social workers in 2005 as the central body to regulate the profession (Law n.466/2004 on the statute of social workers) which also sets the Code of ethics to govern the practice (in 2008). Until the end of 2013 some 4,500 social workers were registered in the National register of social workers (see National college of social workers from Romania's webpage¹).

¹ www.cnasr.ro.



2. A short history of social work education in Romania

The education in social work at university level was established with support from the Association of Christian women. In 1929 appears «Principesa/Princess Ileana school of social work» appears, within the Romanian social institute (sociological organization) and with the approval of the Ministry of labour, health and social welfare. The first issue of its journal «Social work. Bulletin of Principesa Ileana school of social work» was released in the same year (until 1936 within the Romanian social institute and from 1936 to 1944 within the newly created Association for the progress of social work) presenting the curricula of the School of social work². The teaching staff comprised sociologists, doctors and historians but also people trained in schools of social work from the United States (Mănoiu, Epureanu, 1996). Until 1952 the education of social workers continued at university level and from 1952 until 1969 the duration of study was reduced to three years, as a post-high-school/vocational training. From 1969 to 1989 the education in social work was banned, since in a socialist society the social workers do not have a role. The activities they provide were considered to deal with the flaws of the capitalist/western societies (e.g. poverty, unemployment), which are not to be found in a socialist society (Zamfir, 1999; 2006; Buzducea, 2009).

Social work education was re-established at university level in early 1990, with the creation of the Departments of social work, within the Faculties of sociology and social work³ in Bucharest and Cluj and then in other universities too. The first generation of social workers graduated in 1994 (4 years study). Collaborations with other western (European and American) schools of social work contributed to the establishment and professionalization of social work education during this period (Walsh *et al.*, 2005; Crawford *et al.*, 2006). The number of universities with social work programs increases to 24 in 2006 (Zamfir, 2006) and to 23 in 2011 comprising public, private and religious-based facul-

² Recently, on the website of *Social work review* the *Social work archival project* has published scanned copies of the first issues of the journal since 1929-1930, www.swreview.ro/index.pl/social_work_archival_project_en.

³ Sociology education was also banned during the communist rule in 1974.



ties (orthodox, catholic, baptist, advent, etc.). The Social work review (*revista de asistență socială*) is re-established⁴ in 2002 at University of Bucharest, Faculty of sociology and social work. Since 2005, as a result of the Bologna process, undergraduate education in social work decreases from four years to three years of study. Master programs in social work are available nationwide on various specialized fields (e.g. counseling and clinical social work, probation, gerontological social work, social work supervision, social services management, high-risk groups, child welfare, etc.), but doctoral studies are only possible in other social sciences, usually in sociology with a topic on social work. All undergraduate programs include supervised field placements in social work institutions in each semester and at the end of each year of study. There are no aggregate data on the total number of social work graduates at national level although there are 21 generations already. A national Association of schools of social work from Romania (Asswr⁵) was created in 2010 with the support of social work teachers from the main universities (Bucharest, Cluj, Iasi and Timisoara).

3. The socio-economic situation in post-socialist Romania

In December 1989 a violent uprising overthrown the communist regime and a transition from a centralised economy to a free market-based economy began. Since in the previous decade ('80s) Romania paid all external debts having even a surplus, shortly after the regime change these savings were used to compensate some of the public demands e.g. allowing imports, subsidised goods, compensations for those who participated in the revolution and former dissidents of the regime, etc. (Zamfir, 1999). While in 1991 the external debt was merely 7.5% of Gdp, it reached 78% of Gdp in 2012 (MacroEconomyMeter, 2014), respectively 96.5 billion euros in January 2014 (National bank of Romania, 2014). The transition years

⁴ The journal declares to continue the tradition of the journal «Social work. bulletin of Principesa Ileana school of social work» edited between 1929 and 1936, as mentioned above.

⁵ See the website of the association: <http://www.asswr.ro>.



witnessed economic downturn and restructuring, unemployment (officially recognized in 1991), high levels of migration (1 million in Italy, 0.8 millions in Spain – see Sandu, Alexandru, 2009), demographic decline (from 23 millions inhabitants in 1990 (22.8 at the census from 1992) to 20.1 millions in 2011 – see the National institute of statistics, 2013 – census data), polarization/increasing inequalities (Gini coefficient from 23.31 in 1989 to 31.66 in 2004 and 27.4 in 2011, World bank⁶) and other negative social phenomena.

Since 1989 the number of pensioners increased from around 2.5 millions to 5.2 millions in 2013 (out of which about half a million are farmer pensioners), while the number of employees decreased from about 8.5 millions in 1989 to 4.3 millions in 2013. In the first years after the 1989 revolution retirement was used as a measure to reduce the pressure on the labor market in the context of economic restructuring and lay offs/unemployment (8.2% of labor force in 1994 and 7% in 2013). Employment rate for those aged over 15 years old varied from 55% in 1991 to a peak of 62.7% in 1997 and 52.3% in 2012 – 45.4 for females and 59.8 for males (World bank, 2014⁷).

Social development disparities are to be found at regional level (most developed regions are Bucharest and regions from west and center of Romania – for instance gdp per capita expressed at purchasing power standard (pps) in Bucharest is more than the Eu average (122% of Eu average in 2011, while in north-east is 29% of Eu average) – but also between rural and urban areas (Rotariu, 2009). Unlike most Eu countries, almost half of Romania's population (46% in 2011) is living in rural areas (National institute of statistics, 2013).

Surveys on the living conditions at Eu level highlight the second highest percentage of relative poverty rate (22.2% in 2011) and of those at-risk-of-poverty or social exclusion (41.7% in 2012, 52.2% for children, almost double of the Eu28 average). In terms of social protection Romania is lagging behind most Eu countries, spending less than 20% from its gdp on social protection (16.3% in 2012, from 17.6 in 2011

⁶ According to Eurostat, Gini coefficient of equivalised disposable income (Silc, ilc_di12) was 33.2% in 2012 for Romania.

⁷ Eurostat data report employment rate of those aged 20-64 and the percentage for 2012 is 63.8.



and 12.8 in 2004 and 2006), the Eu28 average being at 29%. Also, poverty is higher in rural areas than in urban areas, where slums with extreme poverty are to be found instead (Preda, 2009).

4. Welfare policy in Romania after the fall of communism

Analyses on the Romanian welfare state are rare (Deacon, 1992; Zamfir, 1999; Lazar, 2000; Preda, 2002, 2009; Stanescu, 2013; Pop, 2013) and are usually country-specific. Shortly after the change of regime in Central and Eastern Europe, Bob Deacon (1992) included Romania in a hybrid «post-communist corporatist-conservative» type, with many features inherited from the previous regime. Over the years some of the factors considered relevant in the shaping of social policies in post-communist Romania became less important (e.g. trade unions mobilization in the first decade was important, but not anymore) and the other way around (e.g. the influence of external actors was less important at the beginning, but increased afterwards – see the increase in external debt and the process of Eu accession).

In an attempt to compare Romania with the main typologies of welfare states, Lazar (2000) concludes that Romanian welfare state is «looking for an identity», but with many similarities with the southern/latin rim model previously identified by Leibfried (1993) and Ferrera (1997) (e.g. clientelism, proclaimed social rights, implementation challenges for social policies, etc.) and moving towards the liberal welfare regime from Esping-Andersen's typology (1990). The trend towards the liberal welfare regime was also identified by Preda (2002), who characterizes the Romanian social policies as reflecting a «governmental culture of poverty».

In an analysis of Eu27 countries from the perspective of income level (expressed as Gdp at Ppp) and distribution, Cantillon (2011: 434), identifies four clusters, including Romania into a «poor inegalitarian», along with the Baltic states, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Portugal and Cyprus. Another study carried out by Kati Kuitto (2011) who analyses welfare expenditures in Eu28, considers Romania to be in a group of «developing Eastern European welfare states», along with the Baltic



States, Bulgaria, Poland and Slovakia, all sharing a low social spending (especially low on services).

4.1. Social insurances: pensions, health care, unemployment

Romania inherited from the communist regime a comprehensive welfare system, predominantly insurance based/work-related (pay-as-you-go pension system), following the logic of full-employment (Zamfir, 1999; Sotiropoulos, Pop, 2007). Variations in earnings were limited (the ratio between minimum/lowest and maximum/highest wage was 1 to 5), thus reducing inequalities. Farmers had a separate pension system, but pensions were significantly lower than state pensions (Marginean, 1999). With the growing number of pensioners the reform of the pension system started in 2001 (Law n.17/2000), with a first increase of the retirement age from 57 to 60 for women and from 62 to 65 for men; at the same time to determine the value of pension the entire working period was taken into consideration and related to average earnings (Pop, 2005). Since 2006 mandatory private pensions were introduced, to tackle the foreseeable crisis of the public pension system, while the voluntary private pensions are underrepresented (around 5% of the employees had a private voluntary pension in 2011).

The universal health care system (tax-based), though of poor quality, that existed in communist Romania has been replaced in 1997 with health social insurances (Vladescu *et al.*, 2008). Romania is spending the least on health as a percentage of its Gdp among the Eu countries (around 5.5%, according to Eurostat), despite having poor performances in terms of health indicators (Vladescu *et al.*, 2008; Popescu, 2009).

Before 1990 unemployment was not recognized, Catalin Zamfir (1999) suggesting the presence of «hidden unemployment» (state enterprises being «forced» to employ new staff although they did not need it and then, in shifts putting them «on hold», on unpaid/partially paid leave). Only in 1991 unemployment was officially recognized and an unemployment allowance was introduced (Law n.1/1991). In Romania official unemployment rate is rather low (7.3% in 2013, according to Eurostat) compared with the Eu28 average (10.9% in 2013), which is not matched by the spending on active labor measures (Preda, 2009).



Also the major migration wave after the 2007 Eu accession has lead many young people (or at least employment aged) to emigrate (National institute of statistics, 2013), reducing the pressure on the internal labor market. Unemployment benefits are established based on the minimum wage and are partially wage-related, the duration of entitlement varying between 6 (for newly graduates, at 75% of minimum wage) and 12 months (Law n.76/2002). Some incentives are available for employers hiring newly graduates, people over 45 years old, former convicts, people with disabilities or unemployed people.

4.2. Social assistance

As mentioned above, the social work system started to be gradually rebuilt after 1989. The first laws were aiming at improving the situation of people with disabilities (in 1992), followed by the poor (in 1995 a law on social welfare), children in need (1997) and eventually the social work system in general (2001). In the first decade after the revolution child protection was on top of the public agenda. Due to external pressures from international bodies (e.g. the European Union, the European commission, European parliament, Unicef, Usaid, Wb, etc.) and with major funding (e.g. Phare, Usaid, World learning etc.) the child protection system significantly improved over the last 25 years. Although many cash benefits were introduced (more for children), their value is rather low.

The second decade of the post-communist era is marked by the expansion of social assistance legislation to include previously neglected groups, such as: single-parent families (Ordinance n.105/2003), youth at risk of social exclusion and those who lived in special protection institutions/residential care (Law n.116/2002 on prevention of social marginalization), victims of domestic violence (Law n.217/2003), children whose parents migrated (Order n.219/2006), those with autistic spectrum disorders (Law n.151/2010), etc. Despite this legislative boom, the implementations were not always consistent and continuous (e.g. unclear or late norms of implementation, inadequate funding, etc.). Some groups continue to be poorly addressed by current programs (e.g. the elderly, drug users). Once Romania officially joined the Eu in 2007



most international donors (e.g. Usaid, World learning, Unaid, Unfpa, Unodc, the Global fund) left the country for other areas in greater need. At the same time the global economic crisis created the premise to carry out further adjustments, which seems to characterize the third decade after the regime change.

The main challenges of the social work system include (Zamfir, 1999, 2006; Arpinte, 2006; Buzducea, 2009): inadequate funding, staff, imbalances between services and benefits, disparities in the provision and institutional challenges.

5. Recent challenges

In July 2010 to comply with International monetary fund (Imf), Eu and Wb conditions for a 20 billion euros bailout, the government cut overall public spending by 25%. Several cash benefits for children and families were cut by 15% (e.g. child rearing indemnity for working mothers), for others the eligibility criteria were tightened (e.g. means-tested family allowances), while others have been dissolved (e.g. birth allowance, newborns trousseau). Even the universality of the child allowance was questioned only civil society pressures saving it. Wages of all public sector employees were cut by 25% between July 2010 and January 2011 and other work related benefits were abolished, further diminishing incomes. Around 100,000 civil servants were fired and new hiring frozen. Since January 2011 wages in the public sector increased by 15% and in June 2012 (just before local elections) another 8% were added still not achieving the previous level (before the cut).

In the field of social work a new law was issued in December 2011 (Law n. 292) and (with Wb support) a new reform strategy for 2011-2013 has been elaborated aiming, among others, at reducing public spending on social assistance by 0.8% of Gdp. Also the new legislative package is imposing more conditions on the beneficiaries of services and benefits, enhancing the individual responsibility and promoting a more active participation from the recipients of benefits. A preference is given to services over benefits, but no specific actions are mentioned to comply with this regulation. The same laxness is to be found in the provision that all administrative units «may have» social work services.



Also, contracting out services to private or non-profit providers is encouraged. In order to improve administration and reduce fraud and errors the social inspection is receiving a more important role in monitoring the compliance with the new regulations.

The general political discourse is stigmatizing towards those relying on benefits from the state (not only social assistance recipients, but also pensioners). A national control of the social inspection on the minimum income guaranteed scheme in 2010 revealed that 12% were illegal beneficiaries fueling this perspective. As a result of these measures some foster care families returned the children in care to public institutions and social workers and other professionals from child protection services with very low wages quit jobs to work abroad or in other domains. Also, some 1,500 people from public social work services were dismissed. All these lead to a worsening of the quality of social services provided. As a result of the new legislation the number of children receiving means-tested family allowance dropped 2.5 times (by 40%) from December 2010 to December 2011, the same ratio being also in terms of expenses.

6. Conclusion

Social work in Romania has a long-standing tradition. As elsewhere in the world the first initiatives to help the disadvantaged are to be found in the religious charity. Following a flourishing time in the interwar period that culminated with the creation of the first school of social work, the communist regime banned social work education and the profession. After the fall of the communism in December 1989, faculties of social work were quickly re-established (in 1990) and a (long) reconstruction process began. Historically, we identified four stages in the development of social work in Romania: 1) the early years of the charity era; 2) the development of social work; 3) the communist era when social work was dismantled and 4) the post-communist era witnessing the reconstruction of the profession. Re-started in 1990 social work education at university level continued to develop throughout the transition period coming to its maturity. Faculties of social work are well connected with international schools of social work, but doctoral



studies in social work are not yet available. The socio-economic hardships of the transition years marked the reconstruction of social work services and the welfare policies in general as in other former communist countries (Zavirsek, 2014). In a period of expanding welfare provisions, the global economic crisis from 2008 and the austerity measures adopted to respond to it hit also the social work system and welfare policies (Pop, 2013), with major external influences.

Romanian social policies are still looking for an identity, but social work continues its reconstruction after the communist blackout. At general level, the move toward minimalist welfare state seems to be accentuated under the neoliberal pressures (from internal and external actors). Major progresses were achieved in terms of services provided, quality of social work education and the recognition of social work profession, although there is room for improvement (e.g. services for certain categories, evidence-based practice and policies, doctoral studies in social work, adequate wages for social workers).

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