

POVERTY DYNAMICS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The article focuses on the poverty dynamics in post-communist Romania. In the first part it has been analyzed the current economic and sociological literature regarding poverty. In the second part which is empirically oriented there has been analyzed few relevant statistical data on poverty using both the World Bank data and the World Value Survey data.*

Key words: *Romania, Poverty, Central and Eastern Europe, World Bank, World Value Survey.*

JEL Classification: *I3*

1. Introduction

Economists seem to have very little useful to say about why some countries grow and others do not. It is always possible to construct a rationale for what happened in each place. But the truth is that the specialists are largely incapable to understand very well why things suddenly fire up (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011).

Given that economic growth requires manpower and brainpower, believes Banerjee and Duflo, it seems plausible, however that whenever spark occurs, it is more likely to catch fire if women and men are properly educated, well fed, and healthy, and if citizens feel secure and confident enough to invest in their children, and let them leave home to get the new jobs in the city (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011). If sociologists are focused to understand the causes of the urban and rural poverty and to propose social policies capable to fight against it, the economists are focused on issues related to development aid for poor countries.

On the left side of the political spectrum, Jeffrey Sachs wants to spend more on aid, and generally believes that things like fertilizers, bed nets, computers in schools should be given away and that poor people should be enticed to do what Sachs (the UN and WHO) think is good for them. For example, children should be given meals at school to encourage their parents to send them to school regularly.

On the right side of the political spectrum, William Easterley, along with Moyo, the American Enterprise Institute, and many others, oppose aid, not only because it corrupts governments but also because at a more basic level, they believe that we should respect people's freedom. If they don't want something, there is no point in forcing it upon them. If children do not want to go to school it must be because there is no point in getting educated (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011).

The difference between Sachs and Easterly's points of view stem from a different answer to an economic question. Is it possible to get trapped in poverty? Sachs believes that some countries, because of geography or bad luck, are trapped in poverty. They are poor because they are poor. Easterly, by contrast points out that

many countries that used to be poor are now rich, and vice versa. If the condition of poverty is not permanent, he argues, then the idea of poverty trap that inexorably ensnares poor countries is bogus (Banerjee and Duflo, 2011).

2. The definition of the poverty

Before going into the deep empirical analyses of the poverty there is a need to define the phenomenon.

The most common meaning of poverty is “a state of permanent lack of necessary resources for ensures a way of life considered both decent and acceptable on the level of a community” (Zamfir, 1995). But in a much-quoted book, the British economist Amartya Sen considers that “we need to look at the poverty rather from the perspective of basic capabilities deprivation than from the view of income as standard criterion for identifying poverty. The poverty viewed from the perspective of capabilities does not imply a denial of the sensitive vision that low income is clearly one of the major causes of poverty because the lack of income could be a main reason for one’s depriving by his/her capabilities” (Sen, 2004).

The first argument used by the British economist for poverty as deprivation of capabilities is that deprivation has an intrinsic importance when the poverty viewed from the perspective of low income has an instrumental importance. Secondly there are influences on deprivations others than low income. Thirdly, the instrumental relationship between low income and low capabilities varies between communities and even between different families and persons.

Sen considers that the relationship between income and capability is highly affected by age, gender, place and epidemiological environment. The age, the invalidity and illness could reduce the capability of a person to produce income. The real poverty (that one caused by capabilities deprivation) could be more intense than that produced in the space of income (Sen, 2004).

3. The absolute and the relative poverty

The distinction between absolute and relative poverty has been central to post-war debates to define poverty. Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree, the pioneers of modern poverty research, consider that the absolute poverty is the lack of sufficient money to meet basic physical needs. “As its most basic, considers the British researcher Ruth Lister, absolute poverty is defined in terms of survival; more commonly it refers to subsistence, linked to a basic standard of physical capacity necessary for production (paid work) and reproduction (the bearing and nurturing of children). Nutrition is central to such definitions...A family is poor if it cannot afford to eat” (Lister, 2004).

Rowntree tried firstly to measure the minimum living standard. He used the same indicators in three surveys done in York, United Kingdom, in 1899, 1936 and 1950. He discovered in 1899 that 1/3 of the households was in absolute poverty, but in 1950 he found that only 1.5% of the households were in absolute poverty. His conclusion was that poverty decreased substantially in England (Pop, 2005).

The measurement of absolute poverty implies the elaboration of a poverty threshold which is a formal reference point which considers the consumption as the necessary minimum for a person, household or family.

The definition of poverty in the absolute meaning implies arbitrary suppositions. It is difficult to offer accurate definitions of the nutritional minimum of every person because it depends on psychological factors or on the level of physical activity. But we must add that the organizations which fight against starvation as Red Cross and Oxfam use the absolute poverty in their operational plans (Hardwick, Longmead, Khan, 2002).

Townsend developed a relative definition of poverty in his monumental work *Poverty in United Kingdom* where he criticizes the narrow subsistence notion of needs separated from their social context, upon which absolute definitions of poverty were based. Townsend considers that "individuals, families, and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong." (Townsend, 1979).

The European Commission's definition, adopted in 1984, is similar in tone: "The poor shall be taken to mean persons, families and groups of persons whose resources (material, cultural and social) are so limited as to exclude them from the minimum acceptable way of life in the Member State which they live". Unlike Townsend, it does not spell out explicitly the dimension of social participation, which is key to the concept of relative deprivation upon which the definition of poverty is built (Lister, 2004).

Townsend suggested a deprivation index, calculated as a sum of different indicators concerning 60 activities/problems of a household (diet, clothes, health, entertainment, transportation). Each household gets a score for the deprivation index. Then he related the deprivation index with the income level. The poverty threshold is that income level below which the degree of deprivation decreases dramatically (Pop, 2005).

We must add that in the current research on poverty, the relative poverty threshold is calculated as a percentage (50%, 60%, and 70%) of the mean of consumption expenditures of a society. For instance, in United Kingdom, the official threshold of poverty is at 60% of the median consumption (Pop, 2005).

An alternative to the methodologies of poverty calculations based on the suppositions of the researchers on minimum needs and consumption is to ask people to estimate the income which would ensure them a decent minimum standard of living. This type of threshold has been used by a group of Dutch researchers from the University of Leyden under the leadership of Van Praag. The advantage of this methodology is that it expresses more directly the needs and aspirations of the people as it is crystallized on the community level (Zamfir, 1995). But using the scale of subjective poverty has some risks. Those with higher incomes tend to underestimate themselves concerning poverty degree, while the individuals with lower income tend to overestimation. There is a lack of correlation between someone's monetary income and its own appreciation of the poverty. That is why using subjective poverty scale is not very useful when the researcher does not know the real income of the subjects (Pop, 2005).

4. Poverty in the Central and Eastern Europe

Poverty is not distributed evenly around the world. Specific regions suffer its worst effects. In Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, hundreds of millions of poor people struggle for survival. Periodic disasters, such as the 2004 tsunami that devastated regions on the Indian Ocean, continued to kill hundreds of thousands of poor and vulnerable people. The divide between the global North and South, between the world's richest and the rest has widened (Yunus, 2007). But the focus of this article is Romania, a former socialist country located in Central and Eastern Europe. That is why there should be added few things about the poverty from this region.

The social and economic changes of the Central and Eastern Europe in the last three decades have as consequences that few got rich and others became poorer. Of course, there must add that the last three decades is also a period when a new middle class raised. But the focus is on the poor people and the very rich people. The former are the losers and the latter are the winners of the period of transition from planned economy to capitalism and market economy. Could it be said that at the start of this transition period all the actors had the opportunity to get rich? The answer of this analysis is rather negative. Apparently, all actors had chances. But the enrichment is a process which depends on few factors as cultural capital and social capital.

During socialism, the differences between salaries were very small. The party-state offered jobs for almost everybody. The unemployment was officially zero but probably that realistic is to say that the unemployment rate was fewer than 5%. In the last three decades the economy of the former communist countries restructured and that is why many people lost their jobs. Few areas which depended on an industry or a factory were damaged by the power of these transformations. In those areas unemployment and poverty are unfortunately the new socio-economic realities.

The time of socialism was an age when people had salaries but the offer of services and products was much reduced. Now in the market economy there is the opportunity to choose from a very large offer of products and services but just few actors have the amount of money which allow them to buy everything they want. Of course, there are many who cannot afford to buy new clothes or even go hungry in their beds many times a week.

A team of social scientists coordinated by Ivan Szelenyi conducted comparative research based on surveys in six post-communist countries (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Russia) between 1999 and 2000. The quantitative data included samples of sub-populations, including the poor and the Roma. In addition to survey data, they conducted ethnographic studies in all these countries in the same period.

Analyzing poverty based on the data of the mentioned research, the Hungarian sociologist Ivan Szelenyi said that: "Both the extent and the character of poverty in Eastern Europe appear to have changed with the transition from socialism to a market economy. There has been not only a substantial increase in the proportion of the population living in extreme poverty, but according to some commentators, the actual character of poverty has changed as well. The conventional wisdom

among social scientists is that during socialism poverty was mainly a life-cycle phenomenon. Thus, families with large numbers of young children, the temporarily or permanently disabled people, as well as the elderly tended to be poor. Today, however, social classes, ethnicity and/or gender appear to play a more significant role than in the past in terms of predicting or explaining poverty.” (Szelenyi, 2002). Analyzing statistical data, the researchers discovered that in all countries in 1993, people experienced a similar deterioration of their living standards compared to 1988. But by 2000, the trend is reversed in countries where more rigorous liberal reforms were implemented, as Poland and Hungary, and in countries with a much slower progression towards liberal mode of capitalism as Bulgaria, Romania and Russia.

An interesting distinction made by the researchers is between biological poverty (not enough money for food) and social poverty (not enough money for clothes). The difference between the financial situations of the least and the most educated is at the level of biological poverty in Romania, Russia and Bulgaria and at the level of social poverty in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

Concerning the same research, the Bulgarian sociologist Petar Mitev considers that “the social-biological risk factors (age, gender, and children) are not pushed away but are rather transformed by the new poverty paradigm. The emerging social-economic context reinforces the effects of such factors, particularly in certain countries. A new and unexpected phenomenon is emerging: the formation of an age-based underclass in Southeast Europe and Russia. Except for Poland, all countries exhibit symptoms of feminized poverty, but the strongest poverty risk is ethnicity. The poverty of Roma in Southeast Europe is reaching catastrophic levels, and we are currently witnessing the formation of an ethnic underclass” (Szelenyi, 2002).

Analyzing the birth of the underclass in Central and Eastern Europe, Henrik Domanski, one of the researchers involved in the study of poverty coordinated by Szelenyi notices that “the distinctive culture of America’s black underclass is hardly comparable to the enclaves of material deprivation found in Moscow. Previous research carried out in local communities in Poland reveals a good picture about what is referred to as systemic context. What such studies show is a much higher incidence of poverty in rural areas contrary to the Western countries, where poverty predominates in the inner city...we also found little evidence of an association between poverty and long-term unemployment, which was predicted to produce high rates of marginality and economic deprivation...the underclass debate in America and Britain has been plagued by the ambiguity of the concept, stemming from multiple definitions of the term. Not surprisingly, we found that the poor are deeply embedded in the social stratification structure of Eastern European societies. This fact justified our attempts to uncover whether an underclass was in formation in these countries...If one holds that intergenerational transmission of poverty is the sine qua non of an underclass, the applicability of this term to the case of Eastern Europe must be ruled out” (Szelenyi, 2002, p.57).

The sociologists in the team of Szelenyi noticed some anomalies in the post-communist countries. Firstly, poverty is linked to property ownership. For instance, 79 percent of residence owners in Bulgaria and 32 percent of owners in Hungary do not have enough money for food and for clothes. They found such discrepancies in

Romania and Russia (like in Bulgaria) and in Poland and Slovakia (like in Hungary). There is no linkage between driving an automobile, having a telephone or a refrigerator and poverty. The researchers notice that “the prevalence of residence, car, telephone, TV sets and refrigerator ownership distinguishes poverty in former Second World from poverty in the Third World. Real estate ownership is not in itself a stratification distinction. To the contrary, widespread ownership reflects the degree of social homogeneity achieved in former socialist countries...A contradiction emerges between ownership and income, a contradiction that materializes in the empty fridge, the parked car, and the unheated dwelling” (Szelenyi, 2002).

Another anomaly is that high social status does not ensure money for food. If a university professor in any normal country has enough money to shop for potatoes or mushrooms, in transitional societies a professor must plant potatoes in his or her garden or go mushrooming in the forest. Also, urban residents commonly raised domestic animals and poultry in their dwellings. The researchers conclude that “in cities and villages alike, people grow or breed agriculture products at home, and such practices are nearly as typical among the most educated as among the least educated. A process of de-intellectualization of an individual’s everyday activities parallels whereby cities are becoming countrified, or agrarian, on a global and social scale. Our findings suggest a strange type of poverty that is combined with property ownership, as well as a unique status of people who lack access to even most elementary items” (Szelenyi, 2002, p.21).

5. Poverty Dynamics in Romania

The main objective of this article is to understand the evolution of the poverty in post-communist Romania. After the Revolution of December 1989 there have been created conditions for a market economy and a liberal democracy.

Robert Kaplan, an American journalist who visited Romania both in 1981 and 2013 described the essence of the country in his book “In Europe’s Shadow”. For him Romania constitutes one of those ethnic nations like Georgia and Armenia that have miraculously survived in the millennia despite being oppressed, overrun and vanquished.

Between his visits during Ceausescu’s period and after Ceausescu’s regime fall, Romania had seen several evolutions. In 1990 Kaplan noticed how Romania which denied religion during socialism time, had been transformed into an open-air church, with roses, tulips and beeswax candles at sacrificial payment offerings in honor of the revolutionaries who had died fighting Ceausescu. But by the late 1990s downtown Bucharest would boast casinos, topless clubs, and Italian fashions in boutique windows that in one instance featured live models. As added a former Romanian diplomat quoted by Kaplan, the Romanians are resourceful, adaptable, exaggerated, pseudo cosmopolitan emigres in a new, global world (Kaplan, 2016).

For Kaplan's point of view Romania in 2013 is a totally different country than 1981's Romania. Between his 1981 and 2013 visits Romania joined NATO and the European Union. Using few suggestive graphs, it could be noticed how market economy and the economic growth transformed the society after the fall of the Communism. For the building of the following graphs there have been used data from the World Bank (www.theglobaleconomy.com) and the World Value Survey, the 7th wave.

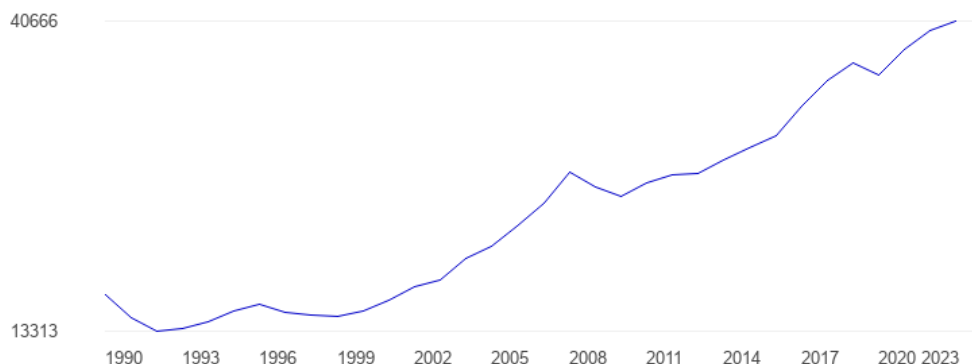


Figure 1. The GDP per capita evolution in Romania (1990-2023).

Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

From this first figure it could be noticed that with the exception of the first years after December 1989 Revolution when GDP per capita decreased because of the structural transformation of the Romanian economy the indicator increased and it could be noticed a much higher increase after 2007 when Romania joined the EU.

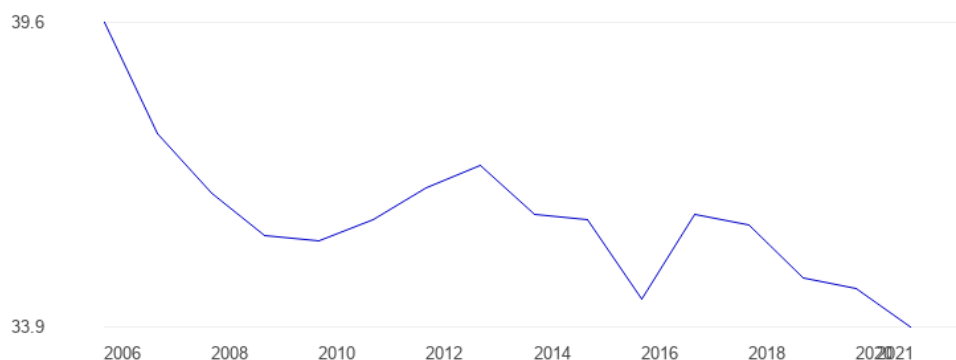


Figure2. The Gini index evolution in Romania (2006-2021).

Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

The Gini index which expresses that the inequality level decreased from 39.6 to 33.9 which means that in this period there have been created the conditions for the raising of the new middle class.

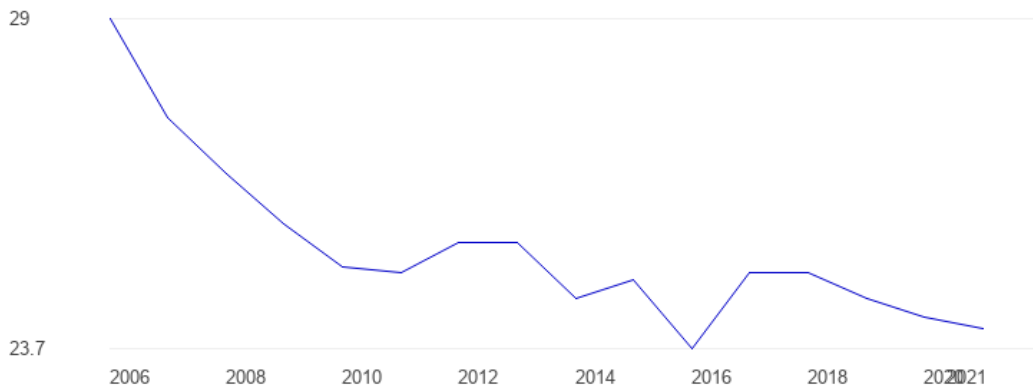


Figure3. Top ten earners. Romania.

Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

In the same time the percentage of the top ten earners (first decile) decreased from 29% to 23.7%.

But what about the poverty level?

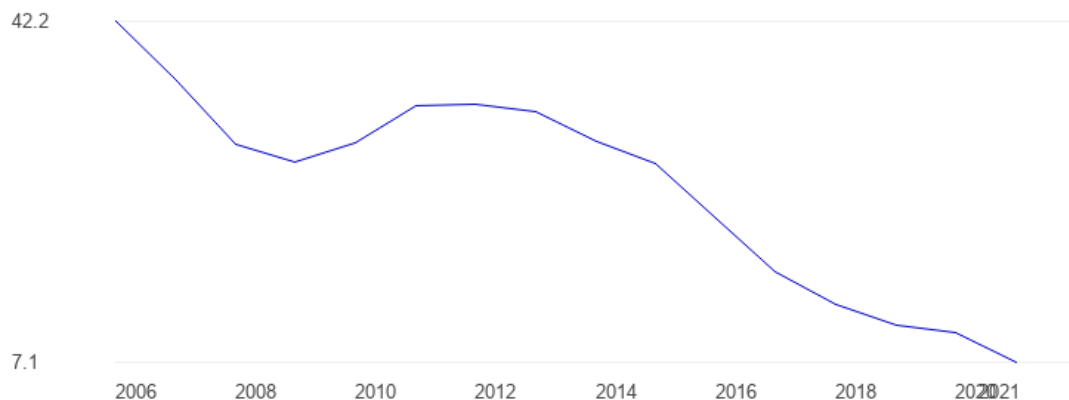


Figure4. Poverty evolution (the 5.50USD per day as a poverty line).

Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

From this very suggestive figure it could be noticed that the poverty decreased from 42.2% in 2006 to 7.1% in 2021.

From all these graphs there should be concluded that the poverty decreased and

in the same time the inequality level did the same. The main factor for these evolutions is the economic growth of Romania which has few causes. First the development of the market economy, the increasing of the investments, the technological change, the development of the economic freedom and the joining of the European Union. The same evolution happened in the former socialist countries of the Central and Eastern Europe that joined the EU such as Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, or Bulgaria (the graphs that illustrate these evolutions are in the Annex).

In this case it is difficult to understand the political discourse of the enemies of the EU from the Central and Eastern Europe. Many populist politicians tried to speak in their discourse about the troubles caused by the European Union to their countries, the huge Brussels' bureaucracy, and the huge authority of the European Institutions that suppressed the national authority of the countries. All these economies experienced an increase in the GDP per capita and a decrease in the level of the absolute poverty.

Another objective of the article is the understanding of the poverty and prosperity of the different development regions of Romania.

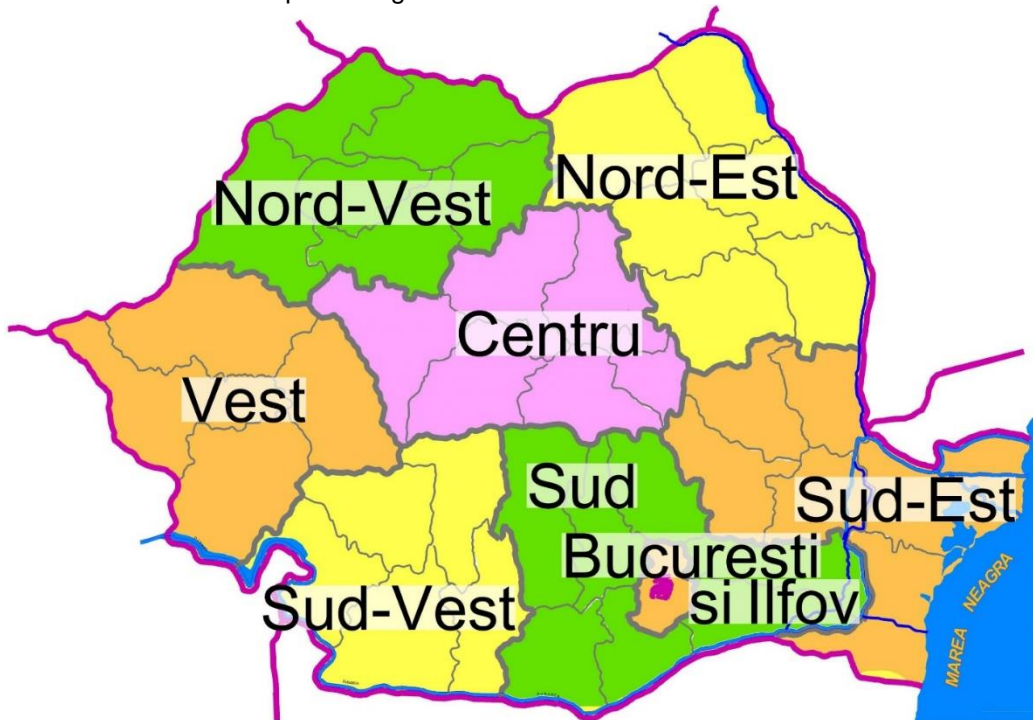


Figure5. The development regions of Romania.

Source:

https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regiunile_de_dezvoltare_ale_Rom%C3%A2niei/

From the figure 5 it could be noticed that Romania has 8 development regions. The most developed regions are the Bucharest-Ilfov region, West, North-West and Center and the less developed are North-East, South-East, South Muntenia and South West as graph 6 and 7 point out. In 2018 the GDP per capita of the Bucharest – Ilfov region was 3 times higher than that from North East, South East and South Muntenia and South West (Oltenia). Also, in the graphs 6 and 7 there could be noticed that the percentage of the active people is higher in Banat, Transylvania and the capital region, but in Moldova, Dobrogea and Oltenia the percentage is lower. The unemployment rate is higher in Muntenia and Oltenia but much smaller in Banat, Transylvania and Bucharest. There are also differences between salaries. The highest average salary is in the capital region and the smallest in South Muntenia.

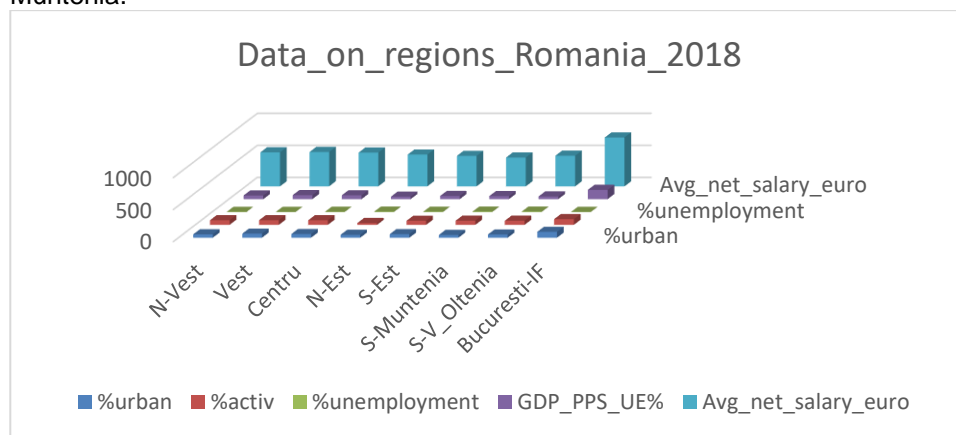


Figure 6. The development regions data. The case of Romania (2018).

Source: author's own calculations

Region	North-West	West	Center	North-East	South-East	South-Muntenia	Oltenia	Bucharest-Ilfov
%urban	52.4	63.1	57.38	45.52	55.6	43	49.8	90.8
%active	72.7	72.1	72.3	28.59	63.8	65	64.6	89.4
%unemployment	2.3	1.8	2.9	4.8	4.6	6	5.9	1.2
GDP per capita (PPS) reported to the mean of UE's GDP per capita (PPS)	57	63	60	39	50	47	42	145
Average net salary in Euro	531	536	527.13	496	475	450	478	763

Figure 7. The development regions data. The case of Romania in 2018.

Source: author's own calculations

Another two figures could add few details between the regional disparities of Romania.

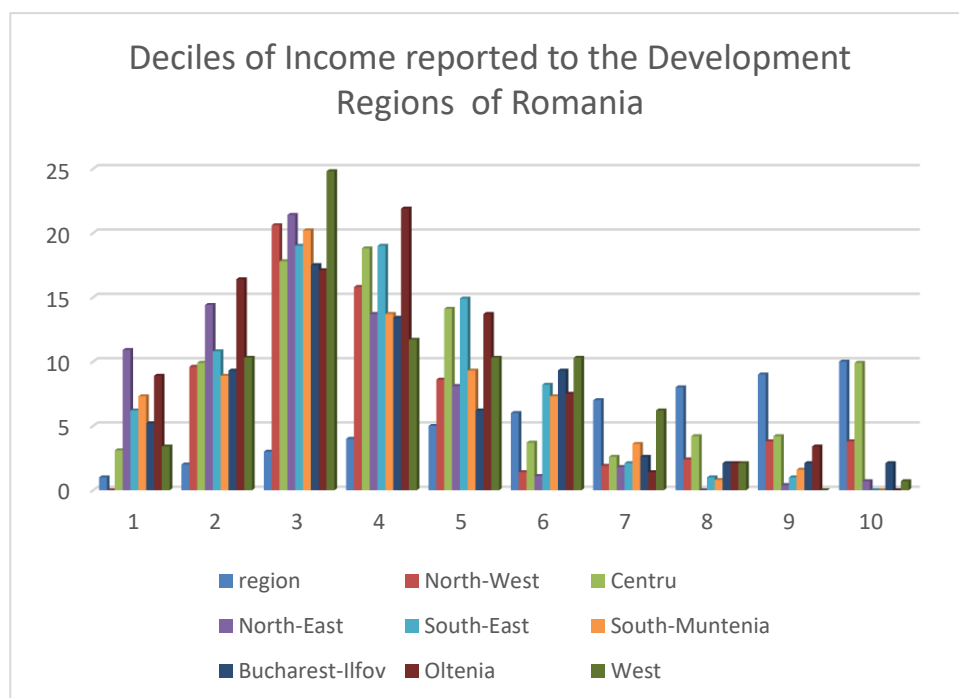


Figure8. Deciles of Income. The Development regions of Romania (2018). **Source:** author's own calculations using the World Value Survey data (wave7)

region	NR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
North-West	27.8	4.3.	9.6	20.6	15.8	8.6	1.4	1.9	2.4	3.8	3.8
Centru	11.5	3.1	9.9	17.8	18.8	14.1	3.7	2.6	4.2	4.2	9.9
North-East	27.7	10.9	14.4	21.4	13.7	8.1	1.1	1.8	0	0.4	0.7
South-East	17.9	6.2	10.8	19	19	14.9	8.2	2.1	1	1	0
South-Muntenia	27.4	7.3	8.9	20.2	13.7	9.3	7.3	3.6	0.8	1.6	0
Bucharest-Ilfov	30.4	5.2	9.3	17.5	13.4	6.2	9.3	2.6	2.1	2.1	2.1
Oltenia	7.5	8.9	16.4	17.1	21.9	13.7	7.5	1.4	2.1	3.4	0
West	20	3.4	10.3	24.8	11.7	10.3	10.3	6.2	2.1	0	0.7

Figure9. Deciles of Income. The Development regions of Romania (2018). **Source:** author's own calculations using the World Value Survey data (wave7)

From the figures 8 and 9 there could be noticed that the poverty is spread not only in North East, South West, South East and South Muntenia but in all regions of Romania, but the richest Romanians seem to live in the South East, Center, North West and Bucharest-Ilfov regions.

But where live the less educated and the higher educated Romanians?

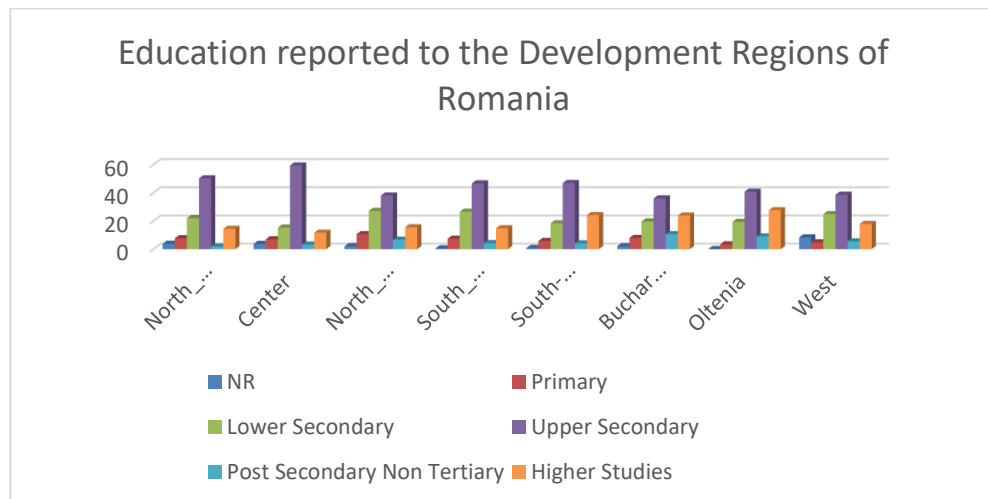


Figure10. Education. The Development regions of Romania (2018).

Source: author's own calculations using the World Value Survey data (wave7)

	NR	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary	Post-Secondary Non-Tertiary	Higher Studies
North_West	3.8	7.7	22	50.2	1.9	14.4
Center	3.7	6.9	15.3	59.3	3.2	11.6
North_East	2.1	10.6	27.1	38	6.7	15.5
South_East	0.5	7.4	26.5	46.6	4.2	14.8
South-Muntenia	0.8	5.8	18.3	46.9	4.1	24.1
Bucharest-Ilfov	2.1	7.9	19.6	36	10.6	23.8
Oltenia	0	3.4	19.3	40.7	9	27.6
West	8.3	4.8	24.8	38.6	5.5	17.9

Figure11. Education. The Development regions of Romania (2018).

Source: author's own calculations using the World Value Survey data (wave7)

It is rather a paradoxical situation that in the North-East and South West (Oltenia) the percentage of the Romanians with higher education is higher than those from the North West and Center. But the percentage of those with higher education from Bucharest-Ilfov is one of the highest in the national context. It could also be noticed that the percentage of the Romanians with upper education (those who graduated the high school) is higher in the counties of Transylvania and Banat-Crisana (North West and Center regions).

6. Conclusions.

The poverty in Romania, a former socialist country from the Central and Eastern Europe, has similar evolutions as the other countries from this region such as Hungary, Slovakia, Poland or Bulgaria. The poverty in the Central and Eastern Europe is linked to social class, gender, age and ethnicity. As graphs used in the empirical part of the article proved there was a dramatic decrease of the poverty after 1989 but this decrease was much more noticeable after Romania joined the European Union in 2007.

The main causes of this interesting phenomenon are the powerful economic growth linked to big investments, the technological change and the market economy, the increase of the economic freedom, the belonging to the free economic space of the European Union and the social policies performed by the Romanian governments after 1989. Also, the migration of few millions of Romanians in Western Europe had an impact on the favorable evolution.

But not only poverty decreased because social inequality decreased, too. Especially after 2007 it could be noticeable the raising of the new middle class. Behind the statistical figures it is obvious that in the last decade Romanians traveled more abroad and more people spent vacations abroad.

Even all these facts Romania is still one of the poorest countries in the European Union. But the social and economic difference between Romania and the rich countries from the West side of the continent decreased in the last three decades. If someone focuses on the difference between the developments regions of Romania it could notice that there are relatively big economic differences between the Transylvania and Banat regions and the capital region of Bucharest that are richer in comparison to Moldova, Oltenia, Dobrogea and the south part of Muntenia. Bucharest region is one of the top ten regions of Europe in terms of GDP per capita today. It could be noticed that in Transylvania and Banat-Crișana there are more high school graduates than in the other Romanian regions but in Oltenia, Moldova and Bucharest the number of the higher studies graduates is higher than in Transylvania and Banat counties.

Behind all these good things the future evolution of the poverty in Romania depends on the speed of the economic growth, the investments, and the development of the education, the evolution of the global economy and the economic and social policies of the Romanian governments.

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ANNEX

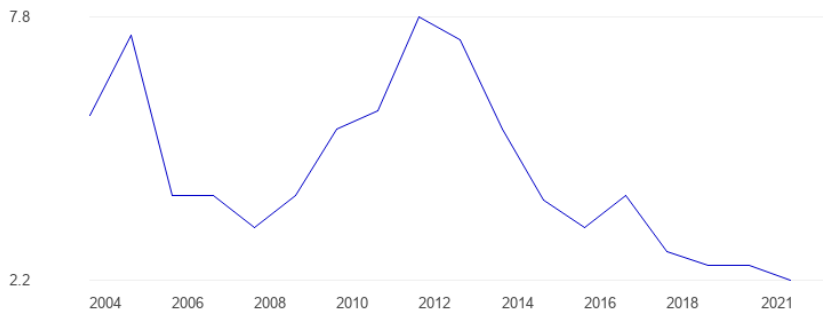


Figure 12. Poverty evolution in Hungary (the 5.50USD per day as a poverty line).

Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

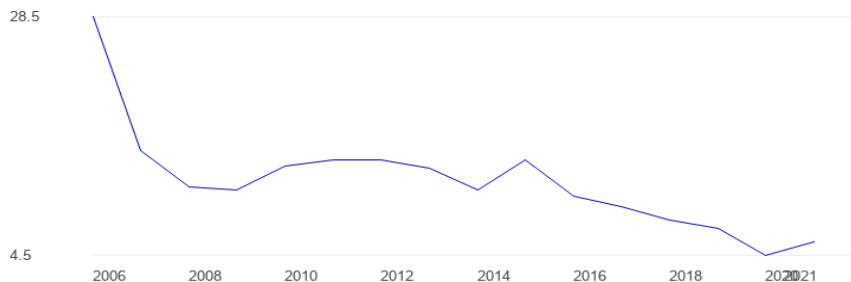


Figure 13. Poverty evolution in Bulgaria (the 5.50USD per day as a poverty line).

Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

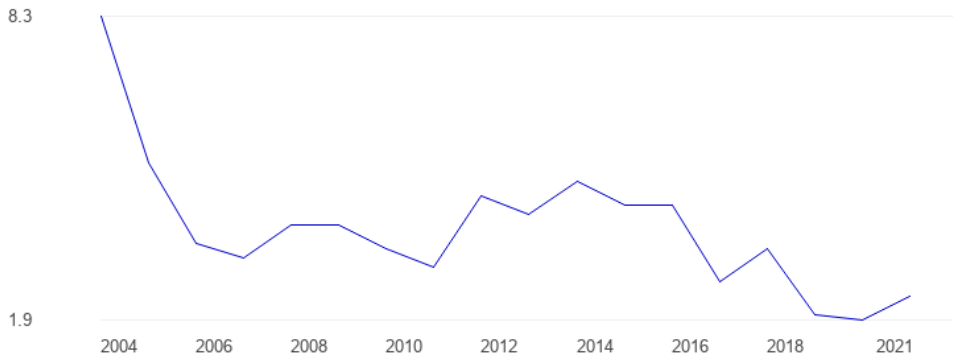


Figure14. Poverty evolution in Slovakia (the 5.50USD per day as a poverty line).
Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com

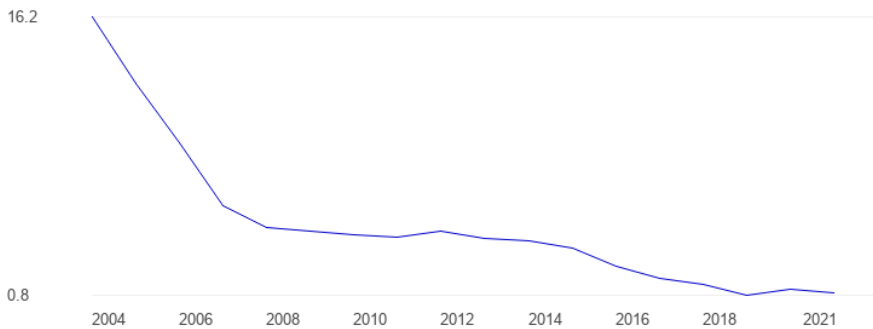


Figure15. Poverty evolution in Poland (the 5.50USD per day as a poverty line).
Source: www.theglobaleconomy.com