



# Journal of Community Positive Practices

Year XXIV  
No. 4/2024

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## JOURNAL OF COMMUNITY POSITIVE PRACTICES

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**Bucharest, Romania**  
CNCIS: cod 045/2006

Editor-in-Chief: Valeriu IOAN-FRANC

Cover design: Nicolae LOGIN

Design and layout: Luminița LOGIN

Phone: 0040-21 318 24 38; Fax: 0040-21 318 24 32;

e-mail: edituraexpert@gmail.com”

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ASSOCIATION FOR SOCIAL  
AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT  
AND PROMOTION CATALACTICA

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ISSN 1582-9344 (printed version); ISSN 2247-6571 (electronic version), indexed in

Scopus; Google Scholar; Ideas RePeC; Eonpapers; CEEOL; ProQuest; Scipio; Questia; WorldCat

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# EXAMINING THE WORK NEED SATISFACTION SCALE IN THE ONLINE PLATFORM GIG WORK ENVIRONMENT: A STRUCTURAL AND CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

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Lucian SFETCU<sup>1</sup>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2024.4.01>

**Abstract:** *The Work Need Satisfaction Scale (WNSS) is a widely validated instrument designed to assess the satisfaction of basic psychological needs in the workplace, as informed by the Psychology of Working Theory and Self-Determination Theory. While it has demonstrated robust psychometric properties across diverse populations, its applicability to online gig workers—a growing segment of the labor market—remains underexplored. In this study, we examined the factor structure of the WNSS among 513 European Union-based online gig workers recruited through the Clickworker platform. Confirmatory factor analysis of the original 20-item, five-factor model (survival, social contribution, autonomy, competence, and relatedness) indicated a poor fit in this population. Subsequent exploratory factor analysis suggested a more parsimonious 12-item, three-factor solution (survival, social contribution, and competence). The autonomy and relatedness dimensions, central to traditional employment contexts, did not emerge as well-formed factors in the gig work sample. These findings highlight the need to adapt the WNSS to better capture the nuances of online platform work. Future research should refine the scale's items to more accurately reflect the gig economy's unique interplay of algorithmic management, flexible scheduling, and virtual social interactions. Such adaptations can inform interventions and platform designs that promote greater need satisfaction and well-being among online gig workers.*

**Keywords:** *Work Need Satisfaction Scale, Gig Economy, Online Platform Work, Basic Psychological Needs, Self-Determination Theory, Psychology of Working Theory*

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## **Introduction**

### **Psychology of Working Theory (PWT)**

The Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) is a comprehensive framework aimed at understanding the work experiences of all individuals, particularly those facing marginalization, poverty, or challenging transitions (Duffy et al., 2016). PWT emphasizes the concept of decent work as a central variable and explores its contextual predictors, mediators, and outcomes (Blustein et al., 2018; Duffy et al., 2016). The theory posits that economic constraints and experiences of marginalization influence access to decent work through factors like work volition and career adaptability (Duffy et al., 2018). Building on earlier work, PWT highlights how work fulfills basic human needs for survival, connectedness, and self-determination (Blustein, 2006). The theory has been validated across diverse populations, including Turkish working adults (H. J. Kim et al., 2023), racially and ethnically diverse employed adults (Duffy et al., 2018), and sexual minorities (Douglass et al., 2017). Recent efforts have focused on standardizing construct measurement and expanding the theory's application in research and practice (Blustein et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2023).

### **Self-Determination Theory (SDT)**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a macro-theory of human motivation that emphasizes the role of basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—in fostering well-being and optimal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the workplace context, SDT posits that the satisfaction of these needs leads to intrinsic motivation and positive work outcomes, while need frustration can result in maladaptive behaviors and decreased well-being (Van Den Broeck et al., 2016). SDT has been widely applied to understand employee motivation, engagement, and satisfaction across various work settings (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Olafsen et al., 2017).

### **Work Need Satisfaction Scale (WNSS)**

The Work Need Satisfaction Scale (WNSS) is a validated instrument that measures the fulfillment of basic psychological needs in the workplace, drawing on the principles of the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Autin et al., 2019). It assesses five

core needs: survival, social contribution, autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Autin et al., 2019). By including survival and social contribution needs, the WNSS extends beyond the traditional three SDT constructs to capture more contextual factors, particularly those relevant to individuals from marginalized groups (Duffy et al., 2016).

Most studies support a five-factor structure of the WNSS, reflecting the three SDT-based needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) as well as the additional dimensions of survival and social contribution (Autin et al., 2019, 2023; J.-H. Kim et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022). The scale has been validated in multiple languages and cultural contexts, including Korean (J.-H. Kim et al., 2021), Chinese (Xu et al., 2022), and Spanish (Autin et al., 2023). These studies have consistently shown that the WNSS demonstrates strong reliability, validity, and measurement invariance across diverse demographic groups.

### **Need Satisfaction in the Gig Economy**

Traditional measures of need satisfaction may not fully capture the experiences of workers in non-traditional employment arrangements, such as gig work (Allan & Blustein, 2022). Gig work is characterized by flexibility, autonomy, and task variety but often lacks stability, social support, and opportunities for advancement (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). These unique features necessitate the adaptation of existing scales or the development of new instruments to accurately assess need satisfaction in this context.

The gig economy, exemplified by platforms like Uber, Lyft, and Upwork, offers flexible work opportunities but raises concerns about worker protection, job quality, and the fulfillment of psychological needs (De Stefano, 2015; Donovan et al., 2016). Gig work often involves low pay, irregular hours, limited social interaction, and a lack of traditional employment benefits (Wood et al., 2019). These conditions can impede the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, particularly relatedness and security (Bajwa et al., 2018).

Recent research on gig work highlights the challenges gig workers face in satisfying their basic psychological needs. Studies have shown that gig workers often experience need frustration due to precarious work conditions, lack of social support, and limited opportunities for growth (Gandini, 2019; Graham et al., 2017). Adaptations of need satisfaction scales, such as the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration

Scale, have been used to assess these experiences in gig work contexts (Nunes et al., 2023). Findings indicate that need satisfaction is linked to better well-being, job satisfaction, and motivation among gig workers (Behl et al., 2021).

### **Technological Influences on Need Satisfaction**

The role of technology in gig work adds another layer of complexity to need satisfaction. Algorithmic management and digital platforms can both enable and hinder the satisfaction of psychological needs (Kellogg et al., 2020). For instance, while technology can provide flexibility and autonomy, it can also lead to increased surveillance and reduced autonomy due to algorithmic control (Shapiro, 2018). Understanding how technological factors influence need satisfaction is crucial for comprehensively assessing gig workers' experiences.

### **Social Needs in Gig Work**

Social needs are fundamental human requirements that, when unmet, can lead to decreased well-being and increased health issues (Bruggencate et al., 2018). Gig workers often report feelings of isolation due to the solitary nature of their work and the lack of traditional workplace interactions (Pesole, A. et al., 2018). Addressing social needs in the gig economy involves creating opportunities for community building and peer support, which can enhance relatedness and overall satisfaction (Taylor et al., 2017).

### **Rationale for the Current Study**

Given the unique characteristics and challenges of online platform gig work, there is a critical need to understand how basic psychological needs are satisfied in this context. The WNSS provides a comprehensive tool for assessing need satisfaction, including factors particularly relevant to online platform gig workers, such as survival and social contribution needs (Autin et al., 2019). Validating the WNSS in a gig work context would offer valuable insights into gig workers' well-being, motivations, and work outcomes. It could also inform interventions, policies, and platform designs aimed at improving gig work conditions and enhancing worker satisfaction.

### **Methodology**

This survey tool, combining the WNSS scale with socio-demographic questions, was administered via the limesurvey.org platform. Limesurvey is



an advanced online survey software tool, commonly used to collect quantitative data. Later, the survey was shared on the clickworker.com platform. Clickworker is one of the most famous online job platforms in the world, bringing freelancers together with businesses or persons in need of help in the execution of a variety of micro-jobs and other digital projects. It is an online internet platform; it is an open-call marketplace where workers execute tasks requesting the cognitive skills of humans, which could not be aptly automated. The research took place from March 9th, 2023, to June 6th, 2023, with the subjects being recruited via Clickworker. We have utilized the Clickworker platform for our recruitment process in order to make sure that all respondents belonged to our target population—that is, people working in the online platform work economy. The inclusion criteria for participants included residents of the European Union, proficiency in the English language because the questionnaire would be provided only in that language and being at least 18 years old.

## **Participants**

We collected valid and complete answers from 513 working adults, 18 to 75 years old, with a mean age of 36.68 (SD = 10.545). Of the 513 respondents, 238 (46.39%) identified themselves as women and 275 (53.61%) identified themselves as men. All respondents were from EU countries, most of them being from Germany (24.76%), Italy (15.59%), Spain (14.04%), Portugal (10.33%), France (9.94%), Austria (6.63%), Romania (5.85%), and other EU countries with < 3% each.

In terms of last education degree, 32.55% declared a high school degree, 31.97% reported a bachelor's degree, 27.29% reported a master's degree, 3.51% reported a PhD or higher degree, 2.92% reported a Less than high school degree and 1.76 % reported other educational degree.

The employment status of the respondents, other than their online gig work activity, were Employed full-time (40+ hours a week) - 53.46% of men and 34.03% of women, Employed part-time (less than 40 hours a week) - 8% of men and 18.5% of women, Self-employed - 14.91% of men and 16.39% of women, Student – 9.5% of men and 8.4% of women, Unemployed (currently looking for work) – 8% of men and 9.66% of women, Unemployed (currently not looking for work) – 1.82% of men and 7.14% of women, the remaining percents being for Never been employed, Retired or Other.

For 68.23% of the respondents, the main income comes from the Classic job, for 18.71% from online work platforms, for 4.48% of the respondents, the main income comes from Pension and for 8.58% of them, from Other sources.

In terms of time allocated for online gig work, most of the respondents (47.95%) reported less than 5 hours/week, 26.32% reported 5-10 hours/week, 12.09% reported 10-20 hours/week, 7.21% reported 20-30 hours/week, 4.09% reported 30-40 hours/week and 2.34% reported More than 40 hours/week.

Of all respondents, 42.89% reported a household income of Less than 2.000 EUR, 40.16% reported a household income of 2.000 – 4.000 EUR, 10.92% reported 4.000 – 6.000 EUR and 6.04% reported a household income higher than 6.000 EUR.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Preliminary analysis**

Before the analysis, we assessed the skewness and kurtosis of all the items. The skewness of the scale items ranged between -0.049 to -0.851 and their kurtosis ranged from -1.159 to 0.455. All values being  $\leq |1,5|$  indicates a normal distribution for all the measured variables.

The entire scale shows good reliability, with a Cronbach's  $a = .95$ . In the same way,  $a = .95$  for the Survival sub-scale,  $a = .92$  for the Social Contribution sub-scale,  $a = .94$  for the Competence scale,  $a = .92$  for the Relatedness sub-scale and  $a = .82$  for the Autonomy sub-scale.

The average variance extracted (AVE) for the 5 factors were AVE = .83 for the Survival factor, AVE = .75 for the Social Contribution factor, AVE = .79 for the Competence factor, .76 for the Relatedness factor and AVE = .55 for the Autonomy factor.

### **Confirmatory Factor Analysis – Initial 20-Items, 5-Factor Model**

We conducted a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) using JASP 0.19.1 with maximum likelihood estimation. We tested the goodness-of-fit for the 5-factor 20 item model (Autin et al., 2019).

The chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2$ ) of 862.167 with 160 degrees of freedom (df) yielded a  $\chi^2/df$  ratio of 5.389 and a highly significant p-value ( $< .001$ ).

The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was 0.092. Specific fit statistics for the CFA measurement model provided additional depth to the assessment: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .927, Tucker—Lewis Index (TLI) = .913, the Relative Non-centrality Index (RNI) = .927 and the McDonald Fit Index (MFI) = .504.

The Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR) of .062 was also computed.

The reliability for the scale and for each construct is shown in Table 1:

**Table 1: Reliability of the Initial 20-Item, 5-Factor Model**

Reliability	
	Coefficient $\alpha$
Survival needs	0.95
Social Contribution needs	0.922
Competence needs	0.935
Relatedness needs	0.922
Autonomy needs	0.824
total	0.949

In Table 2, we can see the Average variance extracted for each factor.

**Table 2: Average variance extracted for the Initial 20-Item, 5-Factor Model**

Average variance extracted	
Factor	AVE
Survival needs	0.826
Social Contribution needs	0.751
Competence needs	0.789
Relatedness needs	0.756
Autonomy needs	0.545

### **Discussion on the Confirmatory Factor Analysis – Initial 20-Items, 5-Factor Model**

The CFA results of applying the model proposed by Autin et al. (2019) to our population resulted in a poor fit.

First, the Cronbach's alpha of the Autonomy sub-scale was good at  $\alpha = .82$ , but not as good as the score of the others (Verma & Abdel-Salam, 2019), which were all above  $\alpha = .92$ .

Second, the average variance extracted was very good for all factors except the Autonomy, where AVE = .55, a value that is very close to the .5 cutoff value (Cheung et al., 2024).

Although this statistic is sensitive to the sample size, chi-square indicated a poor fit of the model to the observed population ( $\chi^2/df = 5.389$ ), according to Byrne et al. (1989).

According to Hu & Bentler (1999), CFI, TLI and RNI should be above .95 for a good fit model, MFI should be above .90, RMSEA should be below .06 and SRMR should be  $\leq .08$ .

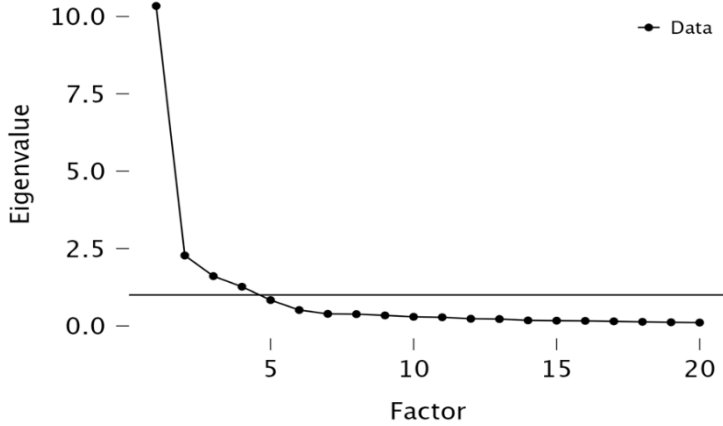
Given these sub-par results, we decided to try and find out why the Work Need Satisfaction Scale (Autin et al., 2019) does not fit our population well, and decided to conduct an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) to see if there are items in the scale that, maybe, are not relevant for the online gig worker.

### **Exploratory Factor Analysis**

To understand why the data did not fit the model very well in the CFA, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with a varimax rotation on all 20 items of the WNSS scale, to identify the underlying structure of the data. Because all items were normally distributed (skewness and kurtosis were  $\leq |1,5|$ ), we used the Maximum Likelihood factoring method (Costello & Osborne, 2005).

The analysis, following the Kaiser rule of eigenvalues being greater than 1, suggested a 4-factor model as can be seen in Figure 1. The factor loadings above .3 and communalities are presented in Table 3.

**Figure 1: EFA Scree plot**



In Table 3, we can see the factor loadings above .3 and communalities.

**Table 3: Factor loadings above .3 and communalities for the 20-item, five-factor model**

<i>Factor Loadings</i>					
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Communality
WNSS_01		0.822			0.779
WNSS_02		0.856			0.839
WNSS_03		0.874			0.84
WNSS_04		0.863			0.854
WNSS_05		0.32	0.677		0.671
WNSS_06			0.767		0.79
WNSS_07	0.308		0.757		0.813
WNSS_08	0.332		0.683	0.359	0.755
WNSS_09	0.809				0.825
WNSS_10	0.88				0.886
WNSS_11	0.793				0.732

<i>Factor Loadings</i>					
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Communality
WNSS_12	0.767				0.7
WNSS_13	0.539			0.525	0.638
WNSS_14	0.5		0.309	0.609	0.762
WNSS_15			0.353	0.779	0.861
WNSS_16			0.385	0.762	0.85
WNSS_17	0.487				0.296
WNSS_18	0.421				0.282
WNSS_19	0.39		0.382	0.413	0.541
WNSS_20	0.361				0.154

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test on all items showed scores above .874, with an overall score of .936, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: *KMO on all items***

<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test</i>	
	MSA
<b>Overall MSA</b>	0.936
<b>WNSS_01</b>	0.94
<b>WNSS_02</b>	0.932
<b>WNSS_03</b>	0.926
<b>WNSS_04</b>	0.923
<b>WNSS_05</b>	0.959
<b>WNSS_06</b>	0.943
<b>WNSS_07</b>	0.941
<b>WNSS_08</b>	0.961
<b>WNSS_09</b>	0.939
<b>WNSS_10</b>	0.917

<i>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Test</i>	
WNSS_11	0.949
WNSS_12	0.957
WNSS_13	0.945
WNSS_14	0.951
WNSS_15	0.921
WNSS_16	0.922
WNSS_17	0.892
WNSS_18	0.909
WNSS_19	0.959
WNSS_20	0.874

As we can see in Table 3, item communalities are, in general, very good across the scale, with 3 exceptions: WNSS\_17, WNSS\_18 and WNSS\_20.

Item WNSS\_13 is loading higher than .5 on 2 factors, and items WNSS\_14 and WNSS\_19 are loading higher than .3 on 3 factors.

### **Discussion on the Exploratory Factor Analysis and the Confirmatory Factor Analysis – Initial 20-Items, 5-Factor Model**

The EFA solution with 4 factors is slightly different than the 5-Factor WNSS Scale model proposed by Autin et al. (2019), but not for all items.

The KMO test showed good scores, well above the minimum acceptable .5 (Kaiser, 1974).

Because items WNSS\_13 and WNSS\_14 are loading higher than .5 on 2 factors, item WNSS\_19 is loading higher than .32 on 3 factors and items WNSS\_17, WNSS\_18 and WNSS\_20 show very low communalities, based on the best practices in the literature (Costello & Osborne, 2005), we decided to drop them and test a model without them.

Given that we decided to drop items WNSS\_13 and WNSS\_14, the Relatedness needs factor remains with only 2 items, forcing us to also drop items WNSS\_15 and WNSS\_16 from the model in order to have an

accurate last analysis, although these items loaded similarly here and in the 5-factor model.

After all these considerations, we arrive at the following model (Table 5), derived from Autin et al. (2019) 's 5 factor model of the Work Need Satisfaction Scale, that we will try to confirm with a second CFA and, if the fit is considerably better than the original model, will try and explain the differences and why they occur.

**Table 5: 12-item, 3-factor model**

<b>FACTOR</b>	<b>ITEM (SHORT)</b>	<b>ITEM</b>
<b>SURVIVAL NEEDS</b>	WNSS_01	have the resources to provide nutritious food for myself and my family.
	WNSS_02	have the resources to pay for adequate housing for my family.
	WNSS_03	have the resources to pay for utilities, such as water, heating, and electric, on time
	WNSS_04	have the resources to maintain the health of myself and my family
<b>SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION NEEDS</b>	WNSS_05	make a contribution to the greater social good.
	WNSS_06	feel like I am doing something important for my community.
	WNSS_07	feel a part of something greater by helping to sustain our world.
	WNSS_08	feel like I am making a difference.
<b>COMPETENCE NEEDS</b>	WNSS_09	feel like I am good at my job.
	WNSS_10	feel like I am good at what I do.
	WNSS_11	feel like I know what I'm doing.
	WNSS_12	feel competent.



### Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the modified 12-Items, 3-Factor Model

The chi-square statistic ( $\chi^2$ ) = 169.075 with df = 51 and a  $\chi^2/df$  = 3.315 and  $p < .001$ .

The fit indexes for this model are: RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = .98, TLI = .974, RNI = .980 and MFI = .891 and SRMR = .027.

### Comparison of the Confirmatory Factor Analyses of the 2 models

The modified model, with only 3 factors, shows a considerably better fit for our population. A comparison between the fit indexes of the two models is presented in Table 6.

**Table 6: Comparison of fit between the original 20-item, 5-factor model and the 12-item, 3-factor model**

	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	RNI	MFI	SRMR
<b>Initial 5-factor model</b>	5.389	0.092	.927	.913	.927	.504	.062
<b>Modified 3-factor model</b>	3.315	0.067	.98	.974	.980	.891	.027

### Results

The CFA of the modified 12-item, 3-factor model indicates a considerable better fit compared to the initial 20-item, 5-factor model. The fit indices improved significantly, with RMSEA decreasing from 0.092 to 0.067 and CFI increasing from .927 to .980.

The removal of the Autonomy and Relatedness factors suggests that these needs may not be adequately captured by the items in the original WNSS in the context of online platform gig workers. These items did not load well in the EFA, and their removal resulted in a better-fitting model. The factor loadings above .3 for each item, together with their communalities, are illustrated in Table 7.

**Table 7: Factor loadings above .3 and communalities for the 12-item, three- factor model**

<i>Factor Loadings</i>				
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Communality
<b>WNSS_01</b>	<b>0.826</b>			0.78
<b>WNSS_02</b>	<b>0.857</b>			0.838
<b>WNSS_03</b>	<b>0.877</b>			0.84
<b>WNSS_04</b>	<b>0.862</b>			0.853
<b>WNSS_05</b>	0.317		<b>0.716</b>	0.67
<b>WNSS_06</b>			<b>0.819</b>	0.786
<b>WNSS_07</b>			<b>0.818</b>	0.816
<b>WNSS_08</b>		0.332	<b>0.765</b>	0.747
<b>WNSS_09</b>		<b>0.825</b>	0.332	0.839
<b>WNSS_10</b>		<b>0.902</b>		0.917
<b>WNSS_11</b>		<b>0.795</b>		0.72
<b>WNSS_12</b>		<b>0.76</b>		0.663

## **Discussion**

The results indicate that the original five-factor structure of the WNSS does not fit well with the data from online platform gig workers. The modified three-factor model, comprising Survival Needs, Social Contribution Needs, and Competence Needs, provides a considerable better fit.

The poor fit of the Autonomy and Relatedness factors may reflect unique aspects of online gig work that are not adequately addressed by the existing WNSS items. Gig work is characterized by high levels of autonomy in terms of work scheduling and task selection, but this autonomy may be constrained by algorithmic management and platform policies (Shapiro, 2018).

### **Autonomy Needs in Online Gig Work**

The autonomy need is crucial in the online gig work context, where workers often operate with fewer traditional constraints (Carneiro et al., 2023). Unlike classical workers, who may experience more rigid schedules and hierarchical oversight, online workers frequently enjoy increased control over their work environment and schedule (Van Yperen et al., 2014). This heightened level of independence can elevate their need for autonomy, as it enables them to determine when, where, and how they complete tasks. However, this autonomy may also be mitigated by algorithmic management and platform policies, which can constrain genuine decision-making freedom (Shapiro, 2018). Nevertheless, the initial rise in perceived independence and flexibility sets the stage for different expressions of autonomy needs compared to traditional office-based settings.

### **Relatedness Needs in Online Gig Work**

The relatedness need refers to feeling valued and connected to others (Dutta et al., 2021). For classical workers, face-to-face interactions in a shared physical workspace naturally foster stronger interpersonal bonds, thus fulfilling relatedness needs more readily (Van Yperen et al., 2014). In contrast, online gig workers often navigate a more isolated environment, engaging primarily through digital interfaces without the immediate social presence of colleagues or supervisors. This can lead to difficulties in meeting relatedness needs, as the absence of in-person interactions and community can result in feelings of disconnection (Pesole, A. et al., 2018; Van Yperen et al., 2014). Although online workers may feel more competent as independent task managers, this perceived competence does not necessarily translate into social support and meaningful relationships. Adapting the WNSS to better reflect the unique relational dynamics in online work environments could therefore be essential for accurately assessing and improving relatedness satisfaction in the gig economy.

### **Limitations, implications and future research**

The findings suggest that the WNSS may require adaptation to accurately assess need satisfaction among online gig workers. The unique characteristics of gig work, such as algorithmic management and virtual-only interactions, may necessitate the development of new items or scales that better capture autonomy and relatedness in this work context.

Future studies should consider adapting the WNSS to include items that reflect the unique aspects of online platform gig work. For this, qualitative studies might be needed on a more diverse sample of online gig workers from different platforms and regions.

## **Conclusion**

The study reveals that the traditional 20-item, 5-factor structure of the WNSS does not adequately fit the studied online platform gig worker population. The modified three-factor model that we tested, which excludes Autonomy and Relatedness needs, provides a considerable better fit. This suggests that the WNSS may require adaptation to accurately assess the work need satisfaction of online platform gig workers, particularly concerning autonomy and relatedness needs.

Understanding how gig workers experience and satisfy their basic psychological needs is crucial for developing interventions, policies, and platform designs that enhance their well-being and job satisfaction.

## **Acknowledgments**

N/A

## **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the authorship and/or publication of this article.

## **Declaration of conflict of interests**

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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# DYNAMICS OF ACADEMIC CIRCLES: A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS WITH ACADEMIC STAFF IN UNIVERSITIES IN KAZAKHSTAN

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2024.4.02>

**Abstract** *In the years following its independence, Kazakhstan's higher education landscape has experienced profound changes. This period has been marked by a concerted effort to broaden the scope and capacity of the education system. There has been a pronounced emphasis on elevating the sector's role in fostering a 'knowledge society', a concept pivotal to contemporary developmental strategies. Additionally, there has been a notable increase in the influence of both external and international entities in steering academic affairs. A key area of focus has been the enhancement of university teaching quality, coupled with the establishment of robust systems for acknowledging and rewarding excellence in this domain. The central task of the article is to analyze the updated model of employment and management of the teaching staff in the universities of Kazakhstan. The authors propose a comprehensive three-stage analysis: firstly, the peculiarities of the emergence, change, and termination of employment relations between teachers and universities are studied; secondly, approaches to managing teaching staff are examined; thirdly, an analysis of sociological data on employment trends among university teachers is conducted. The study covers legal, administrative, and practical aspects of teaching work, emphasizing*

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*the interconnection of these issues in a dynamic educational environment. The results indicate the need for far-sighted leadership in managing the teaching staff, implying the integration of traditional academic values with innovative approaches in organizational culture, incentive systems, and employment practices, and the demand for legislative changes. The insights garnered from this study offer a valuable foundation for formulating policy recommendations tailored to Kazakhstan's higher education framework and similar systems. Such recommendations are poised to significantly elevate the importance and effectiveness of the teaching aspect within the academic sphere.*

**Keywords:** *employment model; teaching staff; University; academic profession; employment conditions; higher education institutions; higher education research.*

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## **1. Introduction**

As of 2023, Kazakhstan's higher education system marked its 95th anniversary. While this duration may not signify a long-standing tradition or centuries-old evolutionary process by global standards, the Kazakhstani higher education trajectory has been intricate and multifaceted. Its roots and development are deeply intertwined with the Soviet era (1917–1991), during which it was initially established and evolved. The training methods for scientific and pedagogical staff that were developed in this period played a crucial role in forming a cadre of highly skilled higher education professionals.

In the post-Soviet era, characterized by significant economic reforms, Kazakhstan's higher education system confronted substantial challenges, primarily due to the reduced funding for public educational institutions. Despite these obstacles, the system not only managed to maintain its state universities but also expanded with the addition of private higher education institutions, enriching the educational landscape of the country.

Today, 609,000 people are enrolled, including 228,000 under the state educational order, in 118 organizations of higher and (or) postgraduate education (hereinafter referred to as OHPEs) in Kazakhstan. The system of higher and postgraduate education in Kazakhstan will experience strong demographic pressures over the next seven years. If the population of the country was 18.8 million in 2021 and 19.5 million in 2022, it is projected

to reach 21.5 million by 2030 and 27.7 million by 2050. By 2029, the number of school graduates is expected to double, leading to overcrowding in OHPEs, a shortage of qualified academic staff, a deficit of places in universities and dormitories, and an increasing relevance of forming modern infrastructure and updating the laboratory base of OHPEs.

The crucial and complex task of organizing and training highly qualified specialists, along with their direct mentorship, falls to the management and academic personnel of higher professional education institutions. Within this framework, the legal aspects governing employment relationships in higher education take on a heightened importance. These regulations are instrumental not only in facilitating the educational and developmental needs of students but also in advancing scientific research. Consequently, there arises a clear necessity to delve into the challenges and nuances of legal frameworks surrounding educators' labor, drawing upon the substantial historical expertise in legal oversight of university-level pedagogical activities.

The legal governance of educators' labor integrates both general and specific legal norms. Achieving an optimal balance between these norms is critical for maintaining a stable and highly qualified teaching workforce, which in turn is pivotal for the ongoing progress of higher education in Kazakhstan. The legal framework governing the labor of teaching personnel should be strategically designed to address and neutralize systemic threats and risks that could potentially impact job security in this sector:

1. Growing demographic pressure on the higher education system.
2. Increasing the 'brain drain' and the outflow of young teachers and scientific personnel to other industries.
3. The need for a clear institutional policy in OHPEs for human resources and talent management.
4. The lack of a talent pool and a system for training top management in OHPEs.
5. The absence of broad career prospects for young talented professionals and managers in the OHPE management sector.

6. The incompleteness of OHPEs' transition to a new system of positions according to international standards, a new staff scheduling model, and academic staff's professional development.
7. The issue of inadequate compensation for educators in higher education institutions.

The academic staff in higher education currently operate amidst several challenging socio-economic issues. Key among these is constrained financial resources, diminished prestige of the teaching profession, an aging educator demographic, and evolving demands from stakeholders such as students, employers, and the public. These factors significantly influence both the objectives and the operational dynamics of universities.

In today's competitive landscape, Kazakhstani higher education institutions are vying for funding, attracting qualified applicants, and retaining educators who can meet the evolving educational standards. The ability of universities to adapt and thrive in the educational service market hinges on the effectiveness of their educational activities, often quantified through specific metrics.

In this setting, the importance of robust legal regulation of educators' labor becomes clear. It serves as a cornerstone for developing strategies that systematically advance university development. The study of employment conditions for teachers in Kazakhstan's higher education system is critical, driven by the need to rejuvenate the teaching workforce. This involves attracting and retaining the most talented, personally driven, and professionally competent individuals in scientific and pedagogical roles. The future of the entire higher education system in Kazakhstan is largely dependent on the quality and dedication of these educators.

## **2. Literature Review**

Consideration of various aspects of employment, and management of the labor of academic staff in universities has been the subject of several works by both foreign and Kazakhstani scholars. Firstly, these are highly cited results of studies on sustainable practices of human resource management, productivity of university staff (Manzoor et al., 2019; May et al., 2013; Teichler & Höhle, 2013; Ramsden & Martin, 1996; Bennion & Locke, 2010; Dunkin, 1990; Slišković & Maslač Seršić, 2011; García-Arroyo &

Segovia, 2019; Wiegel et al., 2016; Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Han et al., 2020a; Han et al., 2020b; Buribayev et al., 2023; Khamzina et al., 2022).

These studies have centered on evaluating the quality of teachers' work life, focusing particularly on solutions that are mutually beneficial for both the employee and the organization. This approach emphasizes cooperative management and suggests that incremental changes in organizational interaction structures can enhance this dynamic. Effective personnel management is also identified as a key competitive advantage, influencing various work-related attitudes like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and work attachment. Beyond the professional sphere, the quality of work life also significantly impacts personal, family, and social aspects. Research aimed at developing a model to improve teachers' work life quality includes contributions from Ghashghaeizadeh, 2020; Solimani, 2013; Powell et al., 1983; Subbarayalu, 2017; Cabero & Epifanio, 2021 and Demediuk & Van Gramberg, 2011).

Experts in this field contend that the quality of work life for academic staff is a critical and impactful element in higher education institutions, possessing an interactive nature within the organization. Consequently, organizational policies can have either a positive or negative influence on work life quality. Organizational justice is identified as a foremost factor affecting the work life quality of professors. A perception of unfairness within an organization can lead to psychological and emotional strain for employees. Therefore, it is recommended that university administrators adopt fair behavior promotion as a management strategy and nurture such conduct within the university environment.

To enhance the quality of work life, several strategies are proposed. These include considering the complexity and qualification levels of teachers' work, assigning duties based on employees' capabilities, alleviating stress through equitable workload distribution, and providing growth opportunities by evaluating staff performance in terms of knowledge, experience, and education.

In the studies conducted by Ma et al., 2010; Kurbatova et al., 2015; Rayner et al., 2010; Gould, 2006, the necessity of continuous research on the labor behavior of university teachers and its management is emphasized. Significant attention is given to the development of collectivism, issues of delegation of authority, organization of control, as well as other variables that affect civic behavior in the organization, evaluation, and stimulation

of teachers' work in universities. Research on the management of university teachers' motivation is conducted by Gutsu & Chilipenok, 2019; Rasheed et al., 2010; Rowley, 1996; Ramsden, 1998; Blaskova et al., 2015; Stankovska et al., 2017, in which basic concepts and managerial aspects of stimulation are thoroughly analyzed, and specific systems for diagnosing work motivation are considered.

The research conducted by Amaral et al., 2002; Enders, 2001; Goddard & Puukka, 2008; Abdulkadyrov et al., 2021 provided insightful analysis into the nuances of higher education operations, particularly in the context of regulating teachers' labor. These studies offer a comprehensive view of the internal and external environments of universities, highlighting their role in state development. The aspects of organizational behavior within universities are explored in the works of Ahluwalia & Preet, 2017; Atta & Khan, 2016; Driver, 1983 and Bo, 2013. These authors propose methodologies for analyzing and evaluating the organizational behavior of university faculty, focusing on managing such behavior through the socio-cultural elements of their environment.

M. Tulegenova et al.'s 2019 study concludes that in post-Soviet developing countries, the work of university faculty is often undervalued. The investment in the intellectual resources of the higher education system is sometimes seen as a bothersome expense, which is frequently minimized to boost the profitability of educational services. This approach, however, risks undermining the intellectual capacity of these nations in the long run. The study supports the hypothesis that the current working conditions do not align with the rapid and expansive technological changes of modern times.

Despite the extensive body of research addressing various aspects of personnel management in universities, there remains no consensus within the academic community on the optimal approach to regulate and structure the management of faculty organizational behavior in higher education. It appears that within labor relations, the issue of effectively motivating educators, particularly in orienting them towards the quality of the educational process, is not sufficiently addressed. The need to develop effective legal mechanisms that influence the employment of professorial and teaching staff, while considering the unique characteristics of this workforce and the current state of Kazakhstan's higher education system, is an urgent and unresolved matter.

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology of the research was systematically executed in a structured sequence. Initially, an in-depth analysis was carried out on various legal documents, including legislation, subordinate legal acts, and local regulatory norms that govern the labor relations between teachers and universities. This was followed by a comprehensive summary of Kazakhstan's current practices regarding the competitive appointment to positions within university professorial and teaching staff. Additionally, the study examined the nuances of establishing, evolving, and concluding labor relations with faculty members. Based on these analyses, the research culminated in the formulation of targeted recommendations aimed at enhancing the legislative framework. These recommendations are specifically focused on refining the processes for initiating, modifying, and terminating employment contracts with university faculty.

In the course of the study, general scientific methods were used, in particular, a systemic approach, and a sociological approach — in summarizing the practice of labor relations with the faculty in universities. The traditional formal-logical (technical-legal, special-legal) method for legal sciences became the basis for analysis. Logical, statistical, historical, comparative-legal, and other specific scientific methods were also applied.

This study employs a range of general theoretical methods for analyzing and synthesizing information, including summarizing findings from both domestic and international empirical research in the field of labor relations. Emphasis was placed on both quantitative and qualitative approaches to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of intellectual labor in scientific research and higher education, along with methods for managing these metrics.

To meet its objectives and address its research tasks, the study utilized various empirical data sources. These included materials from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which provided insights into the current state and key development indicators of the Kazakhstani higher education system. Additionally, monitoring data on the activities of Kazakhstani universities, available on the website of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan for the period 2012-2023, were analyzed. The study also considered information from the websites and public reports of 12 Kazakhstani universities for the same period, as well as local regulatory documents

from these universities, including internal labor regulations, faculty position selection criteria, and collective labor agreements.

The empirical component of the analysis also incorporated findings from sociological research on labor relations issues with professorial and teaching staff at universities in Almaty. This research was conducted by the authors or with their involvement. Almaty is a significant educational hub in Kazakhstan, hosting one-third of the country's universities (over forty institutions) and educating more than a third of the students funded by the state budget.

The survey of university faculty and experts was conducted using a combination of methods: Google Docs, email campaigns, face-to-face interviews, telephone surveys, and social media (Facebook, Instagram). The research was carried out in two stages: 1) during September-October 2022 (388 teachers surveyed); 2) during April-May 2023 (417 teachers surveyed).

The nature and volume of the empirical data obtained allowed for a representative analysis of the features of labor relations with the professorial and teaching staff of Kazakhstani universities. Given that the scope of this study does not allow for an in-depth examination of all existing problems of labor regulation for university faculty, the article addresses three main issues:

1. The specifics of concluding, modifying, and terminating labor relations between faculty and universities. This topic includes legal and contractual aspects of university teachers' employment. It encompasses the development of proposals and recommendations for improving labor legislation, contractual, and local norms.
2. Management of educational staff in higher professional education. This area delves into the administrative and organizational aspects of managing a university's teaching staff. It includes strategies and methods used by universities for the recruitment, retention, development, and assessment of teachers. Management practices can significantly affect job satisfaction and the productivity of the teaching staff.
3. Results of sociological research on employment trends among university teachers. This includes analysis and interpretation of data on employment patterns, career trajectories, job satisfaction, and challenges faced by university teachers. Such research results can



provide insights into broader trends in academic employment, such as changes in job security and the impact of external factors such as economic conditions or changes in academic career policy.

The outlined topics are interconnected and collectively cover the legal, administrative, and practical aspects of university teachers' employment, each influencing and being influenced by others in a dynamic academic environment.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4.1 Legal Provision of Academic Employment in Higher Education**

The research team conducted a thorough examination of the conditions surrounding the establishment, modification, and termination of labor relationships of faculty in higher education institutions. They identified challenges in the legal framework governing labor and other related aspects of higher education employment, proposing actionable solutions. A detailed analysis of the latest labor legislation and local normative legal acts relevant to the subject matter revealed several deficiencies. The authors put forward recommendations for addressing these gaps through amendments and additions to existing legal acts, and they also suggested ways to enhance the current legislative framework.

Upon reviewing the normative acts that regulate labor relations for pedagogical staff in higher education, it became evident that despite the enactment of the Labor Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan (November 23, 2015, No. 414-V Law of RK) and various specific normative acts, there remains a need for further development and refinement of the legal system governing university faculty labor. The Labor Code of the RK lacks a dedicated chapter or specific articles that address the unique legal considerations of pedagogical labor, and it does not fully capture the distinctiveness of this category of workers due to inherent limitations. Additionally, it was argued that including all norms pertaining to the industry-specific labor features of different worker categories in a codified law source is unnecessary.

During the research, a clear distinction between labor law and educational law was made in terms of regulating the labor of pedagogical workers. The

authors posited that the regulation of labor and directly associated relations with faculty should primarily fall under the purview of labor law.

The current working conditions for university faculty are insufficient to meet the evolving demands of higher and postgraduate professional education systems. Based on the findings of the study, several proposals are made to enhance the legal regulation of labor for university pedagogical staff:

- Restrict competitive selection for filling positions of scientific and pedagogical staff in higher education institutions to initial employment and after five years, an evaluation should be conducted. This evaluation will determine whether a new employment contract is offered or if the employee faces dismissal.
- Reintroduce the authority of university rectors to hire teachers, including part-time staff, as well as faculty deans (or institute directors) and department heads, without competitive selection or election for a term up to one year. This period could serve as a probationary phase.
- Clearly define a teacher's specific duties correlating to their salary.
- Address the issue of increasing salaries for university pedagogical workers at a national level, ensuring it aligns with the expenses incurred by these professionals in fulfilling their job responsibilities.
- Limit the use of civil contracts for teaching activities to prevent violations of labor rights of teacher-employees.
- Develop specific qualification criteria for professorial and teaching staff positions.
- Enhance the importance of localized labor regulations for university pedagogical staff, allowing for a more nuanced approach in salary distribution based on qualifications, quality of work, and teaching experience.
- Include the principle of electing the rector of a higher education institution in the Labor Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan and establish safeguards for the labor rights of vice-rectors in cases where the rector's tenure ends prematurely, ensuring that a change in university leadership does not automatically lead to a complete overhaul of the university's executive team.

- In the Labor Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan, incorporate separate articles regulating the specifics of labor of the faculty, in particular:
  - general qualification requirements for individuals seeking to engage in pedagogical activity; grounds for disallowing citizens from pedagogical activity (having a criminal record for certain crimes, incapacity or limited capacity, having certain diseases, etc.);
  - specifics of suspending pedagogical workers from work;
  - the particularities of initiating and dissolving employment contracts with faculty members, including those in professorial and teaching roles. This aspect covers the unique considerations and processes involved in formalizing and ending working relationships with academic staff;
  - the distinct processes involved in the formation and termination of employment contracts with executive personnel, such as leaders and deputy leaders of state higher education institutions, as well as heads of their respective branches;
  - the duration of working hours for pedagogical workers, the procedure for determining the teaching load;
  - the duration of rest time, vacations, and other specifics of exercising labor rights and obligations of the faculty.

Furthermore, the analysis of the legal regulation system for the labor of university faculty has demonstrated the demand for the following steps in the area of normative influence. Regulation of the procedures and conditions for the professional development of faculty. The current legislation does not ensure transparency and systematization in this area of labor relations. The study suggests establishing legal bases that promote fairness and transparency in the recruitment of educational staff. This includes conducting competitions for positions within the higher education system, evaluating the performance of educational staff annually, and introducing new, effective public oversight mechanisms.

Additionally, the study recommends enhancing adherence to existing normative legal acts regarding the financing of higher educational institutions. This involves refining the procedures for creating budget expenditures, conducting internal financial audits, and proactively identifying and addressing corruption in these processes.

There is also an emphasis on developing and implementing normative legal acts concerning the formation of personnel reserves and ensuring adherence to ethical standards within the higher education system.

The anticipated outcome of these measures is an increase in the efficacy of educational and scientific activities, leading to an improvement in the quality of the educational process. These improvements are expected to fulfill the objectives set for higher and postgraduate professional education systems as part of the broader initiative to modernize the education system.

#### **4.2 Management of Educational Staff in OHPEs**

In modern conditions, the traditional structure of university management as a "creative hierarchical organization", as a community of teachers building their organization, selecting the administration, and controlling its activities, is replaced by the model of the university as a customer-oriented organization that produces educational services and hires teachers in the labor market. Customer orientation implies feedback, the implementation of a process cycle, and "distributed" management. The current situation is such that university rectors, practically appointed (competitions are formal) by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, are exclusively subordinate to the ministry, as the direct employer, and do not need feedback from consumers of educational services, employers, business, are not interested in seeking investments, reporting exclusively by the criteria of an effective contract to the ministry.

It is important to remember that university education is a complex phenomenon and is not based exclusively on programs, textbooks, or teachers; it needs nourishment from science, social environment, business, business, and cultural spheres, etc. It is not just recorded knowledge that can be measured by tests. In this connection, a system of rigid centralized management is unsuitable for universities. If we think in market terms, imagining the university as a private company, a factory for the production of specialists (although this category is gradually receding into the background in developed countries), then it should be managed according to market laws. The role of the state is undoubtedly extremely important to counter two negative factors: the strengthening of academic capitalism and the leveling of cultural values of society. Moreover, there is a sector,

particularly the oil and gas industry, where the state acts as a customer, employer, manufacturer, and product seller; however, adjustments in the administration system and increasing the efficiency of management are necessary. It is important to consider not only quantitative but also qualitative indicators of university activity.

Currently, several key management issues in higher education require adjustments, including:

- This broad term refers to situations where personal interests may influence decision-making, potentially harming societal or organizational interests. It's important to intensify and broaden efforts to manage conflicts of interest across all administrative activities. This includes setting limitations on awarding titles, honorary certificates, using faculty status to gain additional vacation days, holding multiple managerial positions, etc.;
- While the position of a rector is formally filled through a competitive process, in practice, the professorial and teaching staff often has little influence on this selection. Moreover, there are limited options for the early dismissal of leadership, barring court proceedings or direct intervention by the Minister of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Introducing an elective process with options for dismissal and early re-election could enhance accountability;
- There should be a direct prohibition on occupying senior positions for more than two terms. Additionally, these terms should be shortened to a reasonable duration, such as three years, to encourage fresh perspectives and leadership;
- The selection process for employment and appointment to senior positions in higher education institutions should be based on meritocracy. Candidates who contribute significantly to the development of the higher education system should be considered, with a fair and objective evaluation of their activities, professional qualities, and special contributions to the field. It's also crucial to adhere strictly to principles of gender equality in these appointments;
- Expanding university autonomy — a long-overdue necessity, as currently, from a legal standpoint, universities cannot manage resources

at their discretion, earn from their scientific activities, or expand cooperation with business;

- Reducing the bureaucratic burden — the university's reporting system to the state and society should be revised, as the existing system is focused on the volume of paper reports, not on target indicators;
- Stimulating mobility, training, and work in different universities to reduce inbreeding - under current conditions, such mobility cannot develop, as teachers are burdened with classroom work, bureaucracy, and lack of time or financial opportunities for self-development;
- Remuneration for teachers — even maintaining the current salary with a reduction in classroom hours per position would provide an opportunity to stimulate the teacher's work not only in the lecture area but also in scientific research. Artificially inflating salaries will only have a negative economic effect, but freeing up part of the classroom load would create opportunities for teachers to engage in science, business, public activities, and publishing;
- Introducing an effective system for organizing continuous professional development of teaching staff;
- Developing programs for academic mobility of faculty within the framework of cooperation with foreign higher education institutions;
- Establishing robust systems for motivating professors, researchers, and young scientists engaged in research. This involves creating a framework for evaluating their work based on specific performance indicators;
- Implementing a system of material rewards, funded through non-budgetary sources, for scientists, professors, and young researchers who have achieved a high Hirsch index (h-index). The h-index is a measure of international recognition in scientific activity, particularly through publications in prestigious journals included in global scientific and technical information databases;
- Systematically raising the number of professors and teaching staff in higher education institutions who possess national and international evaluation certificates and proficiency in foreign languages;

- Actively involving experienced industry professionals in the educational process and systematically arranging internships for professors and teaching staff in relevant enterprises and organizations;
- Refining the distribution of the yearly teaching responsibilities for competitively selected professors and teaching staff, especially those holding copyrights to educational materials. This could involve allocating more time for creating educational content within their annual workload, offsetting the time spent on direct teaching activities;
- Creating favorable conditions for talented Kazakhstani scientists working abroad to return and contribute to the national higher education system. While hiring foreign experts has its prestige, prioritizing the repatriation of Kazakhstani scientists can be more effective for national scientific advancement;
- Achieving an optimal balance in the age and academic qualifications among the professorial and teaching staff in higher education institutions, ensuring a diverse and dynamic academic environment.

#### **4.3 Results of Sociological Analysis of Employment Dynamics Among University Faculty**

The study highlights that the cornerstone of management within Kazakhstan's higher education system is its professorial and teaching staff. These professionals are pivotal in determining the level and quality of educational services. For university leaders, a key objective is to enhance the engagement of teaching staff in their work outcomes, ultimately leading to an improvement in the quality of education. The scale and intricacies of challenges faced by higher education institutions underscore the urgency of identifying an optimal model for managing the organizational behavior of teachers. This includes devising and embedding mechanisms that stimulate the labor activities of the professorial and teaching staff in contemporary higher education.

Kazakhstani higher education institutions find themselves in a highly competitive environment, vying not only for students but also for qualified teaching staff. This competition underscores the critical need for effective collaboration between higher professional education institutions and their faculty. However, there is a concern regarding the qualification level of

Kazakhstani teachers, which in some cases, may not meet current requirements.

The work of higher education teachers is marked by its multifaceted nature, creativity, high responsibility, and complexity. Assessing the outcomes of pedagogical work is challenging, as these cannot be simply categorized as positive or negative. The impact of education is influenced by a myriad of factors and often becomes apparent only after the completion of training. Consequently, the direct influence of a teacher on the final educational outcomes of students is difficult to quantify precisely.

This complexity in evaluating teachers' effectiveness and productivity also indirectly influences their remuneration. The recent focus has been on enhancing the labor efficiency of higher education personnel. This involves optimizing teaching loads and extensively integrating modern information and communication technologies into their professional activities.

To better understand the factors underlying the effective, quality work of the faculty, a sociological study was conducted. The survey results from 2022–2023 showed that the faculty feel overloaded with work and professional duties, believe they are underpaid and lack desired opportunities for professional development and remote work.

In the surveys of 2022–2023, questions were asked in the following areas:

- Satisfaction with the work environment;
- Opportunities for remote work;
- Activities performed beyond the normal working hours and duties (overtime work);
- Evaluation of benefits.

For this report, we analyzed data from 805 employees of higher education institutions. All respondents worked full-time, in a single job position, and belonged to the faculty of universities. The average age of the respondents was 47 years. 69% were women, and 31% were men. 44% of those surveyed held academic degrees and titles.

When it comes to job satisfaction, there are significant areas of dissatisfaction among the faculty, with only 58% of faculty members in higher education institutions overall satisfied with their jobs. A higher



degree of satisfaction is achieved when respondents are asked about specific aspects of their work environment. For example, the highest satisfaction with the work environment among the faculty was expressed regarding relationships with colleagues, leaders, and the atmosphere in the work team (82%).

Significant areas of dissatisfaction with the work environment exist. Faculty members expressed disagreement with the amount of their salary, feeling that their contribution is undervalued (64%). A notable aspect of dissatisfaction is related to the support for professional growth of faculty members provided by the educational institution (59%). 72% of faculty members stated that they lack career advancement prospects and opportunities for professional development funded by the university.

66% of respondents stated that they are not satisfied with the amount of health compensation paid by the university during the annual labor leave. 73% of those surveyed reported dissatisfaction with the conditions for providing remote work and believed that their duties could be performed remotely or in a hybrid format.

Understanding these data allows identifying specific areas that need special attention to increase overall employee satisfaction with their job and work environment.

The survey showed that more than two-thirds (68%) of the faculty agree that they prefer remote work modes. However, only 4% of respondents reported that their duties are performed in a hybrid format (remote and offline). The survey did not reveal any faculty currently working exclusively remotely. Opinions were divided regarding the impact of remote work on the quality of teaching: 35% believe it has a positive impact, while 30% believe the opposite.

56% of respondents felt more productive working remotely. 30% reported no significant changes in productivity. 17% experienced a decrease in productivity, mainly due to distractions at home and technical limitations. 30% indicated the need for improved technological support, including software and hardware updates.

67% of faculty work beyond the stipulated hours and perform duties not specified in their employment contract. For most respondents, overtime work is associated with preparing reporting documentation, filling out electronic work reports, performing public duties, as well as conducting

scientific research, and participating in competitions for funding scientific projects.

About two-thirds of the faculty expressed satisfaction with their paid annual leave but were dissatisfied with the level of health benefits provided during leave, believing that they were under-compensated for their vacation.

Most faculty members expressed satisfaction with the work environment, relationships with colleagues, and administration. However, 38% were dissatisfied with the level of autonomy and academic freedom in teaching and choosing teaching strategies.

More than two-thirds of the surveyed respondents were not satisfied with opportunities for professional development. 20% of respondents expressed concern about the lack of recognition of their professional merits and achievements. 37% would like to have more opportunities or funding for professional growth and more support from the university.

Thus, the key factors affecting teachers' job satisfaction are salary and benefits, employment guarantee, workload, administrative support, opportunities for professional development, and the level of autonomy and academic freedom.

The main problems and stress factors for faculty include high workload, lack of resources, bureaucratic obstacles, or pressures related to research and publications. Additionally, the research results of S. Mohammadi, N. Mohammadi (2022), Moorthy et al. (2013), Taris et al. (2001) show that job stress harms the quality of work-life, organizational health, and organizational citizenship behavior.

The survey identified the demand for a review of compensation packages to address issues related to salary and benefits; methods for managing workload, with a demand for implementing policies for more effective workload management; forms of support for professional development to expand staff development opportunities; and the expansion of recognition programs to boost morale and acknowledge achievements.

The issue of redistributing workloads in universities is critical. Institutions need to explore avenues for a more balanced allocation of teaching, research, and administrative duties. Additionally, it's important to ensure that educators are appropriately compensated for any extra hours worked.

Fair interaction between management and faculty is a significant factor that influences the quality of a teacher's work life. Employees are acutely aware of and expect just treatment when contributing their skills and efforts to the organization. Therefore, equitable treatment of teachers is essential not only for reinforcing their mental well-being but also for enhancing their perception of the quality of their work life (Ghashghaeizadeh, 2020).

The study suggests further support for effective remote work; providing comprehensive training for faculty focused on digital tools and online teaching methods; developing a clear policy for remote work to balance productivity, work-life balance, and teaching quality; and considering a hybrid work model to meet the diverse preferences and needs of the faculty. The survey shows that, despite significant prevalence and satisfaction with remote work among university teachers, there are areas for improvement, especially in technological support, training, and policy development. The hybrid model is becoming a popular choice, indicating a potential path for universities in managing work organization.

The study highlights the widespread issue of burnout among university teachers, affecting their personal well-being, work-life balance, and the quality of teaching and research. Addressing this issue requires institutional reforms, improved support systems, and a reassessment of expectations from workload and reward policies.

This research is valuable from the perspective of university administrations, policymakers, and the academic community in Kazakhstan, helping to identify areas for improvement and informing strategies to enhance working conditions and satisfaction of the university's professorial and teaching staff.

## **5. Conclusion**

The conducted research identified problems in the legal regulation of labor in the field of university faculty in the higher education system; the necessity of improving legislation and other regulatory acts in the field of labor regulation of these categories of workers has been substantiated; specific proposals aimed at eliminating gaps, resolving contradictions in normative acts, and improving the normative legal base regulating the legal

relations discussed in the work have been made. This study does not claim to be exhaustively comprehensive in addressing the problems analyzed, which provides a basis for continuing research on the chosen topic.

The findings highlight the need for visionary leadership in faculty management, which includes blending traditional academic values with modern approaches in organizational culture, incentive systems, and employment practices, alongside advocating for legislative reforms. Amidst ongoing higher education reform, there is a pressing need to develop and implement new, effective management policies. These policies should focus on attracting, retaining, and motivating highly qualified scientific and pedagogical personnel. However, this challenge remains unaddressed in Kazakhstan. Addressing the effective management of university faculty employment is an urgent requirement.

Three strategic directions are proposed for reform. The current level of normative regulation in this area is notably limited and inadequate. Establishing comprehensive legal frameworks to govern faculty labor is essential. This involves recognizing the role of teachers as a crucial component of academic work. In light of efforts to improve the quality of educational services, developing a strategy for managing the human capital of university faculty is crucial. This strategy should aim at effective internal management within universities.

An ongoing evaluation of university faculty's job satisfaction is vital in managing the personnel potential of higher education. Empirical research should be used for continuous monitoring of key parameters related to university teaching roles and the realization of opportunities provided by the university. Segmenting teachers based on job satisfaction levels can optimize decision-making processes by catering to the needs of different faculty groups. Implementing these directions to enhance the management of human potential in higher education is crucial for the relevant state bodies.

## **Acknowledgements**

N/A

## **Funding**

The authors declare no funds/ other support for the current study.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declares no conflicting interests.

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# JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND HUMAN RIGHTS. ASPECTS OF CONTRAVENTIONAL LAW IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2024.4.03>

**Abstract:** *The present research addresses legal aspects of contravention law concerning juvenile delinquency, the conditions for holding minors liable for contraventions, and the application of state coercive measures with an educational character as alternatives to contravention sanctions. Furthermore, the aspects of the "age of contravention liability" criterion were clarified, in relation to the minor's capacity to understand the illicit act he commits. A special section of the research was dedicated to ensuring the rights of children in conflict with the law through the prism of international regulations, the importance of recuperative measures, and the effectiveness of preventive acts against contraventions among minors.*

**Keywords:** *contravention, contravention liability, juvenile delinquency, sanction, educational measure, minor, child rights*

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## Introduction

The field of contraventional law presents itself as a young branch in the legal system of the Republic of Moldova, considering the new configuration that emerged into the Contraventional Code of the Republic of Moldova from October 24, 2008.

This legislative novelty brought with it a lot of characteristic valences to the field of contravention law, a specific terminology and related

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institutions in achieving the proposed goal. In this context, art. 2 from the Contraventional Code<sup>1</sup> establishes that: "The purpose of the contravention law consists in the defence of the legitimate rights and freedoms of the person, the defence of property, public order, other values protected by law, in the settlement of contraventional cases, as well as in the prevention of the commission of new contraventions". From the content of the norm highlighted above, we deduce the object of study and the method of regulating the contravention matter.

We have to accept the hypothesis that most of the illegalities in a state are precisely from the contraventions, i.e. the illegal acts that have a lower degree of danger than the crime, that attack the social values protected by the law and are liable to contraventional liability. According to official data published by the National Bureau of Statistics<sup>2</sup>, in the previous year 685.2 thousand contraventions were registered, or with 55.9 thousand more compared to 2021. Of the total number of decisions taken on contravention cases, in most cases there were adopted decisions to apply the contraventional sanction (97.7% or in 665.2 thousand cases). In 2.7 thousand cases (0.4%) decisions were taken to submit to preliminary (criminal) investigation bodies, given the fact that the contraventional actions contained the sign of the crime, and in 13.0 thousand cases the contraventional process was terminated for other reasons (1.9%). On average, there were 255 decisions to apply the contraventional sanction on 1000 inhabitants. These are not gratifying statistical data, when every third person in a state has committed a contravention, and which raise questions about the effectiveness of coercive measures applied by the state, the effectiveness of the act of prevention and the quality of the operational processes carried out in this regard. Out of the total number of contraventions, about 1000 cases are drawn up regarding minors, those who are liable for contravention liability according to the legislation. Most reports are issued for minor hooliganism and damage to foreign property<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Contraventional Code of Republic of Moldova, adopted on 24.10.2008. Published in Official Gazette of Republic of Moldova Nr. 3-6 from 16.01.2009. Republished in Official Gazette Nr. 78-84 of 17.03.2017.

<sup>2</sup> National Bureau of Statistics, Republic of Moldova, [https://statistica.gov.md/ro/contraventii-constatate-in-anul-2022-9478\\_60403.html](https://statistica.gov.md/ro/contraventii-constatate-in-anul-2022-9478_60403.html) (accessed on 12.03.2024)

<sup>3</sup> Informative Note of the National Inspectorate for Public Security of General Police about the juvenile delinquency state and activities in the field of child security during year 2021,

In fact, it has become an "unwritten rule" that when discussing the phenomenon of juvenile delinquency one considers the responsibility of juveniles for committing crimes and the criminal status of juveniles.

Thus, in this work we will focus on the issue of minors' contraventional liability, which is an indispensable component of juvenile delinquency. Today's law violator can become tomorrow's criminal, therefore the primary role of the state lies in the prevention of illegal acts at an early stage and the eradication of contravention/criminality.

## **Results and Discussions**

The necessary element for the existence of any contraventional component is the subject, i.e. the person who committed the illicit act, called contravention. In general, the contravention law does not provide for the notion of the subject of the contravention as it is revealed in the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova (the subject of the crime). Thus, in art. 16 of the Contravention Code of Republic of Moldova identifies the notion of "natural person", and art. (1) provides that, "The natural person responsible who, at the time of committing the contravention, has reached the age of 18 is liable for contraventional liability".

Paragraph (2) of the same article regulates the conditions for bringing minors to criminal liability, the subject of interest of our research. Thus, "The natural person between the ages of 16 and 18 is liable to contraventional liability for committing the acts provided for in art. 69 para. (1), art. 78, 85, 87, art. 88 para. (1), art. 89, art. 91 para. (1), art. 104, 105, art. 157 para. (1)–(4), (6), (7) and (9)–(12), art. 203, art. 204 para. (1), (2) and (3), art. 228–245, 336, 342, 352–357, 363, 365, art. 366 para. (1), art. 367, 368, 370, art. 372 para. (2)".

The same approach can be deduced from art. 40 para. (3) letter a), the Convention on the rights of the child<sup>1</sup>, in which "the State party to the

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section minors safety. [https://politia.md/sites/default/files/nota\\_informativa\\_privind\\_starea\\_delinventeii\\_juvenile\\_si\\_activitatea.pdf](https://politia.md/sites/default/files/nota_informativa_privind_starea_delinventeii_juvenile_si_activitatea.pdf) (accessed on 14.03.2024).

<sup>1</sup> Convention on the rights of the child, adopted by United Nations General Assembly on 20.11.1989. Republic of Moldova joined to the Convention in 1993. <https://www.unicef.org/moldova/media/1401/file/Conventia-cu-privire-la-drepturile-copilului.pdf> (accessed on 14.03.2024).

Convention must establish a minimum age of criminal responsibility (the provision also applies in the case of contraventional responsibility), below which children cannot be held responsible for the alleged commission of an illegality". The reason for this international norm is externalized by the presumption that they do not have the discernment to understand that they are violating the contravention law.

Then, the Beijing Rules establish that the meaning of the notion of criminal (criminal) capacity must be clearly defined and that the age of criminal (criminal) liability must not be set at too low limit, taking into account the degree of emotional, mental and intellectual maturity of the child. In the states of the European Union, there is no uniform standard regarding the minimum age of criminal/contraventional liability.

In our view, the minimum age of criminal/contraventional liability should be systematically reviewed following periodic assessments of juvenile crime or contravention rate. Among the determinative criteria we mention: the evaluation of the development capacities generated by digital novelties, the achievement of the degree of maturity necessary to understand the social-legal significance of illegal acts in relation to the requirements of the law.

For example, changing the age of criminal responsibility of children to the mental age of 12, through the lens of Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development<sup>1</sup>, is based on an understanding of how children perceive social and legal norms and how they guide their moral behaviour. According to Kohlberg's theory, around the age of 12-13, most children are in the second phase of moral development, called the "Conventional Stage". At this stage, moral behaviour is guided by the desire to maintain norms and authority, recognizing the importance of conformity and social expectations. Children become more aware of society's rules and understand that they serve a common purpose, contributing to order and the collective good. At the mental age of 12, children begin to be able to assess the consequences of their actions on others, understanding the relationship between personal behaviour and the good of society. This

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<sup>1</sup> L. A. Măgurianu, Moral Standards in education from the perspective of the theories developed by Lawrence Kohlberg and Jürgen Habermas. In: Quality of the training of the specialists in higher education institutions: strategies, forms, methods, 5-7 October 2005, Bălți: State University „Alecu Russo" from Bălți, 2005, Vol.1, p. 175-179. ISBN 9975-931-97-9.

ability increases individual responsibility and awareness of the impact of their behaviour on the community. Lowering the age of criminal responsibility to 12, in our case, could recognize and capitalize on the natural tendency of children of this age to conform to social and legal norms, encouraging them to develop a sense of responsibility for their actions. This could help strengthen understanding of the link between personal behaviour and societal rules, promoting the development of morally and legally responsible behaviour. Adapting the legal system to include younger children in its accountability framework could provide better opportunities for early intervention and legal and moral education. This could contribute to the prevention of delinquent behaviours by encouraging the development of positive social values and behaviours at a critical stage of development. Lowering the age of responsibility also takes into account the fact that 11-12 year olds have a growing capacity to understand abstract concepts, including notions of justice, fairness and equity. This enhanced understanding can support the argument that they are mature enough to be held responsible for contraventions in a framework suited to their needs and capacity of understanding.

So what is juvenile delinquency in contravention law? Juvenile delinquency is a component of contravention, which involves a phenomenon of deviance, manifested by the inability of some minors/adolescents to adapt to the rules of conduct in society. According to the information provided by the police, minors in our country are quite active in committing illegal acts: theft, hooliganism, not too serious. We will not develop the cases that determine the occurrence of these phenomena, because it is a topic of interest for further research, we will only list some of them:

- Lack of supervision from parents, guardianship bodies,
- The circle of people with whom they interact,
- Consumption of prohibited substances (alcohol, drugs),
- School dropout,
- Other causes.

Returning to the normative framework of contravention law, we note that the legislator establishes a limited number of material components for which the minor can be held liable. The reason for this grouping emerges from the nature of the contraventional act and the attitude of the minor

perpetrator towards the committed act and its consequences, the lack of adequate self-assessment capacity.

The problems of juvenile delinquency, the rights of the child in conflict with the law are highlighted in other national and international regulations, such as: Law of the Republic of Moldova no. 299 of 2018 regarding measures and services for children with deviant behavior, the Havana Rules of 1990, etc.

From the general to the particular, the contraventional liability regime of minors is based on the following legislative particularities (art. 16 para. (2), in conjunction with the provisions of para. (1) and para. (3) Contravention Code):

- The minor who has not reached the age of 16 will not be liable for contravention,
- The minor who has reached the age of 16 will only be held liable if it is proven that he committed the act with discretion (responsibility),
- The minor will only be held guilty if he had the freedom of action,
- At the request of the investigating officer, the court may apply to the minor the following coercive measures of an educational nature provided for in art. 104 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Moldova<sup>1</sup>:
  - a) the warning - consists in warning the minor that in case of committing new contraventions, measures with a high degree of severity will be taken;
  - b) entrusting the minor for supervision to the parents, the persons who replace them or the specialized state bodies - i.e. the impact of changing the minor's behaviour through third-party assistance;
  - c) obliging the minor to repair the damage caused - consists in recovering the damage caused to the victim or other persons by committing the contravention. When applying this measure, the material condition of the minor is taken into account;

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<sup>1</sup> Criminal Code of Republic of Moldova, adopted on 18.04.2022. Published in Official Gazette of Republic of Moldova Nr. 128-129 of 13.09.2002. Republished in Official Gazette Nr. 72-74 of 14.04.2009.

- d) obliging the minor to follow a course of psychological rehabilitation - establishes advanced psychological assistance from specialists through the use of psychotherapy methods and techniques, cognitive-behavioural etc.;
- e) obliging the minor to follow the compulsory education course - resides in the obligation to attend compulsory education until the age of 18;
- f) obliging the minor to participate in a probationary program - implies the minor's participation in behaviour correction programs (modification of behaviour, views and abilities that led to the commission of the contravention) and social reintegration programs (regaining the abilities to solve the problems of everyday social life) (art. 29, Law of the Republic of Moldova no. 8 of 14.02.2008 regarding probation). The list of coercive educational measures is exhaustive. At the same time, several coercive measures of an educational nature may be applied to the minor at the same time.

Coercive measures of an educational nature are, in fact, alternatives to contraventional sanctions and differ significantly from them. We have in mind the prevention and elimination of possible risks of committing contraventions, by identifying, neutralizing and removing socio-human, subjective and objective sources, which can determine or favour the commission of anti-social acts, measures designed to contribute essentially to the permanent education of all young members of society, in the spirit of respect for the law and law order. More than that, coercive measures of an educational nature are fixed as recommendations in the minimum standards of the UN regarding the administration of justice for minors (p.18, 27 of the UN Beijing Resolution no. 40/33 of 29.11. 1995)<sup>2</sup>. According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the authorities will take measures, whenever possible and desirable, to treat children, without recourse to judicial procedure, provided that human rights and legal guarantees are fully respected.

With reference to the recipients of these educational measures, we note that in fact they apply exclusively to persons who have reached the age of

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<sup>2</sup> United Nations Minimum Rules for the Administration of Juvenile Justice (The Beijing Rules). United Nations – Resolution no. 40/33 of 29.11.1985. <https://www.probatuine.gov.md/files/getfile/156> (accessed on 13.03.2024).

16 and have committed contraventions, i.e. those who are liable for contraventional liability. However, the social-legal divide faced by the community is related to the (non-existent) solutions in the case of children who commit illicit acts of a contraventional nature under the age of contraventional liability. Here the contraventional law is powerless, and the mission of resocialization/behavioural change of minor delinquents falls to specialists in the field of social protection. For the most part, the activity of law enforcement bodies is limited to the identification of the delinquent child and the transmission of the information further to the authority in the field of social protection of the child.

However, since 2013, the police is part of the intersectoral cooperation mechanism for the identification, evaluation, assistance and monitoring of children at risk, where the representatives of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Research also participate. The normative act that regulates the intersectoral cooperation and the tutelary authorities is the Law of the Republic of Moldova no. 140 of 14.06.2013 regarding the special protection of children at risk and children separated from their parents<sup>3</sup>, which establishes the powers of the guardianship authorities in the field of child protection, the method of identification, recording and assistance of children at risk, the protection of separated children from parents, but also the responsibility of the authorities, institutions or persons responsible for the protection of children.

Analysing the issue of juvenile delinquency in contraventional matters through the prism of art. 16 and art. 32 Contravention Code, the following contraventional sanctions can be applied to minors who have committed contraventions: warning, fine, deprivation of the right to carry out a certain activity and unpaid work for the benefit of the community.

When examining and resolving contravention cases regarding minors, the state must guarantee the perpetrator at least the following rights: (the provisions of art. 40 paragraph (2) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child refer to minors investigated for committing crimes, they are also valid for cases of examination of contraventions):

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<sup>3</sup> Law of the Republic of Moldova no. 140 of 14.06.2013 regarding the special protection of children at risk and children separated from their parents. Published in Official Gazette of Republic of Moldova Nr. 167-172 of 02.08.2013.



- to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to the law;
- to be informed as soon as possible and directly about the accusations brought against him or, if necessary, through his parents or legal representatives and to benefit from legal assistance or any other appropriate assistance, in order to formulate and supporting his defence;
- the right to the examination, without delay, of his case by a competent, independent, impartial authority or court, through a fair hearing procedure and in accordance with the provisions of the law, in the presence of those who provide him with legal or other assistance;
- the right not to be compelled to testify or confess that he is guilty;
- the right to interrogate or request the interrogation of prosecution witnesses, to obtain the bringing and interrogation of defence witnesses, under equal conditions;
- if it is proven that he has violated the contravention law, the right to appeal the decision and any measure taken as a consequence, before a competent, independent and impartial authority or higher judicial court according to the law;
- the right to be assisted free of charge by an interpreter, if he does not understand or speak the language used;
- the right to full respect for his life, the right to be treated in a manner likely to promote his sense of dignity and personal worth, to strengthen his respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others and to take into account his age as also the need to promote the reintegration of the child and his assumption of a constructive role in society, in all phases of the procedure.

When resolving cases regarding contraventions, the competent state authorities will adopt decisions in the best interest of the child. Children are different from adults in their psychological development, physical, emotional development as well as in terms of their educational needs. These differences constitute the foundation for a reduced culpability of the delinquent child and the opting for a justice for minors distinct from that of adults, primarily because a differentiated approach to them is needed. These social-legal valences, which are based on the best interest of the child, constitute the basis for the adoption of a restorative justice in

the case of minors, from sanctions to social and psycho-social rehabilitation - for the protection of minors' personality.

A specific characteristic of juvenile delinquency in contraventional cases is its "sleeping mode state", which can break out at any time. In our country, not all contraventions of this age category are discovered and registered, especially the acts of minors under 16 years old. From the statistical reports of the authorities, viewed on the official pages, we only identify contraventions committed by natural persons who have reached the age of 16, but even here we are not sure that the data are correct. The lack of functional governance mechanisms, social order factors (emigration) make this real assessment of delinquency among minors impossible. For this reason, specialists in the matter estimate that the real level of minors' delinquency is 5-6 times higher than the registered one, which is a fairly important indicator when evaluating minors' delinquency, recidivism.

Juvenile delinquency is a phenomenon that leaves its mark more and more, both on society as a whole and on the individual. Through its effects, it can bring serious damage to value systems protected by law and to harmonious coexistence between people. For this reason, juvenile delinquency must be an object of permanent concern on the part of the state, by establishing an effective control over the phenomenon, which allows the prevention of contraventions and the narrowing of the scope of expansion, making extensive use of educational mechanisms. Oprah Winfrey was right when she said, "Education is the key that can unlock the world, a passport to freedom."

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- The increase in the number of minor contraventional offenders, as well as the diversification of the acts committed by them, determines the need for a complex legal and social research, to establish the legal features of the contraventions committed by minors, the factors that orient minors towards deviant behaviour and measures to prevent minors' delinquency. The hypothesis we started from is "to stop a law violator today who may become a criminal tomorrow".

- The legislation of the Republic of Moldova establishes the possibility of applying coercive measures of an educational nature to delinquent minors instead of contraventional sanctions. This valence derives from the international principles and rules regarding children's rights ratified by our country, where the application of alternative (educational) measures to sanctions have a primary role in preventing contravention.
- The contraventional liability regime of minors is based on the following mandatory legislative features: minimum age, responsibility and freedom of action.
- When investigating cases regarding contraventions, the competent authorities will ensure the minor's compliance with all legal and social rights and guarantees.
- The state must assume an active role in ensuring the well-being of the child and his family, as a basic element in ensuring the prevention of the separation of the child from his family even in the case of the child with illicit behaviour from a contravention point of view, there should be specialized residential services for the child in conflict with the law, where their rights and rehabilitation needs can be ensured.
- When resolving cases regarding minors' contraventions, the state authorities will adopt decisions in the best interest of the child, using functional and efficient governance mechanisms to rehabilitate offenders and prevent illegal acts.

## **Acknowledgements**

None.

## **Funding**

The author received no funding for this research.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declares no conflicting interests.

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# THE POLITICAL STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT LINKAGES IN BANGLADESH: A STUDY OF TWO VILLAGES

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2024.4.04>

**Abstract:** *Political stability is a prerequisite for a country's development and economic growth. Because foreign investment depends on political stability, if foreign investment increases, the country concerned will naturally develop. Political instability has harmed the country's overall development, imports and exports, and retailers. But a country's or a village's development depends on political stability and other factors that hurt development. This paper has investigated the root factors of underdevelopment even in stable political environments in two selected villages, namely Barabangina and Talukpara of Cumilla district. A mixed method, especially in-depth interviews, FGD, case studies, and surveys, was used to collect data. This study proposed that to develop the selected village, it is necessary to increase the rate of higher education along with the goodwill of the political leaders otherwise, the overall development of the village will not be possible. So, it is hoped that this research will play a significant role.*

**Keywords:** *Political Stability, Development, Economic Growth, Political Instability, Bangladesh.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Since political stability differs from culture to culture and occasionally even within the same one, researchers cannot come to a consensus on a fundamental definition. The general definition of political stability is based on the stability of the political regime and the government on the one hand and the stability of internal legal systems and external stability (the lack of external threats to the country's stability) on the other (Masry, 2015). There is a strong correlation between political stability, economic progress, and overall development. On the one hand, the uncertainty brought on by a shaky political climate can impede investment and economic expansion. Furthermore, weak economic performance can result in political instability and the fall of governments. All nations should strive to maintain a stable political environment to thrive economically, and we occasionally experienced political turmoil in Bangladesh (Chawdhury, 2016). Bangladesh is a developing nation with lots of room to grow economically. Significant factors include political instability, political crime, law and order issues, human rights violations, and poor governance, which impede economic progress in various ways (Rahman & Rashid, 2018). It rises to the top each time there is a change in the government. The opposing party frequently seeks to seize control of the nation, while the party in power frequently works to keep the government in place. Because of this, the political climate at the moment is unstable. Human welfare is desirable, but the entire system will collapse if it morphs into greed. Both parties participate in meetings, conferences, and other events. However, these actions are ruining our way of life and our economy (Chawdhury, 2016). Economic growth will be found where there is stability when the relationship between political stability and the economy is examined. All economists agree that states with strong economies and stable political systems grow more quickly than those with unstable economies. Political instability is described as the inability of a democratic process to develop an efficient and effective political system that upholds the rule of law. Political instability is taking center stage as the main factor influencing growth in developing economies (Acar, 2019).

Notwithstanding, Bangladesh is a political unrest country. Even then, it is considered the world's fastest economic growing country. According to the World Bank's political stability ranking, 2017, many nations with weak political stability ratings are among the fast-growing economies on the

globe, such as China (115), India (160), and Bangladesh (174) (Johannes & Klaus, 2020). Nevertheless, political stability can be attained by repression or having a party not subject to reelection. In this instance, political stability is like a blade with two edges. Even though political stability is hoped to foster peace, it might quickly become a haven for impunity and cronyism. This conundrum affects many nations, especially those with weak political institutions (Hussain, 2014). Most researchers conclude that two characteristics of political instability are detrimental to economic progress. It first interferes with market activity and labor relations, directly harming production. Second, the investment will be lower during unsteady political conditions (Radu, 2015). This research paper focuses on the relationship between political stability, infrastructure development, and economic growth in these two villages and why the villages have yet to develop despite political stability. Additionally, this study discusses the political conditions, the backgrounds of those participating in politics, the power and status of these villages, the stability of political relationships, the development of the village's leaders, and the contentment of the residents. Finally, this paper includes the Role of Union Parishad and the goodwill of political leaders for development and economic growth, as well as proposes some recommendations for ensuring social facilities and development in these two villages.

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how political stability hurts the infrastructure development and economic growth of these two selected villages. The specific objectives of this study are:

- To identify the key factors hindering development and economic growth despite political stability.
- To explore the role of local government and community engagement in improving development in the selected communities.
- To provide recommendations to accelerate development in the two selected villages by addressing the identified hindrances.

## **2. Literature Review**

By and large, political instability is considered the main barrier to economic growth and development in developing countries like Bangladesh, and the political situation of Bangladesh needs to be more



stable. Surprisingly, the political scenario of Barahangina and Talukpara villages is stable, and residents are also satisfied with it, but still, more development is needed. So, political instability is not responsible alone for hindering economic growth and development. The following studies have shown that several factors besides political stability can hinder development and economic growth. Studies have shown that political stability is positively associated with investment, entrepreneurship, and innovation and can harm economic growth (Aisen & Veiga, 2013; Easterly & Levine, 1997).

One of the critical factors that contribute to political stability is the presence of effective and transparent governance. This includes a well-functioning legal and judicial system, which protects citizens and ensures that the rule of law is upheld (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Independent and free media is also essential, allowing citizens to voice their opinions and hold government officials accountable (Chang & Chu, 2006). According to Van de Walle (1998), achieving high economic growth improves people's quality of life, which in turn helps political and democratic reform. This is why achieving economic development is seen as a critical determinant of political stability. There is a connection between political stability and economic growth, and the two must be managed together (Zablotsky, 1996).

Political stability is a favorable indicator to stabilize economic change, and adherence to democratic principles is the primary driver of economic development (Masry, 2015). The changes that have taken place in Egypt over the past three years, since the revolution of 25 January 2011, confirm the influence that political reality has on economic position. Since the start of the Egyptian Revolution on January 25, many economists have pointed out that political instability and deteriorating security conditions are the country's main problems. These issues have caused a halt in economic activity, and the appearance of barriers to real economic improvement as Egypt's economy becomes more dependent on foreign trade, investment, and tourism (Masry, 2015). According to Cervantes and Villasenor (2015), political stability affects economic growth through investment, savings, disruptions of the labor market, levels of productivity/output of private agents, and government monetary and fiscal policies. Gakpa (2019) defines political instability as the combination of factors, including the absence of a stable administration, internal and external conflicts, and the

military's involvement in politics. Many political disturbances, especially the number of military coups, are said to have a significant and lousy impact on development by Barro (1991).

Moreover, several factors found in many studies hinder development and economic growth. According to Mauro (1995), corruption can misallocate resources, hindering economic growth. Corruption can also discourage foreign investment and reduce economic activity, as businesses may want to refrain from investing in a country with a reputation for corruption. Poor infrastructure, including inadequate transportation systems, power grids, and communication networks, can make it difficult for businesses to operate efficiently, hindering economic growth (Aschauer, 1989). A skilled and educated workforce can help economic growth, as it limits the ability of businesses to innovate and produce goods and services (Lucas, 1988). International trade barriers, such as tariffs and quotas, can hinder economic growth by reducing the opportunities for businesses to export their goods and services to foreign markets. This can limit the potential for economic growth, as businesses may only be able to expand within their domestic markets (Krugman, 1987). Income inequality can hinder economic growth by reducing the purchasing power of the middle and lower classes. This can limit consumer spending and demand for goods and services, ultimately hindering economic growth (Persson & Tabellini, 1994). Environmental degradation can impede economic growth by reducing the availability of natural resources and damaging ecosystems. This can limit economic activity and reduce growth potential (Dasgupta, 2001). Natural disasters and climate change can disrupt economic activity and cause significant damage to infrastructure, reducing economic growth (IPCC, 2014).

A stable political landscape and the good intentions of political leaders can facilitate a country's or a local village's sustainable development. Several things prevent growth. Developmental obstacles can be divided into two categories: those attributable to internal issues in the various countries and those in their external environments (Raj, 1979). The predicament of many people is undoubtedly explained by initial low production levels, poverty of natural resources (such as the scarcity of land for agriculture), and high rates of population growth. But in other cases, these obstacles have been effectively overcome, partly through institutional innovation or adaptation and partly through workarounds that depend on the surrounding

environment. Interactions between internal and external factors significantly impact both the development processes and the outcomes.

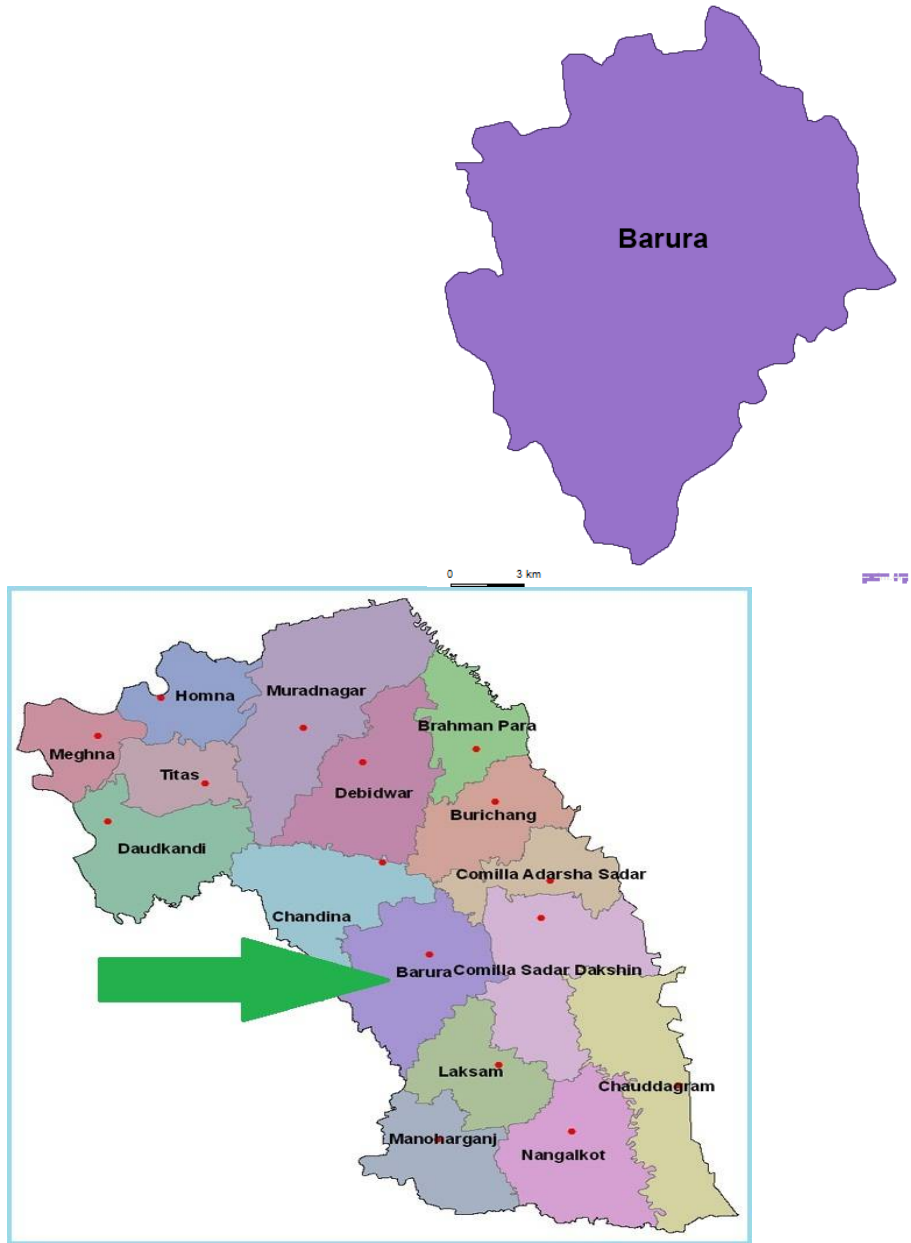
We will consider the development-related challenges previously encountered and now known regarding this interaction (Raj, 1979). According to (Donga et al., 2016), the five main factors preventing development in the Thulamela municipality are more funding, market access, out-of-date machinery and technology, shoddy infrastructure, and a lack of training. According to a South African survey, agriculture is most villages' primary income source. And because the agricultural sector is poor and receives little investment and exports, these villages need more development (Bakari & Ahmadi, 2018). South Africa's villages have struggled to flourish due to the coronavirus. Their labor market has been particularly impacted. In several industries, productivity has decreased while unemployment has increased. No development was, therefore, feasible there (Fengler et. al, 2021).

The obstacles preventing development in various locations, even when there is political stability, have been the subject of numerous studies. These studies have uncovered several vital barriers, such as poor infrastructure, restricted financial access, a shortage of competent labor, corruption, weak institutions, and violence. Additionally, they contend that government intervention and targeted policies, such as increasing credit availability, enhancing infrastructure, and encouraging good governance, can aid in removing these barriers and fostering economic growth. However, while several studies have focused on variables that limit development, the study needs to be more comprehensive on factors that can impede growth despite a stable political environment. This study aims to address these research gaps and investigate further barriers to the economic development and growth of the Barahangina and Talukpara villages.

### **3. Methodology and Materials of the Study**

Generally, research methodology is a method of collecting relevant information and data for achieving the research purpose. Creswell (2003) identifies three distinct research strategies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed, and the mixed approach used in this study. This study purposively selected Barahangina and Talukpara villages in Barura Upazila Parishad of Cumilla district as a research area, and the geographical location of the research area is shown in Figure 1 by the following map.

Figure 1. Map of the Study Area



Source: (Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), n.d.)

Moreover, the study purposively selected 50 respondents from two villages from different social levels, and the respondents were divided into older people as judges for social problems, political leaders as role models in rural development, and ordinary people as farmers, laborers, and employees. Six case studies and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted to collect qualitative data from the three groups. Using the Nvivo-14 software, the interview transcripts were coded thematically, categorized, and organized. Data were gathered and processed with code numbers in a separate file, and then triangulated in accordance with their nature, type, and characteristics. Additionally, information is presented in a range of ways, including pie charts, bar charts, and columns. Table 1 lists the study's sample design.

**Table 1: Criteria of Respondents**

<i>Research Area</i>	<b>Criteria of Respondents</b>			<b>Gender</b>		<b>Sub-Total</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
	Older People	Political Leaders	Common People (less than 50 age)	Male	Female		
<i>Barabangina village</i>	5	7	13	15	10	25	50
<i>Talukpara village</i>	5	8	12	15	10	25	

Subsequently, three central themes, opportunity scarcity, coordination gap with the national level, and political leaders' goodwill deficit, were derived from the qualitative data analysis using NVivo-14 software (See Table 2). The opportunity scarcity theme produced the highest reference code value from the NVivo-14 data with there being four sub-themes in this, while the coordination gap with national level and political leaders' goodwill deficit themes had the second-highest reference code value with there being three and two sub-themes respectively in this.

**Table 1: Defined themes that were divided from the thematic analysis<sup>6</sup>**

Central Theme	Sub-theme	Reference Code from Nvivo-14	Descriptive Coding	Descriptive Coding
Opportunity Scarcity	Education Disparities	12	<p><i>Limited educational options in some rural and small-town locations resulted in a lack of interest in education. The lack of sufficient land prevents the villagers from being entrepreneurial, which hinders the village's growth. Our community has been struggling with massive emigration, which has resulted in the loss of competent workers and unrealized potential. Farmers' ability to increase agricultural yields was hampered by the unavailability and high cost of these inputs.</i></p>	
	Land Deficiency and Dispute	8		
	Migration and Employment Impacts	9		
	Poor Agricultural Production	12		
Coordination Gap with National Level	Economic Disparities	5	<p><i>The lack of cooperation made the economic gaps between urban and rural areas worse. Infrastructure projects were delayed and left unfinished as a result of the local and national levels' lack of coordination.</i></p>	
	Inadequate Infrastructure	4		
	Inefficient Resource Allocation	5		

<sup>6</sup> The central and sub-themes are developed by the authors based on the findings of Mauro (1995), (Aschauer, 1989), (Lucas, 1988), (Krugman, 1987), (Persson & Tabellini, 1994), (Dasgupta, 2001), (Raj, 1979), (Donga et al., 2016), (Bakari & Ahmadi, 2018), and (Fengler et al., 2021).

Central Theme	Sub-theme	Reference Code from Nvivo-14	Descriptive Coding	Descriptive Coding
			<i>Misallocation of resources led to inefficiency in many industries and further hampered the region's development.</i>	
Political Leaders' Goodwill Deficit	Corruption and Nepotism	6	<i>Some political leaders use corruption and nepotism to further their own interests. Urban centers frequently saw a concentration of resources and capital, which fuelled their fast growth.</i>	
	Partisan Politics	6		

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Case Study Analysis

#### 4.1.1. Coordination Gap with National Level

It is difficult for local authorities in Talukpara and Barahangina villages to get the required resources, such as finance or technical expertise, to assist development projects without collaboration with national-level authorities.

##### 4.1.1.1. Economic Disparities

The economic environment has suffered due to the failure to create efficient structures for cooperation between urban and rural communities.

*'The lack of cooperation worsened the economic gaps between urban and rural areas.'* (Case Study #1)

Additionally, low-income families who cannot afford the costs of enrolling their children in alternative schools are affected. Such a situation adds to the difficulties these families experience by placing a hefty strain on them.

*'This is extremely difficult for low-income families who cannot afford the costs of sending their children to a different school.'* (Case Study #3)

Although remittances helped some families with their financial burdens, they unintentionally encouraged a reliance on foreign income sources, which could have reduced the incentives for local investments and development initiatives. This reliance on outside funding may limit the community's ability to promote local sustainable development.

*'While remittances helped some families financially, they also made people dependent on other people's income, which can cause them to make less investment in local development.'*

*(Case Study #4)*

The difficulties caused by migration and unrealized potential in these areas have various adverse effects. These include a shrinking pool of skilled labor, obstacles to innovation and economic growth, increased reliance on remittances, and a potential setback for initiatives to develop locally self-sustaining economic pathways.

*'The difficulties associated with migration and unrealized potential in our village had several effects, including a loss of skilled human capital, an impact on the area's capacity for innovation and economic growth, a reliance on remittances, and a potential underminer of efforts to create sustainable economic sources within the area.'* (Case Study #4)

Furthermore, the lack of opportunities and land has far-reaching impacts, particularly impeding economic growth due to the limited land available for construction projects. The difficulties experienced by the community are exacerbated by the situation, which also encourages social tensions resulting from conflicts over land.

*'Lack of land and opportunity has several effects, including slowed economic development due to the limited amount of land available for development initiatives, and social tensions brought on by land disputes and conflicts.'* (Case Study #5)

#### 4.1.1.2. Inadequate Infrastructure

The two villages have several developmental challenges, most notably inadequate infrastructure. The difficulties have been made more difficult by the lack of cooperation between local and national levels, which has postponed infrastructure projects and left them unfinished.

*'Our community has several development obstacles, including insufficient infrastructure. Infrastructure projects were delayed and left unfinished due*



*to the local and national levels' lack of coordination.'* (Case Study #1)

Moreover, the need for essential infrastructure in the village, such as paved roads, power, and clean water, creates difficult obstacles for locals to achieve basic requirements like healthcare and education.

*'It is difficult for inhabitants to meet necessities like healthcare and education due to the lack of vital infrastructure in the hamlet, such as paved roads, power, and clean water.'* (Case Study #2)

Students' access to education is also significantly hampered by the distance between the village and the closest institution.

*'The distance between the community and the closest institution is a significant challenge for pupils. Students must go quite a distance to pursue further education because no colleges or universities are nearby.'* (Case Study #3)

#### *4.1.1.3. Inefficient Resource Allocation*

The ineffective coordination led to an inefficient distribution of resources. The funding of crucial projects could have been more frequent, and precious resources were wasted due to critical initiatives being overshadowed by less crucial ones.

*'Ineffective coordination led to an ineffective distribution of resources. While less critical initiatives were given priority, essential ones did not receive enough money, wasting precious resources.'*(Case Study #1)

The participants were asked about the misallocation of resources and its impact. The inefficient use of resources has spread throughout several industries, posing additional obstacles to the region's overall development.

*'Misallocation of resources led to inefficiency in many industries and further hampered the region's development.'*(Case Study #1)

The widespread consequences of cronyism and rampant bribery also undermine openness and accountability in resource management by frequently misusing public resources for personal gain.

*'Graft and cronyism are rampant, and public resources are regularly misused for private gain.'*(Case Study #2)

A clear urban-rural difference worsens because larger cities have easier access to infrastructure, services, and job possibilities.

*'There is a clear urban-rural divide, with larger centers having easier access to infrastructure, services, and job prospects.'*(Case Study #5)

## 4.1.2. Opportunity Scarcity

### 4.1.2.1. Education Disparities

The need for higher education opportunities in the area places a heavy load on students and interferes with their efforts to further their education. Additionally, students need more higher education opportunities in the area. The study found significant differences in access to high-quality education within the Barahangina village.

*'The absence of higher education in our community causes students to struggle greatly. There are huge differences in the availability of high-quality education in our Barahangina village. I emphasized the impact of social attitudes toward education in our area.'*(Case Study #3)

Most students stop their education after class 10, choosing to look for work prospects abroad rather than continue to higher education, which has had a noticeable impact.

*'Most students leave study after class 10 to work abroad rather than pursue further education.'*(Case Study #3)

Families unwilling to send their kids overseas for school are also affected, which further restricts their ability to take advantage of chances for further education. This reluctance is brought on by a perceived lack of necessary skills, which fuels opposition to formal schooling. This opposition and a low literacy rate hurt the neighborhood's overall development and growth.

*'Many families are reluctant to send their children to study abroad, further restricts access to higher education. A perceived skills gap contributed to schooling resistance. The villages have a low literacy rate, which impacts the community's general development.'*(Case Study #3)

Additionally, the effects spread to areas where cultural norms and preconceived notions about the value of education reinforce local resistance to schooling. These cultural influences impact people's readiness to participate in formal education, contributing to resistance in some fields.

*'Education reluctance in some communities was exacerbated by cultural norms and beliefs about the importance of education, which had an impact on people's willingness to participate in formal learning.'*(Case Study #3)

#### *4.1.2.2. Land Deficiency and Dispute*

The villages' population is growing gradually and is outpacing the infrastructure. This increase stresses the ecosystem, causing conditions to worsen and become generally unhealthy. The lack of suitable land prevents locals from engaging in business ventures, which limits the village's potential for expansion.

*'Our village is small, but there are more people here. The village's population is growing daily since there are more individuals than residents. The ecology in the community is getting worse and is generally unhealthy. The lack of sufficient land prevents the villagers from being entrepreneurial, which hinders the village's growth.'*(Case Study #5)

Due to ambiguous land tenure policies and competing property interests, the region frequently experiences land disputes and conflicts. These conflicts prevented the land from being used productively for development, which resulted in inefficient land use and undermined potential opportunities for economic expansion.

*'There were frequent land disputes and conflicts in our area due to murky land tenure arrangements and conflicting property rights. Conflicts prevented land use for development, resulting in wasteful land use and reducing prospects for economic progress.'*(Case Study #5)

#### *4.1.2.3. Migration and Employment Impacts*

The community continues to face the difficulty of significant emigration, which causes the loss of trained labor and unrealized potential. As highly

qualified individuals leave the neighborhood searching for better opportunities abroad or in more populous cities, contributing to the problem known as brain drain, this migration has brought about hardships.

*'Our community has been struggling with massive emigration, which has resulted in the loss of competent workers and unrealized potential. Our community faced difficulties as a result of immigration. Highly skilled individuals left our hamlet in quest of greater possibilities abroad or big centers, causing a brain drain.'*(Case Study #4)

The absence of proactive policies and initiatives to promote employment prospects also contributes to the community's high rates of unemployment and poverty, which are made worse by them. These difficulties can be directly linked to political leaders' lack of goodwill and dedication.

*'High unemployment and poverty rates, as well as the absence of encouraging policies and attempts to create work prospects, are direct results of political leaders' lack of goodwill.'*(Case Study #2)

Additionally, there is a general belief among some people that formal education only partially corresponds with the practical abilities necessary for gainful employment in the actual world. This view has essential effects on schooling and preparation for the workforce.

*'Some people believed that formal education did not correspond with the real-world abilities needed for employment.'*(Case Study #3)

A further factor driving up the demand for land and resources in those areas is the tendency of rising migration to metropolitan centers. Increased demands on urban infrastructure and resources result from this population surge.

*'More people migrate to metropolitan areas, which increased the demand for land and resources there.'*(Case Study #5)

#### 4.1.2.4. Poor Agricultural Production

The respondents emphasized that agriculture is their community's primary source of revenue. The village's production has been falling despite the

clear potential for agriculture. The lack of adequate irrigation infrastructure impedes efficient farming methods, a primary element causing this problem.

*Rajesb, a farmer and inhabitant of Talukpara village, stated that agriculture is our community's primary income source. But the village's production has been declining despite its potential for agriculture, and a major problem is the lack of adequate irrigation systems.' (Case Study #6)*

Additionally, the influence can be observed in the decreased output brought on by a need for knowledge of contemporary farming techniques, such as effective crop rotation, pest control, and effective fertilizer use. Farmers' inability to integrate new technology hindered their potential to increase yields and embrace sustainable agricultural practices, halting development.

*'A lack of knowledge about modern farming techniques such as effective crop rotation, pest control, and the best use of fertilizers hampered productivity. Their incapacity constrained the capacity of farmers to increase yields and use sustainable agricultural practices to absorb new techniques.' (Case Study #6)*

The circumstances also affect farmers since they cannot obtain fair product pricing due to poor market links and limited market access. Investments in agricultural operations are discouraged due to the inconsistent price structure, which further negatively impacts their income and profitability.

*'Farmers' ability to get fair pricing for their produce was constrained by limited market access and a lack of efficient market linkages. The income and profitability of their operations were further harmed by price swings, discouraging investment in agricultural ventures.' (Case Study #6)*

### **4.1.3. Political Leaders' Goodwill Deficit**

#### *4.1.3.1. Corruption and Nepotism*

As a result of sluggish communication and decision-making, essential projects like building roads, schools, and healthcare facilities went unfinished. Since there is a gap between elected officials and the people

they represent, popular support and confidence have decreased, making the community's problems worse.

*'Critical initiatives, including roads, schools, and healthcare facilities, were not completely realized due to a lack of timely communication and decision-making. Moreover, the disconnection between elected officials and the people they represent has weakened public support and eroded public trust.'*(Case Study #1 & 2)

Additionally, the effects are visible in how confident political leaders use corruption and nepotism to further their agendas, frequently at the expense of the general welfare. This practice erodes public confidence and questions the government's legitimacy.

*'Some political leaders' use of corruption and nepotism to further their interests at the expense of the public's welfare undermines the government's legitimacy.'*(Case Study #2)

The effect can also be seen in some political leaders' short-sighted policies, which put the implementation of short-term gains and popularity over long-term development objectives. This way of thinking can obstruct complete growth and lasting progress.

*'The short-term thinking of some political leaders, who prioritize popularity and short-term advantages above long-term development plans.'*(Case Study #2)

#### 4.1.3.2. Partisan Politics

Partisan politics hinders cooperation between competing political groupings and frequently eclipses local and regional concerns. Partisan politics is a significant contributor to the absence of constructive purpose. This dynamic may hamper effective governance and growth.

*'Partisan politics are a major contributor to the lack of goodwill since they prevent cooperation between opposing political groupings and frequently overshadow regional concerns.'*(Case Study #2)

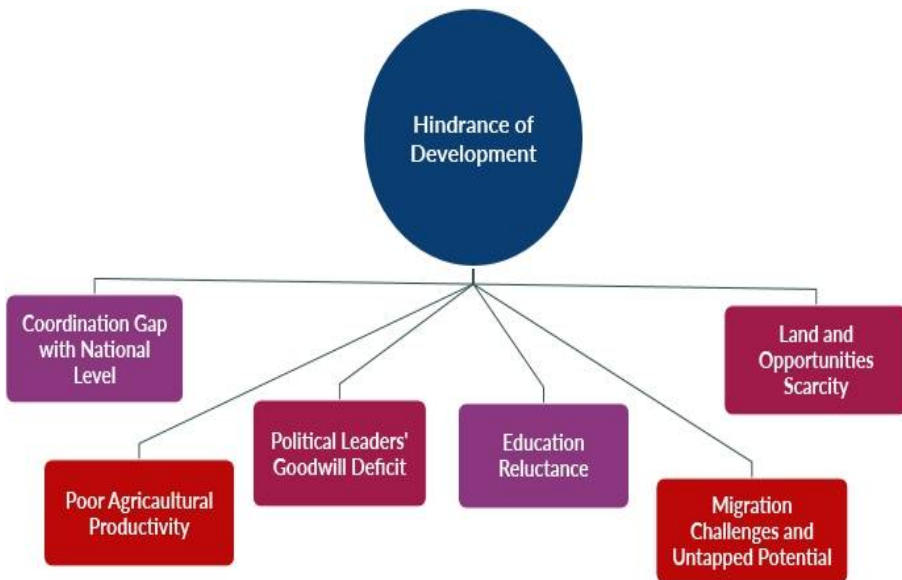
Moreover, urban centers where resources and capital are concentrated are feeling the effects, which has helped to fuel their explosive expansion and

development. Regional imbalances and inequality may increase as a result of this centralization.

*'Urban centers frequently saw a concentration of resources and capital, which fuelled their fast growth.'* (Case Study #1)

## 4.2. Survey Analysis

*Figure 2: Factors that hinder the development of a stable political environment*

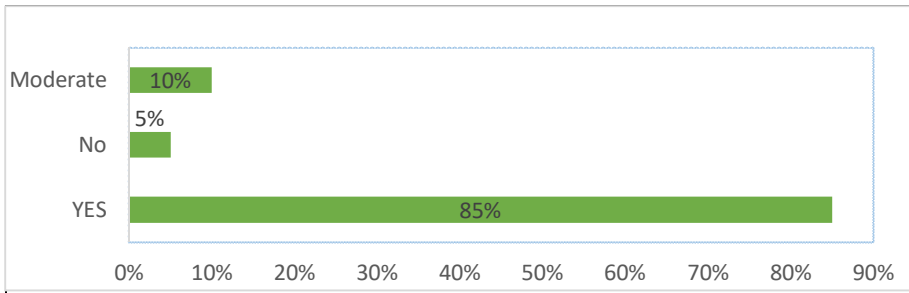


Source: The figure is developed by the authors based on findings of Mauro (1995), (Aschauer, 1989), (Lucas, 1988), (Krugman, 1987), (Persson & Tabellini, 1994), (Dasgupta, 2001), (Raj, 1979), (Donga et al., 2016), (Bakari & Ahmadi, 2018), and (Fengler et. al, 2021).

### 4.2.1 Coordination Gap with National Level

Figure 3 shows limited coordination at the national level. In this regard, 85% of the respondents said that their villages needed the support and resources they required from higher authorities, hindering their villages from flourishing.

**Figure 3: Coordination Gap with National Level**

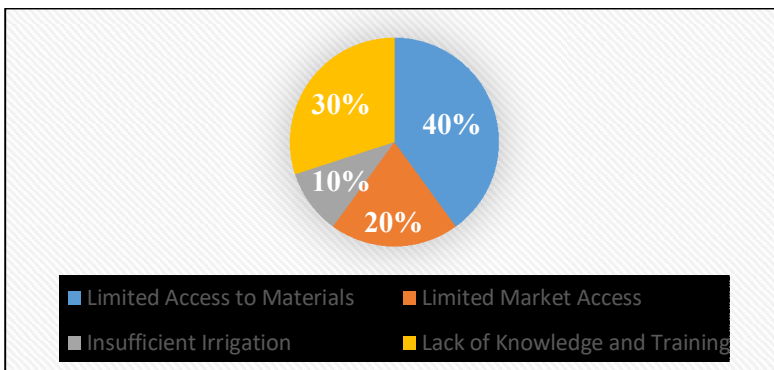


However, 5% of respondents claimed that their local governments had close relationships with national-level authorities and were either politicians or supporters of the ruling government. In certain situations, villages get aid due to their political connections. Lastly, the remaining respondents (10%) were moderately concerned about this issue.

#### 4.2.2 Poor Agricultural Productivity

In terms of poor agricultural productivity in Barahangina and Talukpara villages, Figure 4 shows that about 40% of respondents stated that access to agrarian materials is limited, and farmers confront several difficulties, including difficulty getting high-quality seeds, fertilizer, and other agricultural materials that are necessary to boost crop yields.

**Figure 4: Poor Agricultural Productivity**



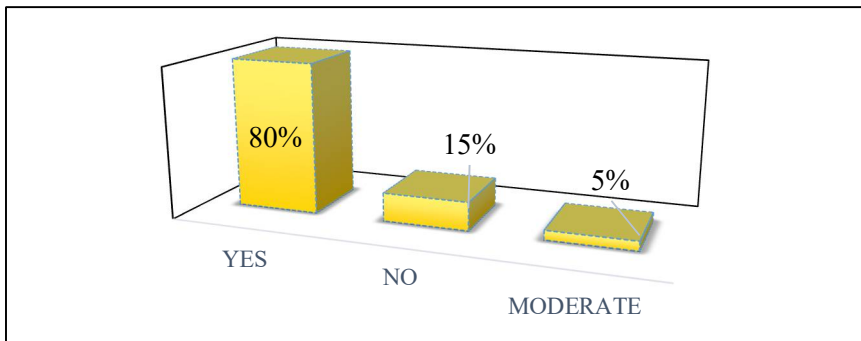


Moreover, considering the poor agricultural productivity in these villages, about 30% of respondents stated that farmers of these two villages lack training and knowledge of contemporary farming methods, which hinders their ability to increase crop yields and use sustainable farming techniques. About 20% of respondents stated that farmers experience limited market access, which makes it challenging for them to sell their crops and get an equitable price for their labor, and the middlemen who buy commodities at cheap rates and sell them to end customers at higher costs could engage in unfair pricing practices toward farmers. Finally, about 10% of respondents stated that lack of irrigation limit agricultural yields and impairs farmland productivity in these villages.

#### **4.2.3 Political Leaders' Goodwill Deficit**

Political leaders' unwillingness is a barrier to development in the Barahangina and Talukpara villages, as shown in Figure 5. In this context, about 80% of the respondents think that their village's political leaders don't care about the growth of their community. As a result, villagers cannot receive the necessary support and development projects from national authorities. However, 15% of respondents—politicians and followers of political leaders—said their political leaders are responsible to the villagers and carry out initiatives to develop the villages. In comparison, 5% of respondents were moderate in this regard.

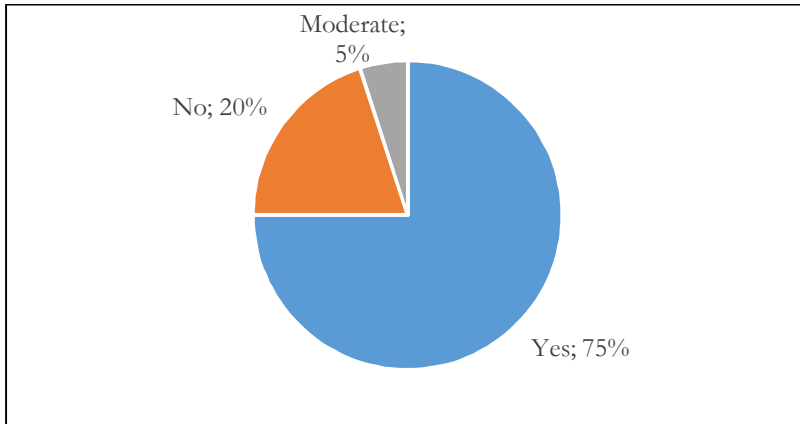
*Figure 5: Political Leaders' Goodwill Deficit*



#### 4.2.4 Education Reluctance

The residents of Barahangina and Talukpara villages are not interested in pursuing the education found in the study. In this regard, Figure 6 shows that about 75% of people didn't have an interest in pursuing education, while 20% have, and the rest were moderate.

*Figure 6: The reluctance to education*



Moreover, reluctance towards education in certain villages has led to three primary challenges. The lack of skilled workers, particularly in fields like healthcare, engineering, and technology, was mentioned by almost 70% of respondents as being caused by the peasants' disinterest in education. Approximately 25% of respondents stated that villages miss out on important information on healthcare, finances, legal rights, and other crucial subjects due to a lack of interest in education. By limiting possibilities, impeding skill development, and lowering competitiveness, about 5% of respondents emphasized that a lack of interest in education in these villages prevents social mobility.

#### 4.2.5 Migration Challenges and Untapped Potential

*Figure 7: Migration Challenges and Untapped Potential*

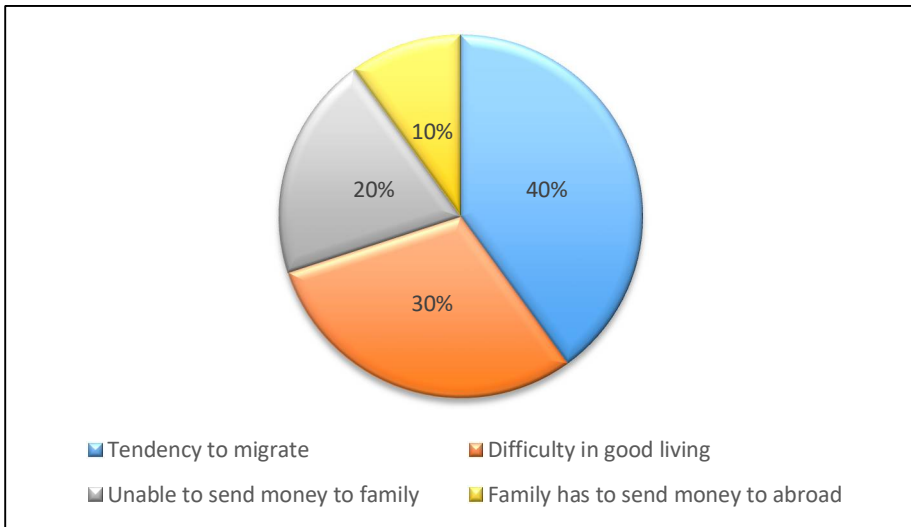


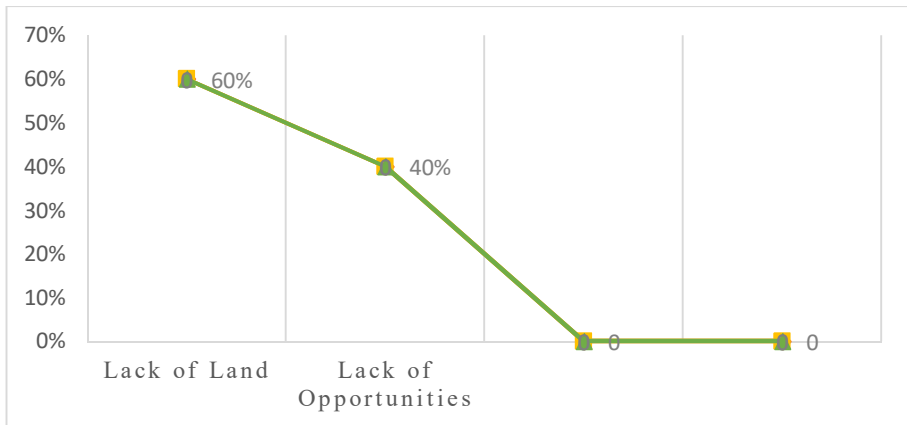
Figure 7 shows that there is a tendency for young people in these villages to migrate overseas stated by 40% of the respondents. There are two reasons for the migration abroad: they desire to or don't want to pursue higher education. However, about 30% and 20% of the respondents respectively mentioned that despite their efforts to improve their families' financial situation, these migrants frequently find it challenging to make a good living and cannot send money to their families because of not getting a job. As a result, family members frequently give them money, as stated by 10% of respondents, which strains the family's finances. The families' financial instability limits their capacity to invest in their village's expansion and development, influencing its overall growth.

#### 4.2.6 Land and Opportunities Scarcity

Figure 8 shows the lack of land and opportunities in Barahangina and Talukpara villages that hinder the development of these villages. In this

regard, 60% of respondents said their towns are very congested with overpopulation, and the population rate is increasing yearly. As a result, people were compelled to destroy crops and land to make their houses significantly decreased land, which directly hampered the adequate agricultural productivity and enterprising for the villagers due to lack of land.

*Figure 8: Land and Opportunities Scarcity*



Besides, 40% of respondents said that the villagers, especially young people, are unaware of education. They tend to migrate abroad to earn without pursuing education, which results in most of the people of these two villages needing to be more literate. They are being deprived of various opportunities due to the need for proper educational qualifications.

### 4.3. FGD Findings

In the study, data was collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) that were conducted in both villages. Participants in the focus groups consisted of various occupations, including teachers, students, politicians, vendors, and farmers. The length of each FGD was 60 minutes.

The participants in the FGDs highlighted four things that are impeding their villages' growth. In the initial stages, there needs to be more coordination between the national and rural levels. This meant that

national development initiatives needed to reach rural communities properly. The participants also acknowledged the need for more political leaders' support for developing their areas. In their opinion, the community's well-being came second to personal gain for political leaders. Thirdly, there was a propensity for people to leave their home countries searching for work. This resulted in a brain drain in the villages, with many skilled people departing and never returning, negatively impacting the villages' growth. The panelists also brought up students' resistance to studying. This was viewed as a significant barrier to the villages' growth because education is crucial to the advancement of any society.

## **5. Discussion**

The study highlights the impact of economic inequalities, inadequate infrastructure, ineffective resource distribution, and limited opportunities on the growth and well-being of communities in Talukpara and Barahangina villages. These issues stem from various sources, including a lack of cooperation between national and rural authorities, limited access to higher education, cultural norms, and migration. These factors contribute to a cycle of dropouts, limited access to higher education, and increased competition for resources and jobs. Addressing these issues is crucial for promoting sustainable development and addressing the challenges faced by these communities.

Although remittances from migrants offer financial assistance, they also encourage reliance on foreign money, impeding local economic initiatives. Poor infrastructure, including a lack of clean water, electricity, and roads, restricts access to essential services and slows economic expansion. Conflicts are exacerbated, and land disputes and improper land management hamper development prospects. The environment is harmed by deforestation and inadequate garbage management. Agriculture productivity needs to be improved by better irrigation infrastructure and a need for more awareness about contemporary farming methods.

Resources must be used more efficiently, and corruption hurts business and impedes development. Corruption, nepotism, and partisan politics undermine effective governance and development activities. Thinking only about the present and putting one's interests first has checked long-

term development. Public support is lost when people don't trust the leadership. Resources and capital are concentrated in urban areas, which promotes quick growth and development. This centralization has made regional inequality and inequities worse.

The analysis illuminates the intricate problems these communities must contend with by offering thorough case studies and insights into each consequence. To overcome these problems and promote holistic growth, it emphasizes the necessity for collaborative efforts, sustainable development techniques, and efficient governance.

### **5.1. Recommendations**

The villages of Barahangina and Talukpara have specific development issues. Before development can start, the environment must be favorable. However, the atmosphere in these villages could be more conducive to development. The respondents suggest several measures to help the area overcome obstacles and achieve equitable and sustainable growth. These include improving communication, setting up a committee to plan regional development, and implementing an open resource allocation system.

Moreover, political leaders must prioritize the welfare of their people and invest in the village's prosperity if they want to improve the quality of life and economic development. In Talukpara and Barahangina villages, it is emphasized that transparent and competent governance is the primary force behind progress. Leaders' collaboration and community empowerment are emphasized as paths to significant advancement.

The respondents further emphasize the importance of promoting a learning culture, enhancing educational outcomes, and giving the workforce the skills they need for long-term growth. By making investments in educational infrastructure and resources, this can be accomplished. The village administration is encouraged to adopt regulations and incentives that preserve skilled workers and draw in talent from other places to support local economic growth. This strategy can unlock potential and allay fears about migration. It is recommended to diversify the economy to lessen reliance on remittances and to ensure steady sources of income and jobs.

Furthermore, Government-led land reforms are recommended to solve problems relating to the land. These changes are intended to clarify who

owns the land, establish property rights, lessen land conflicts, and promote beneficial land usage. It is emphasized that local populations should participate in decisions about using and developing land.

Additionally, to effectively address these difficulties, collaboration is necessary. This entails enhancing irrigation infrastructure, offering farmers technical training and extension services, encouraging soil conservation practices, enabling access to inputs and loans, and creating effective market links. This comprehensive strategy can potentially increase Talukpara and Barahangina village's agricultural productivity, resulting in better livelihoods and long-term agrarian growth.

## **6. Conclusion**

Political stability also affects overall development, while political instability has ramifications for economic growth and infrastructure development (Radu, 2015). However, more qualitative and quantitative research is needed to thoroughly understand the detrimental effects of political stability on the plot (Blum and Gründler, 2020). The study discovered that in the villages of Barahangina and Talukpara, some factors of underdevelopment in stable political environments. The result of the study demonstrates that neither political stability nor political instability, by themselves, can promote or impede growth. Other factors that are hindering development in these two villages include a lack of coordination with the national level, the unwillingness of political leaders, the young generation's reluctance to study and tendency to immigrate abroad, as well as a lack of ability to benefit from opportunities abroad, and unavailable land and opportunities. By concentrating on two particular villages, the study examined the underlying causes of underdevelopment in surroundings with stable political systems. The study has found numerous vital variables that lead to underdevelopment in these areas by analyzing several socioeconomic indicators and people's opinions. The study's overall conclusions significantly impact development practitioners and politicians operating in comparable environments. It emphasizes the necessity of a comprehensive strategy for development that accounts for the many social, economic, and political aspects that cause underdevelopment. It might be possible to foster long-term sustainable

and inclusive growth in these areas by addressing these underlying causes of underdevelopment.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors thank Harun Ar-Rashid Mamun, a Fellow at Teach for Bangladesh, and Zahedul Islam, a B.S.S student at the Department of Public Administration, Comilla University for their inspiration, creative guidance, and unwavering support that have been instrumental in the creation of this article.

## **Funding**

The authors declare no funds/ other support for the current study.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declares no conflicting interests.

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# THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: FROM REFUGEE CRISIS MANAGEMENT TO RESETTING SECURITY ENFORCEMENT STRATEGIES

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2024.4.05>

**Abstract:** *The article analyzes how the national security of the Republic of Moldova re-actualized under the impact of the war in Ukraine and led to a reset of regional security strategies. The article reviews how the Republic of Moldova, confronted with a significant wave of Ukrainian refugees, was forced to test its logistical, economic and security capacities. Building upon the contextual benchmarks, the steps taken to respond promptly and in a coordinated manner to the refugee crisis are outlined, as well as how Moldova's image as a responsible and humanitarian partner has been strengthened. The article also emphasizes the importance of international support, which has been crucial in managing the refugee crisis. At the same time, the crisis has underlined the need for systemic reforms in the area of national security in order to address current and future threats.*

*The article emphasizes that while the Ukrainian refugee crisis has challenged the Moldovan authorities, it has also provided an opportunity to demonstrate the country's commitment and solidarity, as well as the Moldovan people's resilience. This difficult*

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*journey has strengthened the Republic of Moldova's position on the international scene, increasing the recognition of its humanitarian and security efforts and has created positive preconditions for its journey towards European Union membership.*

**Keywords:** *security, crisis, refugees, war, rights, resilience*

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## 1. Contextual Background

For over 30 years, the Republic of Moldova has been in search of its own identity and has tried to prove that it can be a reliable partner for other countries in the world. With ups and downs, influenced by the geopolitical configuration and preferences of the governments (sometimes preferring the East, sometimes the West) over the years, the Republic of Moldova has remained on the periphery of the democratization processes and in a constant struggle to consolidate the rule of law, reform its institutions and fight corruption. Fundamentally, nothing stands out from the rest in the sense that democracy-building is a long and laborious process, and the conditions that contribute to the consolidation of a democratic state, as Huntington (Huntington S., 1991) points out, include: ongoing democratization processes; high development indicators; international partnerships and external support; a long and committed process of transition to democracy; social consensus on the preference for democracy. Echoing the author of the Third Wave, we shall argue that, on the whole, nothing can ensure the transition of a state from a totalitarian regime to a democratic one if there is no consistency of adherence to democracy and democratic values by the state authorities and its citizens. Consistency is the guarantee for the success of democratic processes and democracy.

The Republic of Moldova, like other former Soviet states, opted for democracy, independence and expressed its desire to be part of the European community. However, precisely from this perspective, the processes that have taken place at national level have not enabled the steady achievement of this objective. According to the experts who drafted the Report Security Sector Governance in Moldova (Report Security Sector Governance in Moldova, 2024, p.11) Raportul Guvernarea sectorului de Securitate în Moldova), "the instability of the regional security environment and domestic vulnerabilities have highlighted the need to reset some important sectors of state activity, such as justice and

security". Selectively will be emphasized events with a major impact on the processes that have taken place in the Republic of Moldova and which have had an impact on the practical implementation of democracy and the rule of law, on cooperation with the European states.

Throughout its recent history, the Republic of Moldova experienced periods of approaching closer ties with the EU, and at a certain stage it was even declared a country of 'success story'. After a three-year political crisis, in 2012 Moldova received a major support from the EU and the phrase "Moldova, an EU success story" became a common catchword in Brussels and Chisinau. A significant achievement was the signature of the Association Agreement (in June 2014) and its entry into force (in 2016), even so, it failed to secure the steady European course of the country. Subsequent deviations have been significant and have influenced the Moldovan Republic's relations with the European community. In 2018, the European Parliament officially declared, in its resolution on the implementation of the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, that the Republic of Moldova is a state captured by oligarchic interests (European Parliament, 2024). A year later, after the parliamentary elections of the 24th of February 2019, the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova adopted the Declaration on the recognition of the captive character of the state, which was based on "the statement of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Thorbjørn Jagland of August 11, 2015 on the captured state, the selective application of justice and the existence of serious deviations in the political process in the Republic of Moldova and the European Parliament resolutions of July and November 2018, which denounced the government in Chisinau as a captured state" (Decision of the Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. 2019).

Since 2019, there has been a rush both in the context of the constant effort to justify the right of the Republic of Moldova to be part of the EU, as well as in the light of some factors that have marked the development of the country and its citizens. Multiple factors have influenced the development of the Republic of Moldova and the country's path towards European standards, even though the preference for EU values and the tendency towards accession have been declared on several occasions. The crises, which have become a permanent feature, have made it necessary to redirect efforts towards identifying targeted actions to manage and resolve them. There is an accumulation of crises caused by both internal and

external factors. According to IDIS Viitorul experts, the years 2020, 2021 and 2022 shall remain in history as the most challenging years for the Republic of Moldova. The pandemic was a moment of difficulty that required consolidated efforts of the authorities and citizens, which put the government to the test, changing from a political crisis to a health crisis. The consequences of the pandemic were not over by the time another crisis arose, triggered by the war in Ukraine. "The year 2022 was the most crisis-stricken in Moldova's history. Mainly the energy crisis, registered shortly after the pandemic crisis, and fueled by the crisis of the war in Ukraine" (IDIS Viitorul, 2022), while "The greatest weight is given to the crisis caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war (Press agency IPN, 2022), which has put enormous pressure on the authorities from multiple perspectives and which, according to some experts "significantly affects the security architecture of the European continent in general and of South-Eastern Europe" (Albu N. et al, 2024).

The critical issue that has gripped and alarmed Moldovan society, becoming a primary concern for authorities, is the realization that the security of its citizens and the sovereignty of the state have been at risk since the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While the outbreak of the war was initially perceived as surreal by many, its reality has starkly exposed the region's security vulnerabilities, particularly those of the Republic of Moldova.

Thus, the following analyses focus on the interconnections between history, processes, and priorities, which, considering the background of the war in Ukraine and beyond, have highlighted some imminent threats to the security of the Republic of Moldova and to the fundamental rights and freedoms of its citizens. At the same time, the analyses explore how accountability, responsibility, solidarity, and compassion can enhance security by fostering more partnerships, international support, and cooperation. Therefore, in a generalizing formula, it will be analyzed how the declarations made and transformed into actions can bring benefits on multiple levels: social, economic, political, etc., but perhaps the most important benefit is the fulfillment of the security need and peace regarding the future of a state and its citizens, ensuring the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms.

## **2. Converting the priorities of the Republic of Moldova towards security**

Against the background of social, political, economic, etc. developments, the Republic of Moldova has been trapped between Western and Russian influences, and the issue of national security remains an open and sometimes neglected topic due to the different agendas of political parties in terms of geopolitical orientation. Therefore, security trends in the Republic of Moldova must be seen through the lens of the country's history, the current situation in the region and the impact of various factors (both internal and external) that have marked the processes of democratization and consolidation of the rule of law. Institutional reform (reform of the judiciary, strengthening the rule of law, eliminating corruption, democratization, etc.) is certainly necessary to ensure long-term security and stability, but at the same time the way in which national security is approached as a priority and strategic issue must be reconsidered.

What has marked Moldova's security? Frequent conflicts and the presence of Russian troops in the region under the pretext of peacekeeping have made bilateral relations more complicated and affected national security. However, the reforms that have been carried out over time have not been designed to ensure an exit from Russia's influence, which has been and continues to remain a factor of impact on internal processes, the security of the Republic of Moldova, but also on regional security. The National Security Strategy reiterates that the main threat to national security is "the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation against our country and against peace in general" (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2023). The first steps towards the identification of international partnerships to ensure national security can be identified in the accession to the NATO Partnership for Peace (1994) and the Individual Action Plan of the Partnership with NATO (2005).

Over the years, with NATO and EU support, several steps have been taken to implement reforms in the security and defense sector, however, the Republic of Moldova is still marked by major challenges, in particular related to the situation in Ukraine, Transnistria and regional geopolitical influences. The report prepared by Deen and Zweers (2022) outlines the vulnerabilities faced by the Republic of Moldova and examines how Russia

influences Moldova's domestic politics as well as the Transnistrian region and Gagauzia.

The growing concern for national security has skyrocketed in recent years. The war in Ukraine triggered a determination to intensify ties with the EU and NATO in the area of security and defense cooperation. However, the risk of a possible escalation of the war cannot be excluded, given the proximity of the Republic of Moldova to Ukraine, but also because of the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria, which is a source of tension and instability. At the same time, internal challenges are increasingly intensifying, generating social and political tensions, due to actions aimed at polarizing society through disinformation and manipulation, which is a risk factor at a global, not just local, level (Global Risks Report, 2024).

Concerns about Russian interference in the countries of the Eastern Partnership have become more and more frequent, especially intensified in the context of the fall 2024 elections and referendum. To undermine Moldova's European course "Russia has managed to considerably diversify its political influence in Moldova (...). The risk that the presidential elections and the referendum in the fall will become the target of Russian provocations is imminent", notes D. Cenușă (2024). Thus, the fact that Moldovan political parties continue to exploit the message of geopolitical preferences in their political discourse, ignoring the realities and national interest, and the security risks, thus intensifying internal tensions and making the country more vulnerable.

According to the report on Security Sector Governance in Moldova (Albu N. et al, 2024), "since the beginning of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, the European Union has strengthened its cooperation with the Republic of Moldova in the fields of security and defense. The European Union actively contributes to the reinforcement of the security and defense sector of the Republic of Moldova and cooperates on security and defense through its external financing instruments. Security and defense cooperation has substantially increased in 2023, in particular, in the area related to the modernization of the army and the increase of military capabilities with which Moldova intends to contribute to international security operations under the patronage of the UN, NATO and the EU." At the same time, the Moldovan authorities have to carefully navigate between ensuring national security and maintaining a position of neutrality



in the tense geopolitical context, as stipulated in Article 11 of the Constitution.

In order to increase the state's capacity to prevent and counter national security risks, the National Security Strategy (Official Gazette, 2024) was adopted on December 15, 2023, which is a reference document and provides a basis for the development, integration and amendment of legislation in the field of national security.

At the beginning of this year (January 22, 2024) by a Presidential Decree (The Decree of the President of the RM, 2024) the Commission for the elaboration of the defense strategy of the Republic of Moldova was established, which aims to further reform the country's security and defense system in order to strengthen national defense capabilities. A similar exercise took place in 2018, when as a result of a complex regional security context, the first National Defense Strategy was approved by parliamentary decision No. 134 of July 19, 2018, which identified risk factors to the security of the Republic of Moldova, including ones that continue to be valid even today: propaganda, cyber-attacks, instability and conflict in Ukraine, military potential in the Transnistrian region, etc. This strategy is among the pioneering documents that highlighted the national security focus and interests.

The Strategy points out that, taking into account the fact that "Due to its geographical location, the Republic of Moldova is an integral part of the security architecture of the Black Sea basin - an area of interest for a number of actors (...) influenced by the existence of the axis of frozen conflicts (Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Mountain Karabakh regions), as well as current conflicts (Ukraine) (...) The Republic of Moldova shall strengthen, develop and modernize the national security and defense system, taking into account the developments in the security environment" (Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, 2018). However, this document did not bring national security defense issues onto the top priorities of the political agenda. Currently, the regional security environment and the international security system's trends require actions to develop and strengthen the national defense system to ensure national security.

### **3. Refugee crisis – a test of the Republic of Moldova's maturity and commitment**

The Republic of Moldova and Ukraine (both former republics of the USSR), by virtue of their regional context and shared history, have maintained bilateral relations, although much closer relations have continued to be between the citizens of the two states. At the same time, Russia's imperial ambitions to maintain its influence in these states persisted even though "After the break-up of the USSR (1991) (...) the principles of inviolability of borders and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states were extended to the former union republics (...). The Russian Federation (RF) confirmed this principle and recognized the borders of the new states (...) [Moreover] the Kremlin's policy was to keep not only the inhabitants of Ukraine, but also the rest of Europe on alert" (Petrencu A., 2024, p. 110, 112).

Once the war started, public order and security in the region became fragile and the neighboring countries became vulnerable to security challenges and external influences. This anxiety is also noted by Prof. Radu Carp (2024), who in his overview of the course of the war in Ukraine, states that "the problem that has bothered the authorities and citizens of the Republic of Moldova from the very beginning - is the security risks for the country in the context of the possible expansion of the Russian army's actions". The Moldovan President argues this vulnerability of the country in her public speeches. "The war on Moldova's borders is a risk for all of us, especially for our region and especially for the Republic of Moldova, which is the most fragile and the most vulnerable. As we have said on other occasions, we do not see immediate, imminent risks to the security of our state, but these risks exist and the situation depends on what will happen next in Ukraine" (Declarations of the President of the Republic of Moldova, 2024).

As an independent state, Moldova has been constantly marked by Russia's interference, its influence being periodically intensified by provocations in the separatist Transnistria region in the east and the autonomous region of Gagauzia in the south of the country, through pro-Russian political parties and fleeing oligarchs. The Munich Security Report (2024) takes a similar perspective. According to the report, presented at the Munich Security Conference, entitled *Lose - lose?*, the Russian Federation is considered by public opinion in various countries to be the greatest

security risk or is at least in the top three risks, while at the same time "countries stuck in the 'gray zone' are in a dangerous place. The Ukrainians are already paying the highest price for Russia's imperial ambitions. Georgia, Moldova and the Western Balkans are also feeling the impact of Russian coercion."

Against this background, the war has brought into focus some priority issues concerning the need to strengthen national security measures, to reinforce the efforts to overcome persistent crises and to prevent them from deepening, in order to avoid irreparable situations and to ensure social order.

In addition, a review of current priorities was necessary in order to shift the resources (human, material, IT, etc.) needed to deal with the refugee crisis. The Ukrainians' first reaction to Russia's attack was to flee the conflict. Thus, the Republic of Moldova was the most exposed to the flow of refugees from the first day of the war. Moldova received a significant number of Ukrainian refugees, which strained the country's economic and social resources. The authorities had to quickly manage the humanitarian crisis generated by this flow of people, but also to maintain political and economic stability, security and order.

Apart, for the moment, from its internal problems, the Moldovan authorities have committed themselves fully to the protection of Ukrainian citizens (elderly, single children, mothers) with or without identity documents, who have been forced to leave their country of origin because of the war and have crossed the border to find safety. The estimates of the number of refugees who have crossed the Moldovan border range from 1 to 1.5 million. The largest influx of refugees was registered in the first phase of the war, both in and out of the country.

The most vulnerable refugees are those who are currently on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Today there are more than 110 thousand Ukrainian refugees, half of them children. Among those who have chosen to stay in the Republic of Moldova are people who have their roots in Moldova and have relatives who have offered them accommodation or have returned to their parents' homes. Behind these figures are people who have urgent needs (accommodation, employment, health, etc.), people with hopes, rights and freedoms, which calls for a reinforced effort to provide moral and material support, legal assistance and protection.

In line with relevant legal instruments, such as the UN Convention, Directive 2011/95/EU and other regulations, the Moldovan authorities have sought to ensure the protection of the rights of refugees: protection against return (Art. 21), access to information (Art.22), access to employment (Art. 26), access to education (Art.27), equal treatment and social assistance (art.29), access to health services (art.30) (Directive 2011/95/UE), etc. However, in order to cope with the situation, the Moldovan government needed to strengthen the technical and financial capacities to respond to the needs of refugees and Moldovans. There were obvious institutional shortcomings and insufficient human resources at national level. This made it necessary for the state authorities to strengthen the instruments for coordinating and managing the situation in order to avoid ad hoc responses. However, "The mass arrival of displaced persons from Ukraine who were forced to seek refuge and protection in countries in the region, for the first time in the history of the Republic of Moldova, has led to a considerable increase in asylum applications. This has put enormous pressure on the national asylum system in a very short time. The most effective mechanism to legalize the stay on the territory of the Republic of Moldova of displaced persons from Ukraine due to the armed conflict and to grant access to a broad spectrum of rights is the application for temporary protection, a form of protection provided for by Law No 270/2008 on Asylum in the Republic of Moldova" (Study, 2024, p.67).

In this context, the measures adopted by the Republic of Moldova from a structural, functional and legal point of view have aimed to achieve legal and moral commitments in close terms, which also facilitated the reorganization of some institutions. Thus, by the Government Decision No. 16 of 11.01.2023 the Migration and Asylum Office was reorganized into the General Inspectorate for Migration, which "has the mission of implementing state policies in the areas of migration, asylum, stateless people, readmission and integration of foreigners, respect for fundamental human rights and guaranteeing the public order and security of the state" (Government Decision no.16 /2023). The informative note (2024) accompanying the draft Government Decision, points out the need for structural and functional reorganization and capacity building for the effective realization of the mission and tasks, to increase the quality of the response to regional and international challenges, as well as EU requirements in the field. Thanks to the deconcentration (the Asylum and Statelessness Directorate and three territorial subdivisions of the IGM

were created: The Northern Regional Directorate, the Southern Regional Directorate and the Central Regional Directorate), it was possible to respond to the flows of immigrants, but also to mitigate internal and external risks to ensure public order and security. The reorganization was necessary in order to increase the efficiency of the response to situations such as the war in the neighbourhood.

Given the need for a structured approach to the situation, and for effective crisis management, right from the beginning of the war, by Parliament Decision no. 41 of 24 February 2022, the Commission for Exceptional Situations of the Republic of Moldova was established, which took a number of important decisions, authorizing border crossing, medical assistance, granting the right to work, etc., and as of 28 February 2022, the Single Crisis Management Centre became operational, a structure that has assumed the coordination of the assistance efforts carried out by the Government, international organizations, private initiatives and volunteers. Thus, the authorities of the Republic of Moldova, with the support of citizens and the international community, have acted in solidarity, affection and moral commitment towards Ukrainian citizens, and with a high degree of responsibility towards each person who arrived on their territory.

From the perspective of the applied national normative framework, which has been largely adjusted over time to international regulations, a series of measures have been adopted to create functional inter-institutional synergies adaptable to the context and circumstances, as well as to the needs of refugees. In accordance with the provisions of the 1951 UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, ratified by the Republic of Moldova, and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, the authorities took action in an attempt to make use of all legal instruments capable of ensuring a balance between rights and obligations for persons in need of protection. "The Convention aims to grant international legal protection to refugees and to ensure the exercise by them of fundamental human rights and freedoms. The 1967 Protocol broadened the scope of the 1951 Convention, which had been limited to European refugees in the post-World War II period, and removed its geographical and temporal restrictions, making the Convention a universal instrument protecting all persons fleeing conflict and persecution" (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2024, p.13).

The Convention requires States to cooperate with UNHCR in the exercise of its functions. In this context, close and effective collaboration between UNHCR and the Government of the Republic of Moldova and other international and national organizations has been identified to promote and protect the rights of refugees, including their right not to be returned to a country or territory where their life, integrity and/or freedom would be at risk. The Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF), co-chaired by the Government and UNHCR, as well as other UN agencies and humanitarian partners, in 2022, some 42 governmental and humanitarian partners joined efforts to provide Ukrainian refugees with protection and humanitarian support services across all sectors. The coordinated response actions were included in the Regional Refugee Response Plan (RRRP), launched in early March 2022, revised on April 25, 2022 and "recalibrated" in October 2022. The Refugee Response Plan for 2024 focuses on key priorities and is a document that targets both refugees and locals. The plan aims to support people in their legal status exercise, in particular temporary protection that provides vital support to vulnerable people and leads to improved socio-economic inclusion. An important aspect of the plan is its focus on social cohesion between refugees and host communities.

Jointly with the partner organizations, UNHCR has constantly focused on providing support and services to refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons in Moldova (access to information, legal assistance, accommodation, humanitarian transport, psycho-emotional support, assistance in covering basic needs), contributing significantly to their needs for integration. The authorities, in turn, have not neglected the necessity to broaden the measures in order to ensure the mechanisms effectiveness in protecting the rights and freedoms of refugees and their integration into the national (socio-cultural and economic) realities.

Given the large flow of refugees, the European Union, through the Council Decision No. 2022/382 of March 4, 2022, decided to grant temporary protection to persons arriving from Ukraine, triggering the application of the Temporary Protection Directive No. 2001/55/EC. At the national level, on the basis of Article 21 of the Law on Asylum in the Republic of Moldova, No. 270/2008, by the Government Decision No. 21 of 18.01.2023 on granting temporary protection to displaced persons from Ukraine, the conditions for providing temporary protection to

displaced persons from Ukraine and the action plan were approved. The Government Decision No. 21/2023 implements Art. 4 (1), Art. 6, Art. 8 (1), Art. 9, 10, 10, 12, 13, Art. 14 (1) of the Directive 2001/55/EC,<sup>150</sup> as well as the Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382. Furthermore, the same Government Decision approved the Inter-Institutional Plan of Measures on Granting Temporary Protection to Displaced Persons from Ukraine, which aims to achieve the general objectives of: ensuring adequate information process on granting temporary protection; establishing the legal status - regulating the stay of displaced persons from Ukraine; establishing protection measures to ensure the realization of the rights of displaced persons from Ukraine; establishing preventive measures to ensure public order and national security. The measures aimed at managing the refugee crisis, ensuring their protection were assessed as effective, well-targeted and impactful.

Within a relatively short timeframe, the evaluation of the temporary protection mechanism has highlighted certain difficulties, which hinder its effective implementation (such as the proof of the address of residence/temporary residence in the Republic of Moldova for example), which contributed to the simplification of the procedure for obtaining temporary protection in September 2023. Also, one year later, taking into account the uncertain and unstable situation in Ukraine, the need to extend the period of application of the temporary protection mechanism was recognized.

Equally relevant is the fact that the Law 274/2011 on the integration of foreigners in the Republic of Moldova, which partially incorporates the Directive 2011/95/EU, has given the necessary basis to respond to the individual needs of refugees, creating conditions for their active participation in the economic, social and cultural life of the Republic of Moldova. Similarly, the Government Decision No. 808 of 23.11.2022 by approving the Program on the management of migration flow, asylum and integration of foreigners for the years 2022-2025, started to strengthen and implement the mechanism for the integration of foreigners, which resulted in a holistic and cross-sectoral approach to addressing the needs. The document states that "the migration crisis caused by the war between Russia and Ukraine has highlighted institutional shortcomings and insufficient human resources (...). [The Republic of Moldova therefore] (...) needs to strengthen its capacity to manage an increased flow of

migrants across its borders, to analyze the situation and prepare a contingency plan, to equip the authorities involved in the process with the appropriate technical means to manage the massive influx of foreigners." (Government of the Republic of Moldova).

During this difficult period of turmoil that has troubled states and societies, the Republic of Moldova has pursued to defend the human rights and democracy. Despite exacerbating crises affecting the country, the Moldovan authorities, showing solidarity and compassion, have not even for a moment neglected the fact that the rights of refugees are human rights. The key to ensuring these rights was, from the very beginning of the refugees' flow, the need for grassroots actions to ensure children's right to education, access to social protection and health services.

The adopted decisions have ensured refugees' access to a wide range of services and rights, including the right to work, access to education, access to primary and emergency health care, and a certain level of access to social protection. According to the study "Implementation of temporary protection granted on the territory of the Republic of Moldova to displaced persons from Ukraine: the situation after 6 months", carried out by the Lawyers' Law Center (Study, 2023), the authorities' actions should be assessed according to several categories of rights: free access to justice, the right to free movement, the right to work, the right to education, the right to social assistance and protection, the right to health protection. The analysis of each dimension and the way in which the statistical data, the actions of the authorities and the solutions to the problems raised are related. According to them and other data available, the large number of displaced children from Ukraine, approximately 50%, living in the Republic of Moldova, required the adoption of urgent measures to ensure their access to the education system. Important actions have been taken by the Ministry of Education and Research to ensure children's right to education. Thus, simplified instructions have been issued on the enrolment procedure for Ukrainian children in Moldovan schools. On the other hand, educational institutions under the subordination of the Ministry of Education and Research have been substantially involved in supporting the authorities in managing the refugee crisis, by allocating space for their accommodation and providing essential facilities, by enrolling Ukrainian refugee students in universities, by involving the teaching and scientific staff in providing humanitarian aid.



In order to facilitate the access to education for Ukrainian children and young people, the Ministry of Education and Research has placed on its website and is constantly updating the information on the procedure of enrollment of children in educational institutions in both the Ukrainian and Russian languages; it has published the list of general educational institutions identified for the enrollment of children from refugee families from Ukraine for the 2023-2024 academic year; it has ensured the accessibility of textbooks in PDF format developed by the Ministry, as well as access to the online library ([www.educatieonline.md](http://www.educatieonline.md)). For the online learning of students, who are interested in pursuing online studies according to the study program in Ukraine, as well as for those who want to continue their studies in higher education institutions of the Republic of Moldova, a number of useful information was also made public (Ministry of Education and Research website). There were similar approaches implemented in relation to the access to medical services (IOM, 2023), social assistance, right to work, etc.

This brief overview of how the Republic of Moldova has managed and responded to the challenges exposed, not only in the context of the refugees' flow generated by the war in Ukraine, but also in the context of other security pressures and challenges, it consolidates itself in a future vision of the state's geopolitical priorities and preferences and the way in which national security is prioritized. Moreover, as the Munich report (p.24, 2024) observes "Russia's war has forced the EU to look at enlargement as a geostrategic tool to bring countries out of the gray zone (...) crucial to ensure security in the region."

The answer of the Republic of Moldova to the refugee situation, in the opinion of the international community, is a model to follow, a model that has proven its effectiveness thanks to the commitment, the efficient and human leadership of the Moldovan government, the solidarity of Moldovans and the continuous international support.

Consequently, the important steps taken to protect refugees have directly benefited the Republic of Moldova. The greatest gain is the recognition of the Republic of Moldova at the international level, the appreciation and the international juncture particularly beneficial for adjustment to international standards and connection to democratic processes. However, still multiple risks persist, along with missed opportunities up to 2020, which need to reshape national security mechanisms.

## 4. Conclusions

The impact of the war in Ukraine on regional security has been of interest not only to national authorities, European and international institutions, but also to experts and researchers who have been exposed to its impact on European and global security and international relations<sup>9</sup>, who have been exposed to the events and closely following the developments in the region. The existing literature provides a thorough analysis of the current geopolitical landscape, the risks involved and the strategic responses needed to navigate through this complex crisis.

There is no doubt that the war in Ukraine has a profound impact on the national security of the Republic of Moldova, generating military and economic threats, influencing foreign policy and provoking changes in society and internal dynamics. Given the direct impact of the war on the security of the Republic of Moldova, as well as the effort of interference in the democratization processes, the Support Platform for Moldova (Moldovan government website) was created upon the proposal of Romania, Germany, France and the USA. Its priority being the creation of a response mechanism to the consequences and crises generated by the war, it succeeded in mobilizing, concentrating and coordinating the political, technical and financial support of advanced countries for the Republic of Moldova. Moreover, the need for assistance and expertise to achieve progress in implementing democratic reforms was also taken into account. In this perspective, the strategic and cooperative approach between the national authorities and the international community has provided a multi-sectoral response and has helped to ensure coherence and coordination of actions, as well as increased the confidence of the Republic of Moldova in its future viability as a state.

The international assistance received during this period by the Republic of Moldova to strengthen its security capacity and to manage the impact of the war-generated crisis has been and is crucial for enhancing the national security. The fact that during the meeting of the European political community (of July 18, 2024) the priority topics of the discussions being connectivity, security and democracy, migration, the support of the international community for increasing the resilience of the Republic of

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<sup>9</sup> More to the subject available at: <https://warontherocks.com/understanding-the-russo-ukrainian-war-a-guide-from-war-on-the-rocks/> (accessed 5.09.2024)

Moldova was repeatedly reiterated, thus it creates positive premises to move forward in order to increase national security guarantees.

To address current and future challenges and ensure stability and security, Moldovan authorities must evaluate their successes and shortcomings. They should build on the positive experience gained in managing the refugee crisis, acknowledge and correct any mistakes, and prioritize effective governance of the national security sector.

In addition to the need for stronger efforts—such as engagement, cooperation, mutual support, and investment - to ensure national and regional security, international measures and partnerships must be backed by citizens from within. This requires implementing reforms to strengthen the rule of law, combat corruption, and promote economic growth. Corruption plays a key role in shaping public perception and has a direct impact on national security<sup>10</sup>.

Civil society and citizens provided significant support during the initial phase of the large refugee influx, easing the burden on central and local authorities. This highlights the importance of social cohesion in times of crisis. To ensure this, it is essential to adopt measures that strengthen and build social solidarity around national interests and security.

Based on the study "Public Perceptions of the Security and Defense System of the Republic of Moldova," (2022) which identified that the security culture among citizens is poorly developed, it is necessary to take significant steps to enhance it. This can be achieved by emphasizing national interest, security, cohesion, and responsibility - key resources for ensuring internal security.

The complex and diverse nature of threats to state security, particularly in the context of the information technology and artificial intelligence era, necessitates the enhancement of security culture and awareness of its importance.

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<sup>10</sup> Analiza sondajelor de opinie cu privire la percepția populației cu privire la sistemul de securitate și apărare a RM arată că 72 % din respondenți apreciază corupția ca o amenințare internă la adresa securității. [https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/6\\_Studiu-Sociologic-Percepții-publice-asupra-sistemului-de-securitate-si-aparare-al-RM.pdf](https://pisa.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/6_Studiu-Sociologic-Percepții-publice-asupra-sistemului-de-securitate-si-aparare-al-RM.pdf) (accessed 1.09.2024)

Developing a strong security culture and raising awareness of potential dangers can, in the long term, reduce internal vulnerabilities and increase resilience against malign external influences.

## **Acknowledgements**

The paper is developed in the context of the realization of the project ‘Strengthening socio-economic and legal mechanisms to ensure the well-being and security of the citizens’ (CONSEJ 01.05.02).

## **Funding**

The authors declare no funds/ other support for the current study.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declares no conflicting interests.

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# ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN – A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF IN FAMILY OFFENCES

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2024.4.06>

**Abstract:** *This research aims to analyze the sexual exploitation through online pornography shows, that takes place in Romania, in the family environment. This type of abuse is represented by cases where children are involved in live pornographic shows on the internet, within which minors perform the sexual acts requested by adult clients who pay for the show. Although a relatively recent phenomenon in our country, this type of abuse has been prevalent for years in other disadvantaged regions of the world. The research focuses on in-family offences and aims to identify the factors that lead to the commission of such crimes. Data was obtained through 27 semi-structured interviews that were conducted with specialists involved in the management of online pornography offences: police officers and psychologists from child protection departments. The results of the study show that, although family sexual exploitation through live-streaming shows is not a very common modus operandi, it has extremely serious consequences for the victims. Discussions with specialists outline two distinct social situations in which this type of abuse manifests: a part of the perpetrators come from economically marginalized families, in the framework of which other deviant behaviors are also registered and within which pornography is used to provide the necessary income for day-to-day living; for the second category of perpetrators, this form of exploitation represents a quick source of substantial income, which is used to provide them with the material comfort they aspire to.*

**Keywords:** *cybercrime; sexual deviance; child pornography; anomie; social innovator marginalized groups*

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## Introduction

The consumption of adult pornography has increased at an accelerated pace with the proliferation of new technologies, in the development of which companies in the sex industry have been significantly involved, anticipating that such investments would prove extremely profitable. However, with the explosion of adult pornography, child pornography, an extremely serious form of child victimization, has also expanded in an uncontrollable manner (ECPAT International, 2018; UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2011; O'Brien, 2014, and others).

Online child pornography represents the documentation of a sexual abuse committed against a child, and simultaneously, an extension of this abuse. It causes continuous harm to the victim because, even when the physical aggression ceases and the perpetrator is caught and sentenced to prison, the images remain accessible and can circulate in the alternative space, without the possibility of it being permanently deleted (Eneman, 2005, p. 2).

Statistics cited by the European Commission show that, globally, in 2019, 17 million such abuses were reported, 17 times more than in 2010 (EU Strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse 2020). At the EU level, the increase is equally alarming: from 23,000 in 2010 to over 725,000 in 2019 (US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2020, as cited in E.C. 2020). It is estimated that the volume of pornographic material representing minors will experience unprecedented growth with the development of artificial intelligence tools (Culture reframed, 2023, Internet Watch Foundation, 2024).

In Romania, data from the Romanian Police shows that child pornography has been experiencing a nearly constant and strong increase in recent years. While in 2014, at the national level, 162 child pornography offenses were reported, in 2022 this number increased 5.6 times, reaching 901 (IGPR, 2022).

The DIICOT activity report for 2022 (p. 37) notes "the increase in cases involving the crime of child pornography and the exploitation of minors in the online environment caused by easy access to technology by both offenders and victims (especially in the case of self-production of



pornographic material), but also the emergence of new modes of operation like livestreaming child pornography".

The „Report on the situation of human trafficking in 2022 „, (ANITP, 2023), which concludes that Romania remains the European country from which the most victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation originate, also identifies changes in the ways in which trafficking for sexual exploitation manifests. This official document notes a decrease in the number of victims exploited in homes, on the street, in clubs, and in hotels, but an increase in the number of cases of internet pornography. Data shows both an increase in the number of cases of exploitation through child pornography (from 5 in 2010 to 87 in 2022), as well as an increase in the proportion of this mode of operation in the total number of cases of sexual exploitation of minors, which in 2022 reached more than half (52%) of the total number of minor victims of sexual exploitation. The report also notes that "specialized groups" in the sexual exploitation of victims are directing their criminal their criminal activity towards using mostly virtual means and tools for perpetrating their offenses: pornography, video chat, etc." (ANITP, 2023, p.17).

This research aims to analyze the sexual exploitation through online pornography shows, that takes place in Romania, in the family environment. This type of abuse is represented by cases where children are involved in live pornographic shows on the internet, within which minors perform the sexual acts requested by adult clients who pay for the show. Compared to juvenile prostitution, which involves the direct exercise of the aggression by an adult, in the case of exploitation through online child pornography a second category of perpetrators is involved in committing the crime – those who facilitate the abuse. These are usually adults in the child's proximity (parent, guardian or other trusted person) who actually commit the aggression, carrying out the sexual acts requested by those who pay, or determine the children, based on the authority they have over them, to behave as the clients demand. Thus, the aggressor client, defined as the person who benefits from sexual services in exchange for money, remains the distant author of the act, while the the facilitating aggressor represents the author who makes the physical aggression possible, by identifying and co-opting the child in sexual acts.

This type of abuse is conceptualized in the specialized literature by the term "web child sexual tourism" (Terre des Homme, 2013), as it allows

pedophiles thousands of kilometers away to sexually exploit minors from less economically developed countries, without having to physically travel to those countries.

The live streaming of children sexual abuse is identified by EUROPOL as no longer a trend but as an established reality as early as 2014. A number of sources reported significant increase in the number of online child sexual exploitation and specifically live streaming cases during and after the COVID pandemic, when both children and offenders were forced to stay at home and rely almost exclusively on the Internet for social interaction. (IWF 2023, Europol 2020, Netclean 2020). Most of the cases reported and investigated by law enforcement agencies were perpetrated using relatively non secure methods (social media, chat, dating websites) on the surface web (Napier et al. 2021, Terre des Hommes 2013, IJM 2020). Given the relative technological simplicity necessary to commit live-streaming crimes, there are reasons to believe that the majority of livestreaming of child sexual abuse remain undetected due to the anonymization techniques available to offenders (end-to-end encryption, VPNs, Dark web websites, cryptocurrency payments, etc).

While payment platforms and money transfer agencies have begun to work with law enforcement to detect payment for livestreaming offenses, the appearance and development of anonymous payment methods like cryptocurrency creates problems for law enforcement agencies in identifying and prosecuting live-streaming offenses. (EUROPOL 2020, ECPAT 2017).

In the first part, this paper presents a synthesis of the specialized literature which addresses the issue of child sexual abuse through live-streaming shows. The next subchapter refers to the research methodology, describing the objectives and research questions, the data collection methods and the subject selection method. The third subchapter presents the results obtained, which are structured according to the research questions. The last subchapters present the conclusions and limitations of the research.

## **Literature Review**

Early studies dedicated to analyzing WCST (Terres des Hommes, 2013, 2014) assess that the phenomenon, which has reached alarming

proportions in Southeast Asia, registered the most pronounced increases since 2013. The social and cultural context that favors the important expansion of the phenomenon involves the interaction of a multitude of factors such as a large proportion of the population living in poverty, cheap internet access and widespread coverage within the country, cultural norms that value unconditional loyalty to the family, the limited efficiency of control institutions and the vulnerabilities of the legal system (Terres des Hommes, 2013). Live streaming offenses are especially difficult to combat due to the technologically enabled nature of the crime. Most platforms that facilitate live-streaming offer end-to-end encryption which makes it almost impossible to detect crimes as they happen. Also, the crime does not result in the production of a media file (picture or video) and therefore fails to be detected by ESP's and law enforcement. (IJM2020, WeProtect2023).

According to de Gjermeni (2008), belonging to a disadvantaged group is a key factor in the emergence of child trafficking. Belonging to a marginalized group does not cause exploitation, but it favors it in the context of the manifestation of multiple risk factors. Gjermeni (2008) found that statistically significant predictors of minor trafficking among the marginalized studied groups are drug/alcohol use, poverty, and the presence of people involved in prostitution in the vicinity of children.

The accentuation of social inequalities both globally and within states, which translates into increasing poverty among certain sectors of the population, in parallel with the enrichment of the already wealthy, is a key factor in the expansion of the phenomenon. (Poulin, 2008; Batha, 2020). This fact is supported by the high prevalence of the phenomenon in countries where a large percentage of the population lives below the poverty line and the relatively small amounts paid by offenders for accessing live streaming sexual abuse of children. (ECPAT 2017, Cubitt 2021, Napier 2021a, IJM 2023).

Along side the aforementioned socioeconomic factors, the spread of online child pornography is favored by the lack of a unified and adequate legal framework pertaining to intervention methods in the virtual space. The tightening of legislation regulating the sexual exploitation of children on the internet, through harsher penalties for perpetrators and the emergence of extraterritorial laws that allow persons who have committed criminal acts abroad to be prosecuted in their own country, represent

important steps in the fight against abuse, but the results achieved so far reflect their limited effectiveness (Terres des Hommes, 2013; Dushi, 2020).

The difficulties in regulating virtual space are due to both objective causes and the difficulties generated by moral dilemmas regarding what is permitted and what should be prohibited on the internet. Objectively, cybercrime is characterized by anonymity, transnationalism, and adaptability, features that make it difficult to identify and prove (Nanikian, 1996; Capeller, 2001; Stutton and Mann, 2010). At the same time, in order to discover and prove consumption, access to user data is necessary. This situation raises controversies regarding the violation of users' rights to privacy, intimacy, or freedom of expression. E. Hnason (2019) argues that cyber-libertarianism, which currently governs the use of the internet, has led to its transformation into a space where immoral behavior, including the sexual exploitation of children, is possible. A determining role in perpetuating this tolerant approach is played by technology corporations, which, under the pretext of defending users' rights, protect their financial interests, encouraging "a significant ethical drift [...] that facilitates the sexual exploitation of children through online pornography" (Hnason, 2019, p.14).

Most available studies analyze the specific characteristics of the phenomenon in Asian regions known for having problems with prostitution and which have been consecrated, with the implicit support of state policies, as destinations for sex tourism. Drejer et al. (2023) found that over half of the children abused through live streaming have family members who are also engaged in the same activity. The conclusions of the analysis indicate a high level of community tolerance for people engaging in video-chats with sexual content. The phenomenon of normalization and trivialization of sex work is also identified by R. Poulin in explaining the process by which underdeveloped states have allowed and even encouraged the development of the sex industry (prostitution, sex tourism, pornography) in order to obtain significant revenue for the national budget (Poulin, 2008).

Abuse facilitated by the internet is perceived as relatively harmless due to the lack of physical contact between the abusive client and the victimized child. Moreover, it is considered an easy way to provide an income for the family (Terre des Hommes, 2013; Varrella, 2017). However, the

consequences for the victims are very serious. Victims suffer from high levels of psychosocial distress, such as traumatic sexualization, betrayal, social stigmatization, and helplessness. The traumatic effects are exacerbated by the involvement of parents in the abuse, causing children to feel confusion and conflict of loyalty (Terre des Hommes, 2013).

Family involvement in sex trafficking or production of child sexual abuse material has been documented in different studies (Napier et al. 2021, Salter & Wong 2024, Sprang & Cole 2018, Reid et al. 2014). In 2017, the International Organization for Migration estimated that 41 percent of child trafficking experiences are facilitated by family members and/or caregivers.

The prevalence of family involvement appears to be higher in the case of livestreaming offenses. A study by IJM revealed that 83% of cases were perpetrated or facilitated by family members. Research has identified livestreaming facilitators to be mostly female with a median age between 20 (Napier et al. 2021) , and 27 (IJM 2023).

The psychological and social impact on the victims of familial sexual exploitation appears to be extremely severe and last longer than in the case of victims of sexual exploitation perpetrated by strangers, with a higher incidence of social and developmental damage as well as higher incidence of attempted suicide later in life. (Sprang & Cole 2018, Salter & Wong 2024).

Victims appear to be mostly girls and a large percentage of them aged 12 years or younger. This trend appears to be confirmed by multiple studies and reports. (IWF 2018, IJM 2020).

Analysis of the ways in which offenders identify and contact victims shows that at least some offenses are opportunistic in nature and are being committed by offenders who are not looking for children sexual exploitation material, at least initially.(Napier et al. 2021b, IJM 2020). There have been instances where facilitators or in some cases even victims approached the offender via social media platforms. Many livestreaming CSA offenders have little to no criminal history (Brown et al. 2020) and offend almost exclusively in this way (Cubitt et al. 2021).

## **Studies on the sexual exploitation of children in Romania**

The most documented theme related to sexual exploitation through online pornography in Romanian sociological literature is that of human trafficking. Trafficking for the purpose of exploitation through pornography is just one form of human trafficking; at the same time, human trafficking is just one form of commercial exploitation of persons (according to the legislation in force).

The unfavorable socioeconomic situation of victims/families is a risk factor for minors entering trafficking. Without being able to establish a direct causal link between victimization and poor living conditions, since most minors living in poverty are not subjected to any form of abuse, the lack of income necessary to ensure a decent living and the lack of access to the labor market due to lack of education and necessary training, limit individuals' chances of social mobility. Community poverty (manifested by the lack of jobs, lack of housing, high unemployment) and the lack of effective social policies that allow for the real integration of disadvantaged groups, lead young people to consider emigration as the only hope for material fulfillment. In the absence of information about the realities of human trafficking, emigration represents a major risk situation for human trafficking (ANITP, 2009, 2023; Popescu, 2003; Bogrdogi, 2015).

A dysfunctional family climate and/or the adoption of deviant behaviors also constitute risk factors identified in the families of the victims. In families where minors become victims of exploitation, usually some deviant or even delinquent behaviors manifest (such as alcohol/drug use, domestic violence, a conflictual family atmosphere, interaction with people involved in criminal activities). These elements negatively impact parents' ability to provide attention and emotional and educational support to children (ANITP, 2009, 2023, Popescu, 2023; Bodoroghi, 2015).

From Lăzăroi's perspective (2001), victims of human trafficking are social innovators who aim to change their disadvantaged situation through emigration, by identifying new solutions that involve taking risks and adopting, in certain contexts, illegitimate means of action. Social innovation fails due to personal characteristics (age, which in the case of young people implies a lack of life experience, low human capital, lack of information about the realities and risks of migration), which are

correlated with characteristics of the environment in which they live (hostile socioeconomic environment, inefficient institutions, social discrimination that through socialization leads to abuse).

## **Methodology of study**

This research aims to describe the methods of online child sexual exploitation and explain the cases occurring within Romanian families, and has the following research questions: How does sexual exploitation through online child pornography committed within families manifest? What are the contributing factors to the emergence of these forms of abuse? What are the consequences for the victims?

To answer the research questions, 27 interviews were conducted with specialists involved in managing cases of online child pornography: police officers and psychologists from county directorates for social assistance and child protection.

The interviewed police officers interact, as part of their specific activities, with perpetrators, victims, and their families, both during hearings and during raids at the scene of the crime. The subjects have between 2 and 10 years experience within the structures in which they carry out their activities. The interview guide focused on the dynamics of crimes, the operating methods they encountered throughout their experience, the economic situation of the perpetrators, their criminal records, the reactions of the perpetrators upon identification, the justifications regarding their own behaviors presented by the perpetrators during the investigations, their way of relating to the victim, the characteristics of the victims, how they related to the aggression during the investigations, the family support received by the victims and perpetrators in this context.

The psychologists participating in the study were selected based on their availability following the invitation we sent by email to all general directorates for social assistance and child protection. Some of the psychologists participating in the study assist victims of child pornography during hearings. Another part of the respondents are involved in counseling activities for victims of child pornography. The interview guide aimed to understand the climate in families where crimes occur, the social integration of these families, their economic situation, the victims' perception of the perpetrator and the aggression, how the victims relate to

the experience of aggression, and the social reactions faced by the victims after reporting the aggression to which they were subjected.

The information presented in this study represents a part of the data collected in the research "Online Sexual Behaviors - Between Normality and Deviance", for which the approval of the Ethics Committee of the University of Bucharest was obtained. The subjects were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, as well as about the confidentiality of the participants' identity. The discussions did not make any reference to the identity of the victims or perpetrators. Details were removed from the content of the interviews, pertaining to case contents that, without disclosing the personal data of the persons involved, illustrate particularities of the operating modes or characteristics of the victims/perpetrators, which could lead to their recognition. The research results make a significant contribution to understanding how perpetrators act and rationalize their own behavior, facilitating the development of adequate prevention measures.

## **Research results**

### **Dynamics and modes of manifestation**

Police officers, as well as specialists from the DGASPC (Directorate General for Social Assistance and Child Protection), consider that the evolution of the child pornography phenomenon as a whole is alarming. Although cases of online sexual exploitation within the family environment are not the most common forms of child pornography in Romania, they are important due to the very serious consequences they have on victimized children. The emergence of these behaviors is associated, in the opinion of respondents, with the increasing demand for child pornography, with the increasing access to the internet of vulnerable categories from which abusive parents come, with the expansion of videochat businesses in our country, as well as with the increased capacity of the police to identify this type of abuses.

Most often, the perpetrators of these acts are women who come from the ranks of videochat practitioners, who co-opt their children in creating pornographic materials or live erotic shows in order to obtain large sums of money. Most women act on their own, but there have been several cases identified where both the mother and father were involved: "The



mother and father had been working abroad ... for several years. They were discovered abusing their autistic child via videochat" (DGASPC psychologist, 31 years old).

Police officers argue that, in the cases they have investigated, most clients of erotic shows were foreign citizens (especially American citizens, but also French, Belgian, Dutch, English or Canadian).

Most often the victims are young children - from a few months to 7/8 years old. However, there is a significant number of victims aged between 9-12 years. Girls are especially sought after, but there is also demand for boys. Specialists state that there is also a high risk of victimization of children with developmental disorders.

Both police officers and DGASPC psychologists explain the low age of victimized children through the demand from clients who pay for materials, but also as an element of the strategy of abusive parents, who ensure that they will not be reported: "Young children do not know how to speak and are easily blackmailed. Those with psychological problems, intellectual disability or autism, do not realize what is happening or are not taken seriously by those around them. The parents believe that because they are small, they will not remember what happened" (DGASPC psychologist, 32 years old).

## **Perpetrators acting with the aim of obtaining income to increase material comfort**

### **Socio-economic situation**

Most facilitators are women who are married or are involved in family-type relationship. Most are women with a high school degree or vocational education. Only a portion of the female perpetrators have held a job throughout their lives. Most have been supported by their family - husband or partner. The household income is based on the money brought home by the life partners and covers the necessary expenses for the family's maintenance. Interviews with DGASPC specialists have identified situations where women had a job at one point but quit. They started videochat activities to obtain sums of money that they use to increase their comfort level: (they use the money) "to renovate their house, to buy designer clothes, go to the hairdresser, get dressed up, buy toys, sweets for children" (DGASPC psychologist, 35 years old). In a smaller

number of cases, women had a job at the time they offended, being employed as a baker or saleswoman.

For these women videochat represents a form of financial independence that they did not have before starting this activity and allows them access to a comfort level that they would not have been able to access otherwise.

The findings made by the police during house searches show that most homes had an appearance that was common for the environment in which they lived. Urban families live in spaces with access to utilities and are rather well-maintained. In rural areas, households, although more modest and lacking some utilities, like most rural homes, have the capacity to provide the basic necessities in terms of comfort: "they have thermal windows, electronic equipment, and appliances." In exceptional situations, the living conditions exceed those of the neighborhood: "She had built two houses from videochat" (police officer, 36 years old). "She lived in a villa, not a house. She had money from her husband who worked in construction in England" (DGASPC psychologist, 45 years old).

The abusive parents were dissatisfied with their material situation, which they perceived as unsatisfactory. According to the interviewed police officers, during the hearings, the perpetrators present their behavior as being determined and justified by economic pressures that they cannot otherwise cope with; in order to obtain the necessary income for a decent living, they performed certain actions that they do not perceive as having very serious consequences.

Specialists talk about an addiction that develops in the case of some videochat practitioners. They become dependent on the large sums of money they earn, so that, at a certain point, what they do can no longer be justified by the desire to improve their standard of living. Even when they reach a level above the population average, such people continue to practice videochat and exploit their children: "Her husband had told her to stop. They had everything they needed, they had a house, a car... And she continued. Because it was easy money" (police officer, 40 years old).

Videochat becomes a way of life for such people, which also becomes attractive to people around them:

"In one case, both the mother and the daughter and the aunt were doing videochat. They had brought each other into it" (police officer, 32 years old).

The interviewed specialists do not have data regarding the existence of other risky behaviors in these families. However, the subjects speak of a significant number of reconstituted families.

In essence, this text discusses how women involved in online sexual exploitation of children often come from relatively stable economic backgrounds but are motivated by a desire for increased financial comfort and independence. The study highlights the addictive nature of this activity and how it can become a way of life, even when the perpetrators have met their basic needs.

### **The rationalization of one's own behavior**

The reactions of the abusers when identified and confronted by the police outline the hypothesis that they do not comprehend the severity of their own actions. The perpetrators try to rationalize their own behavior by claiming that what they are doing does not affect the children. During interactions with the police throughout the investigations, abusive parents provide arguments such as the fact that minors are too young to understand what is happening to them, that they lack discernment and that these memories will not stay with them, that the sexual acts they perform on children do not have a violent character and that the children perceive everything that happens as play. Psychologists interpret this discourse of the abusers as a means by which they try to diminish their feelings of guilt towards themselves and to improve their image in front of the authorities.

However, the fact that in many situations parents only mimic sexual acts, or are involved as active partners in sexual games, without actually engaging in sexual intercourse, are elements that support the hypothesis of a lack of awareness of the devastating impact that this form of aggression, which also involves a form of incest, has on the victim."

The value system of these parents is assessed as being distorted, centered on meeting material needs: "They care about the children, but not as much as they care about the money they can get from them. They take care of them, feed them, but that's all they understand about caring for a child. They don't think about how much harm they are causing" (DGASPC psychologist).

Testimonies of specialists who witness scenes where children are removed from families to be taken over by DGASPC, confirm the existence of

attachment relationships with children: "It's a tragic scene when the children are taken away. The children are crying, the mothers are crying too. They care about the children in their own way" (police officer, 37 years old).

The care for children also results from the way they are treated - children are cared for, clean, well-dressed, they buy toys for them. The fact that there have been cases where parents invested the usual money from videochat, including in children's education, is another element that confirms a different scale of values than that of the majority of the population and, at the same time, a dysfunctional perspective on the role of a parent: "The daughter and the mother were both doing videochat. The mother had involved her daughter when she was [...] years old. Now she was in high school. And when the daughter didn't have money, the mother gave her money to pay her tuition at a private high school" (police officer, 37 years old).

At the same time, interviews with police officers reveal cases where the child is transformed into a tool for making money: "She had a 9-year-old child and was thinking of having another one, because the market is not interested in the older ones. And she was thinking of having a child specifically for that" (police officer, 44 years old).

Psychologists argue that abusive parents are aware of the prohibition, but by valuing money more, they choose to violate it: "The mother and father abused their two daughters. The father was actively involved, mimicking sexual acts [...]. They superficially realize that it is not good, because they know they can be caught. But the drive for money is stronger" (DGASPC psychologist, 33 years old).

The psychologists interviewed talk about the existence of psychological problems that explain the parents' ability to abuse their own children. Their hypothesis is that the life experiences of the abusers have negatively influenced the way they have developed their sexuality and/or attachment: "It also depends on how this child appeared. If it appeared because it was wanted, if the relationship with the partner is an assumed one and not forced, or she herself to have found herself in the position of a mother without being psychologically prepared for this role. Because she was forced or because she feels restricted. There are people in whose case this instinct simply does not develop. This is also true for women" (DGASPC psychologist, 40 years old).

### **Perpetrators belonging to marginalized groups**

A distinct category of cases of online child pornography committed within families for the purpose of profit is represented by perpetrators who come from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. They are individuals with very low human and socio-professional capital. Social mobility is not possible because there is no adequate schooling and no interest in such an activity: "some are our beneficiaries. In such families, only one works, or none works. More often the woman works [...] They have little money, they earn 1000-1500 lei" (DGASPC psychologist, 44 years old).

Along with unfavorable socio-economic conditions, in families where abuse through the online sexual exploitation of children was recorded, other antisocial behaviors were also recorded, such as domestic violence, alcohol consumption, prostitution, and pimping: "They are our clients from the area. They have no resources; they live on benefits, and they don't have a job. Very few have a stable income. They also commit crimes, they also face violence [...] they engage in all sorts of illegal activities" (DGASPC psychologist, 41 years old).

### **Consequences for the victims**

The sexual exploitation of children through online pornography draws attention due to the very young age of the victims. Children are, in most cases, too young to be aware of the abusive situation they are in and do not fight back: "video-chat is not done by force" (DGASPC psychologist, 44 years old). The psychologists participating in the study describe the process of co-opting children into these activities as being based on manipulation: children are told that there are no alternatives, and they believe this. In case of refusal, blackmail is resorted to, parents exploiting the children's naivety and saying that if they do not comply, they will not have money to buy the toys they want, to give them the sweets they ask for, or even to buy food. In this way, they manage to overcome the opposition of the little ones. To ensure that the little ones will not talk, abusive parents resort to threats and emotional blackmail: "If the police find out, (the parents say) they will kill themselves, or the police will come and beat up dad and take him to jail, you will end up in a children's home." (DGASPC psychologist, 41 years old).

Police have identified that, in homes where searches have taken place, children had access, in addition to age-appropriate toys, to sex toys.

Psychologists argue that the development of sexuality in these children is profoundly affected. It is stimulated before they reach the biological age for such urges/activities, and this also influences their physical development, stimulating hormonal processes that influence the growth process, as well as cognitive development. At the same time, these minors are educated outside the moral norms that guide sexuality at the societal level, which will predispose them to adopting deviant sexual behaviours, in the absence of an effective recovery and resocialization process.

Parents exploit the children's attachment to them and ask them to make sacrifices. The degree of toxicity in such parent-child relationships is extremely dangerous: children do what children should do, they listen to their parents, based on a dysfunctional loyalty relationship. However, children show symptoms of trauma: although they are too young to understand the deeply corrupt nature of the actions they are involved in, although they do not have the capacity to categorize as wrong what is happening to them, they do not have basic notions of sexual morality, they present psycho-somatic symptoms: they have language development problems, suffer from enuresis, or have problems relating to others.

Children are attached to their parents, for whom they find excuses, repeating the same discourse with which they were manipulated by their parents. Psychologists argue that separation from abusive parents is perceived by children as a greater trauma than the one they are subjected to during exploitation. Most victims are removed from the family and institutionalized, fewer end up in the care of family members. Adaptation to the state system is another shock that only a portion of children manage to overcome. Essential in the recovery process after sexual abuse is the support and affection offered by significant people in the child's life, but these children do not benefit from this essential element of support because their parents are convicted. The prospects for recovery are extremely fragile in the absence of sustained and professional intervention. Recovery from this type of sexual abuse necessarily involves long-term psychological assistance. DGASPC introduces the victims to a counselling program that can be useful but is not enough. It is necessary to develop specialized therapy services for recovery after sexual abuse, which were not available at the time the interviews were conducted (2023).

## **Conclusions and limitations of the research**

Sexual exploitation on children through live streaming is not a very common form of abuse. However, it represents the most serious manifestation of the child pornography phenomenon, given the extremely serious consequences it has for the victims. Children victimized within the family are manipulated by their own parents and determined, on the basis of a dysfunctional loyalty relationship, to sacrifice themselves for the entire family - to engage in sexual activities, in order to get the money needed by the parents. After the discovery of the abuse, the abusive parents are convicted, and the minors are most often removed from the family, adding a new trauma to the initial one - that of institutionalization. The shock that the children go through is accentuated by such interventions, but so far no alternative solutions have been identified. In this context, I appreciate that the need for prevention is the main direction of action that is emerging. At the same time, additional efforts are needed to place the victims in their own extended families, this approach being likely to contribute to the stability and emotional support necessary for the physical and psychological recovery process that the victimized child will go through. The answers regarding the consequences of the aggression on the victims confirm the severity and modes of manifestation identified by Terre des Hommes (2013).

The study confirms the data from studies conducted by Terre des Hommes (2013) and Varrella (2017) and shows that the lack of physical contact between the child and the abusive client causes parents who mediate the abuse to perceive the child's involvement in sexual acts as tolerable, and even as an easy way to obtain money.

The discussions with specialists have outlined two distinct social situations that favor the sexual exploitation of children through online pornography. A part of the perpetrators come from disadvantaged categories, which are characterized by early school dropout, limited social interactions, lack of interest in schooling, and lack of stable jobs. These categories fall into the category of marginalized groups defined as "minority groups of individuals who are more or less permanently or even traditionally disadvantaged, according to dominant values or norms" (Ferreol apud. E. Balica, 2002, p.1). Along poverty and isolation faced by these groups, the coexistence of a dysfunctional climate or of different deviant behaviors (drug/alcohol

consumption, domestic violence, prostitution, and pimping) emerge as risk factors in the emergence of the online sexual exploitation of children.

However, child pornography produced for commercial exploitation does not only occur among disadvantaged groups. Specialists talk about abusive parents who are part of categories with a lower standard of living but who have the resources necessary for survival: they have a constant source of income, they have their own home, they can provide food and care for their children. They are described by specialists as families that do not stand out in the community they belong to. These people are dissatisfied with their economic situation and, at the same time, are limited by the lack of human capital necessary to access the material well-being they see around them. For such parents, child pornography becomes a quick source of significant income.

The perpetrators want to overcome the material disadvantages they face by resorting to innovative behavior, in the sense in which it is described by R. Merton (1938). While victims of human trafficking are social innovators who, in order to get out of the hostile socioeconomic environment, find the solution of emigration (Lăzăroiu, 2001), parents who exploit their children through child pornography are social innovators who choose illegal and immoral strategies to achieve their goals. Abusive parents pursue the material well-being and financial comfort promoted by Romanian society as desirable objectives. Given that the means necessary to achieve these goals are not accessible to them in a social context that is characterized by strong social inequalities and inefficient social mobility programs, abusive parents resort to the commercial sexual exploitation of their own children to obtain the material comfort they desire.

The limited number of interviews I was able to conduct represents the main limitation of the research. Although the data obtained is based on the analysis of a limited number of subjects and considers only cases identified by authorities, it represents a starting point in understanding the dynamics and particularities of manifestation of a worrying phenomenon that affects Romanian society, and which has not been analyzed so far in sociological research.

A strength of the study is the target group, which consists mostly of specialists with expertise in the field. The specialists who participated in the semi-structured interviews, and whom I would like to thank on this



occasion, are people who are directly involved in managing child pornography cases, having significant professional experience that allows them to know and understand the phenomenon and, consequently, to formulate informed conclusions on this topic.

Carrying out quantitative analyzes based on the analysis of files drawn up following the discovery of child pornography offenses and/or conducting representative surveys among people convicted of child pornography could allow for the completion and generalization of the results obtained. In addition, future research can contribute to a better understanding of the topics analyzed in this paper, by studying the perception of the population regarding what is permissible or dangerous in terms of sexuality that manifests itself in virtual reality and by knowing the attitudes and beliefs that underlie the consumption of online pornography. The results of such research must be considered in conducting awareness campaigns for target groups regarding the legal, social and personal implications of accessing child pornography.

## **Acknowledgements**

The paper is developed inside the program of Doctoral School of Sociology, University of Bucharest.

## **Funding**

The authors declare no funds/ other support for the current study.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declares no conflicting interests.

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\*\*\* <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics>

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## RECESSION

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35782/JCPP.2024.4.07>

**Abstract:** *This study analyzes the social consequences of the recession in Romania, viewing it not merely as an economic downturn but as a catalyst for significant social transformations. It explores issues such as unequal income distribution, labor market changes, and access to basic services to highlight contemporary social realities. Utilizing secondary data, the study examines macro-social indicators to assess societal progress or regression over time.*

*The research identifies a key limitation in aligning established recession theories with current data, noting that traditional recession indicators have been reactive to past events. The contemporary socio-economic context has adopted unprecedented management strategies, challenging established economic indicators.*

*The findings reveal that despite traditional recession indicators like GDP, poverty rates, and unemployment not showing typical recessionary trends, the social reality suggests a deeper economic crisis. Measures like generating inflation to counter global economic pressures are unsustainable, leading to devalued personal savings, increased taxes, and higher costs for essentials. The study recommends government actions including increased infrastructure investment, tax policy adjustments to stimulate growth and equity, enhanced contributions to social and health programs, and regulatory policies to ensure economic stability. Progressive taxation is emphasized as a critical measure to reduce social inequalities and resource disparities, promoting a more equitable and caring society. This approach is seen as essential to managing recession impacts and supporting vulnerable populations.*

**Keywords:** *recession, economy, crisis, inflation, COVID-19*

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## **Introduction**

The present study proposes a broad analysis that goes beyond the economic aspects of the recession and is oriented towards understanding the social consequences that are manifested within Romanian society. The phenomenon of recession is not simply an economic downturn, but brings with it substantial transformations in the way individuals and communities relate to available resources. By exploring these issues, we aim to address not only economic fluctuations, but also how they manifest themselves in the quality of life. Unequal income distribution, the reconfiguration of the labour market and unequal access to basic services become key points of interest, thus highlighting social realities in contemporary Romania.

By means of secondary data research, a series of macro-social indicators are analysed whose role is to highlight the progress or regression of our society over a representative period of time.

The main limitations of the research were the ability to overlap established theories of recession with data from the contemporary period. We can say that the literature and scientific consensus on recession and its indicators have emerged in a reactive manner to past events. In contrast, the management of the current socio-economic context has been carried out in an unprecedented manner, going beyond the symmetry between established indicators and social reality.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, succeeded by the war in Ukraine initiated on 24 February 2022), the global economy has suffered greatly (Guenette et al., 2022; Băhnăreanu, 2023). These challenges include the collapse of three US banks, Silicon Valley Bank, Silvergate Bank and Signature Bank in March 2023, and the shock wave shortly reaches Europe, materialising with the collapse of Credit Suisse Bank. So, we're talking about the beginning of a global recession that comes in the wake of unprecedented health and political-military events. The isolation and quarantine from 2020-2021 has led to a slowdown and even, in some cases, a halt in economic activity, which has inevitably led to a fall in the revenue collected by the state through taxes and duties. The monthly incomes of Europe's citizens have fallen dramatically and with them the quality of life has also declined through reduced purchasing power and a decent living. Budget deficits, rising interest rates, falling a country's gross domestic product

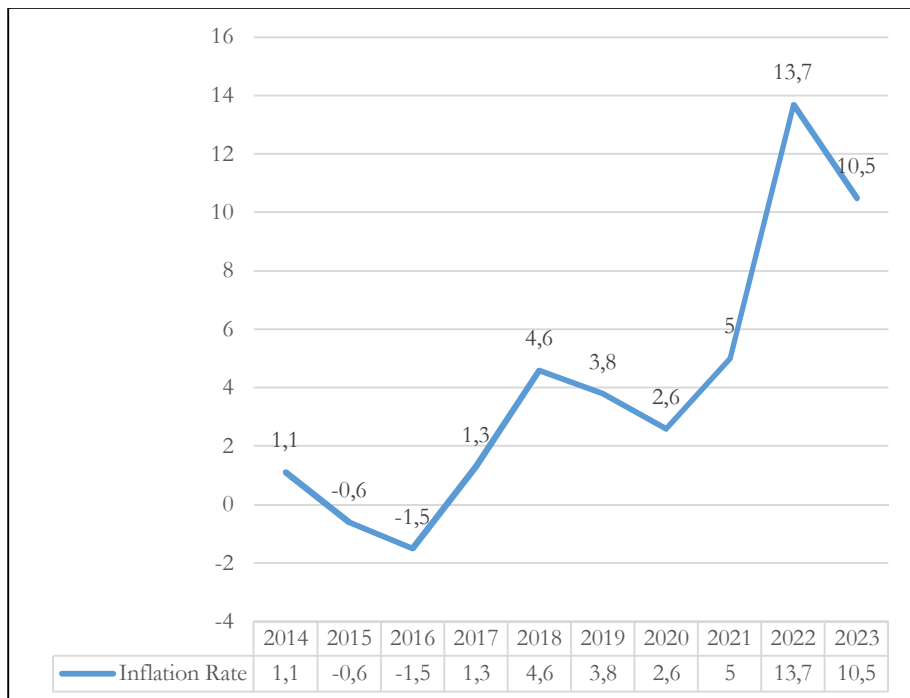
(GDP), and rising government debt are the main visible effects of recession (Oravský et al., 2020; Rangarajan and Srivastava, 2005).

So, 2023 looks set to be just the start of a long string of economic and financial challenges, and Kristalina Georgieva, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) confirms this in *The Guardian* (2023). These challenges pose a number of difficulties for the global economy, with the need for fundamental reform of the current system. Reform of the major international financial institutions is now an imperative if the financial sector is to return to a state of stability. The world's economies are currently facing shocks, such as the situation of rising inflation in electricity, gas, oil, goods and services. In the fight against inflation, central banks will raise interest rates, and low-income countries are at additional risk. There are three main issues that need to be considered for good reform: 1) fighting inflation and maintaining financial stability; 2) having real medium-term growth prospects; 3) reducing international inequality (Georgieva, 2023).

In our opinion, financial and tax reform must have the well-being of the citizen, for example the family, at its heart. It is the human being who must be protected through the various socio-financial and political mechanisms in order to achieve a good standard of living that will enable him to maintain his physical and mental health.

Our society is experiencing apparent economic growth, as indicated by GDP. However, this growth is not reflected in the population's standard of living. We believe that one reason for the increase after 2020 is an artificially elevated inflation rate. In 2022, as shown in Chart 1, Romania's inflation rate reached 13.7%, following an economic growth of 5.7% in 2021. Both the growth rate and inflation decreased in 2022-2023 by 1.1% and 3.2%, respectively.



**Chart 1. Inflation rate in Romania 2014-2023**

Source: World Bank, 2024

## What is Recession?

It should be said at the outset that there is no generally valid definition of the term recession. A complete set of generally valid indicators that can be applied as a template to predict a recession is not possible (Claessens et al., 2009, 52-53). However, a country's economy can be measured by five important indicators, as follows: gross domestic product, real income, existing labour force, industrial production in the country and retail sales volume (Mocanu, 2022).

The term recession was first used by the American economists Wesley C. Mitchell and Arthur F. Burns in 1946, in their work "Measuring Business Cycles". Recession, in general, translates into a temporary reduction in economic activity in a region, for example a decline in investment and productivity, as well as stagnation in the development of

the business environment and rising unemployment. A recession is also felt when a country's GDP falls for more than two consecutive quarters (Dex-online, ID def. code 575076). On the other hand, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a global recession can be sustained for 8 to 10 years if GDP falls below 3% (Stijn and Kose, 2009, 52-53).

According to The National Bureau's Business Cycle Dating Committee, a recession is defined as "a significant decline in economic activity, lasting several months, and observed in declines GDP, real household income, employment, industrial production, and retail and wholesale sales" (NBBCDC, 07.01.2008). Recession is a term used to describe the difficult economic situation of a country or a region over a longer period of time that is experiencing significant declines (Abberger and Nierhaus, 2008; Mazurek and Mielcová, 2013). The official recognition of a recession in the European Union (EU) is carried out by Eurostat, the Statistical Office of the European Union. Eurostat collects and analyses economic data from EU Member States, such as the development of GDP, and then publishes information on economic growth or decline.

It should be noted that there are some differences between recession and economic depression, as explained in Box 1.

#### **Box 1. Specific differences between recession and depression**

- a) "Economic depression is the advanced form of recession;
- b) Unlike recession, which includes a decline in economic activity for a few months, economic depression is spread over a long period of time;
- c) While recession may affect different countries at different times, economic depression has worldwide effects at the same time, with much more severe and larger effects than recession.
- d) The recession criterion is negative Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for up to two consecutive quarters, while economic depression implies a decline of more than 10% in GDP for more than three consecutive years;
- e) Unemployment rates increase exponentially during economic depression compared to recession, where unemployment rates are lower;
- f) Recessions occur more often than economic depressions and are considered a "business cycle".

*Source: Learn Business. 03.06.2022. The difference between recession and depression.*

At the same time, there are some differences between recession and crisis, while crisis takes a lot of forms such as financial crisis, housing crisis, health crisis, political crisis, commodity crisis, etc. Also, crisis can be generalized, for example a crisis that spreads internationally, or a crisis localized in a certain geographical area and over a certain period. In other words, the crisis in its worst form becomes a recession, defining a decline in the economy of one or more countries. Whether we are talking about crisis, recession or economic depression, the labour market and labour supply will be affected, purchasing power will fall, certain market segments will be affected, leading to a fall in employment rates.

As far as Romanian society is concerned, some of the symptoms of the recession mentioned above are very present, but others are not. As we can see in table 1, the drop in employment rates only occurred in 2020, amidst the restrictions of the pandemic context. In contrast, the years 2021-2022 were marked by a steady but slow increase in employment rates. We can say that some instabilities have existed, but these have predominantly affected a certain age group, namely young people aged 15-24. This trend is the reverse of the rest of the European Union. At EU level, employment rates for those in the early stages of their careers have risen and those in the later stages of their careers have fallen.

**Table 1. Employment and activity by age group**

UM: %	2020			2021			2022		
	15-24	25-54	55-64	15-24	25-54	55-64	15-24	25-54	55-64
EU27	31.5	79	59	32,7	80.4	60.5	34.7	81.8	62.3
Romania	20.5	75.3	41.5	21.2	76.9	43.18	19.7	78.3	46.7

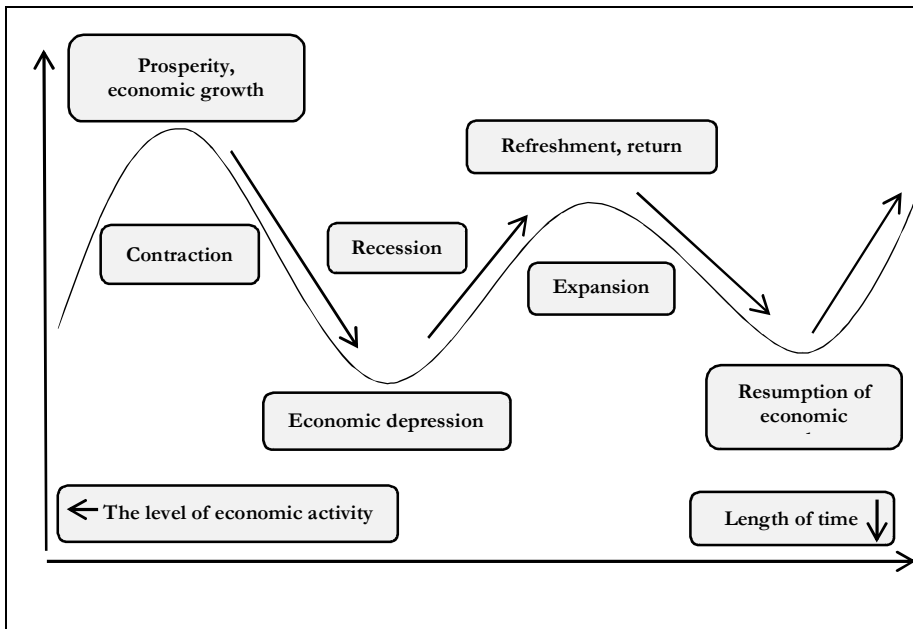
*Source: Eurostat, online data code LFSI\_EMP\_A*

In terms of the length of economic cycles, we are talking about the division into three types classified by Joseph Schumpeter, the former German-Austrian finance minister in 1919: short, less than 5 to 10 years; medium,

between 5 and 10 years, defined by Kitchin, defined by Juglar and long, between 40 and 50 years defined by Kondratieff (Kingston, 2006).

The free economy has a cyclical evolution, so it periodically faces adjustments and challenges. In short, an economic cycle is composed of two main phases: expansion and contraction (Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Phases of economic cycles*



Source: Burz, 16.07.2020.

### **A short history of economic recession and depression: consequences**

There are a wide range of recessions and economic crises in human history, each with distinct causes, consequences and solutions. Here are some of the recessions that we believe have had a major impact on the economy.

*The Great Depression*, between 1929 and 1937, resulted in a considerable downturn in the international economy. The volume of international trade

fell, as did production, and the impact was devastating, both in countries with strong economies and especially in countries with fragile economies. The housing market stagnated, while government revenues fell sharply. Unemployment growth has been on an upward trend, putting individual budgets at risk. Families faced major difficulties in securing their daily food supply. Against this backdrop, in 1939 humanity experienced what was to be called World War II (Dickstein, 2009; Eichengreen, 2014; Rogler, 2002). Thus, *The Great Depression* (1929-1937) affected even one of the world's most important economies: the United States of America (USA). High levels of unemployment caused by multiple bankruptcies, which also meant reduced contributions to the state budget, put the USA in front of one of its greatest challenges. Subsequently, famine gripped much of the population and daily living became a challenge (Poppendieck, 2014; Fumagalli, 1978).

*Oil crisis* triggered in 1973 due to the embargo imposed by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Specifically, oil prices rose sharply, leading to high inflation and subsequent recession in many countries (Zulkifli and Haqem, 2022; Issawi, 1978).

*The Savings and Loan Crisis* of 1980-1989 in the US led to a severe recession and large financial sector contractions. The savings and loan industry was severely hit by rising inflation and interest rates, while mortgage loans lost value. Financial-banking mechanisms are complex and have shown their fragility at critical moments over time. Many institutions at that time became insolvent and the state lacked the financial resources to intervene. Subsequently, in the late 1980s, interest rates and inflation fell and the economy began to recover, but the insolvency problem remained and was prolonged by the policy of forbearance, which only worsened the financial problems of the various troubled institutions (Warf and Cox, 1996; Ely, 1993; Pyle, 1995; Kenneth, 22.11.2013).

Further, in 2008 a recession began in the United States of America when the Lehman Brothers investment bank went bankrupt, followed by panic on the stock markets and a housing market freeze, spreading rapidly across the globe. The first country to go bankrupt was Iceland, and the collapse of the banking system brought the whole economy to a standstill. However, 2011 marked the recovery from recession and (Peasant, 2020). Basically, this crisis started in December 2007, when US investors lost confidence in securitised mortgages, leading to a liquidity shortage. In

response, the US Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank and the Bank of England immediately pumped substantial capital into the financial markets (Elliott, 2008). In 2008, the crisis deepened as stock markets crashed, leading to the bankruptcy of several lenders, banks and insurance companies, which in turn led to rising unemployment (European Central Bank Annual Report 2008).

The labour market was severely hit by the recession in 2008, amid multiple bankruptcies and rising unemployment. The quality of life of workers has also declined considerably due to falling incomes; at the same time, downsizing has led to an increase in workload; and stress and burnout have escalated, with negative consequences for health. Higher unemployment has meant less contributions to the state health system, which has led to reduced spending on health care, especially on prevention, thus creating the corridor for long-term health problems in the working population. In other words, the working environment and conditions worsened, while workers' health was affected to a greater or lesser extent, depending on age, gender, form of work, working hours, etc. (Mucci et al., 2016, 983-984).

The 2008 recession saw a stock market decline in transport, exports and manufacturing, as well as alarming increases in bankruptcies and inflation, and rises in unemployment. Lack of confidence and uncertainty have taken their toll on the investment sector, which has also fallen dramatically. The whole world was affected, while inflation was creating difficulties in the consumer market (Smeral, 2010, 31). Also, the 2008 recession had a major impact on the global economy, resulting in many job losses, which led to rising unemployment and thus lower purchasing power, which led to lower economic growth and lower living standards... Several sectors of the economy suffered as governments around the world and central banks implemented a series of measures to minimise the devastating impact of the recession's effects, one of which was a financial package specifically designed to help ailing firms retain employees.

In the period 2020-2022, the multiple crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is evident, with numerous negative effects on the economy internationally. The healthcare system has shown its limitations, while various sectors of activity have been severely affected, such as tourism and the HoReCa industry (hotels, restaurants, catering). Education and trade have also suffered from the restrictions on free movement imposed by the

pandemic and social isolation, so necessary to limit the spread of SARS-CoV-2 at EU level (Ozili, 2021; Nicola et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic entails a series of short and long-term challenges, difficult to manage in economic, social, health, educational terms, as well as multiple changes in the various activities in the workplace. It is an unprecedented, unique crisis (Borio, 2020, 181). For this reason, it is quite difficult to predict with any accuracy the future development of the various areas of activity, but even so, adaptation is the watchword defining the new trends. For example, remote working has opened up new opportunities, both for employees, who can work from anywhere and enjoy a flexible work schedule and a certain freedom, and for employers, who can save significant amounts of money on office rent and utilities. These are some of the effects of the pandemic that can be seen as positive. On the other hand, quarantine and social isolation have led, in some cases, to the partial or permanent closure of several economic activities, which has meant technical unemployment, or unpaid leave or even job losses (Brodeur et al., 2021; Băhnăreanu, 2020).

In the context of the recession, Cătălin Zamfir aptly observes, "We are also beginning to understand the social effects of the crisis. The immediate social effect of [the] medical crisis: an impoverished and more polarised society," highlighting the deepening economic inequalities and societal divisions exacerbated by the economic downturn (Zamfir, 2024, 123).

Further, in March 2023, three US banks go bankrupt one after the other, seemingly inexplicably: Silicon Valley Bank, Silvergate Bank followed by Signature Bank, a financial institution active in cryptocurrencies. Subsequently, US regulators took control of the two banks in order to protect depositors (Stan, 13.03.2023). The rising trend of national and international inflation is steadily reducing people's incomes, causing purchasing power to fall and bringing with it a number of difficulties in ensuring a decent living, especially for those on minimum incomes. Soaring energy, oil and gas prices have made it difficult for small and medium-sized enterprises to afford the rising costs of predictability. Following the collapse of the two American banks, Credit Suisse Bank in Switzerland goes bankrupt and is subsequently taken over by FINMA (The Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority), which is responsible for the control and supervision of banks and other financial institutions (Walker and Morris, 24.03.2023). Subsequently, Credit Suisse Bank was

bought by UBS Bank for \$3.23 billion to protect the Swiss economy and ensure financial stability (HotNews.ro, 19.03.2023).

In general, the banking system is based on public confidence, and when this confidence suddenly decreases or disappears, depositors make massive withdrawals and the bank will face the danger of bankruptcy. Thus, a simple rumour can trigger a bank crisis, while the whole banking system suffers indirectly. Of course, in general, the banking system is sound, but even so, some imbalances can occur and banks are vulnerable to rumours. Currently, the power of rumour is amplified by the internet and social media, making it dangerous to the stability and smooth functioning of banks (Gong and Zou, 2023; González-Bailón, 2017).

In summary, both the Great Depression of 1929-1937 and the recession of 2008 have had devastating effects around the world. In terms of the series of triggers, the Great Depression started with a major, dramatic stock market depreciation, the onset of the US Federal Reserve's monetary contraction and hence the decline in market liquidity, and the curtailment of international trade. These are just some of the main triggers of the Great Depression. The 2008 recession, on the other hand, was based on the housing crisis in the US, which was triggered by the exaggerated and unfounded increase in house prices, thus many borrowers defaulted, leading to large losses for banks and investors alike (Stan, 28.03.2023).

At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the COVID-19 pandemic, through measures to protect the health of the population and prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 at EU level, led to the onset of the recession in 2020. In other words, quarantine and social isolation led to the outbreak of a global cold, more or less recognised and assumed by the countries of the world. In 2023 the banking system in the EU and the US faces a number of challenges in terms of maintaining depositor confidence and determining depositors not to withdraw capital. Once mistrust spreads among the population, the bubble effect is hard to manage and stop. The massive capital withdrawals and the caution that is beginning to characterise stock markets and consumer markets are certain to lead to a deepening of the recession internationally, despite the EU's recovery and resilience plans. In such a dramatic context, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, together with the EU government, have a responsibility and a duty to intervene in order to mitigate the devastating effects of this recession. In such a time of multiple uncertainties and



financial risks, stability and growth must be the main focus of every EU economy (Stan, 28.03.2023).

In 2023 and 2024, the danger of recession facing euro area banks can no longer be ignored. It is a difficult and uncertain time, when the world's economies must show the skill and wisdom so necessary to overcome these problems. In February 2023, there were massive cash withdrawals in the euro area in EU member states, with depositors withdrawing €214 billion, according to the European Central Bank. The drop in Eurozone bank deposits came amid the European Central Bank's summer 2022 interest rate hike and the collapse of banks in the US (Silicon Valley Bank, Signatura Bank, Silvergate Bank) and Switzerland (Credit Suisse Bank) (Arnold, 27.03.2023).

## **What are the characteristics, drivers and effects of the recession?**

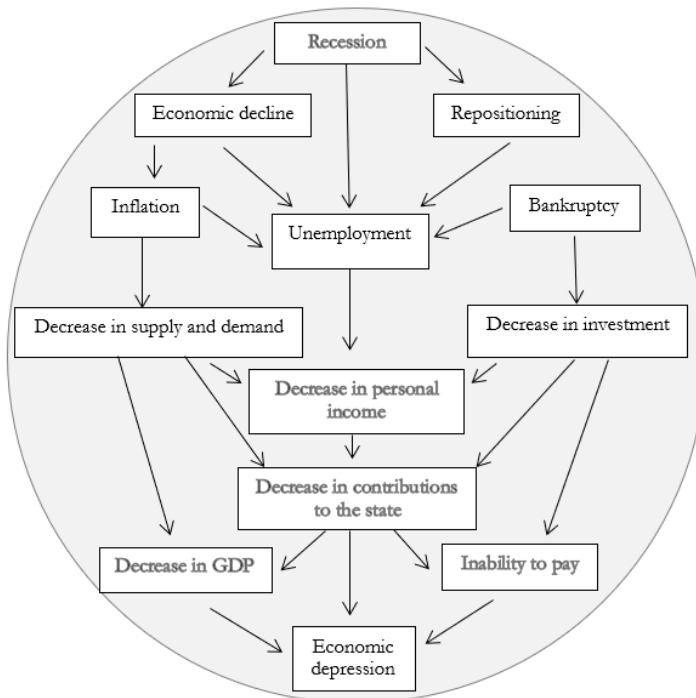
In general, a recession involves significant declines in a region's economic activity, based on a variety of socio-economic, health, political-administrative, etc. factors (Christiano et al., 2015; He, 2016).

So, among the main factors favouring a recession, the following can be mentioned: increasing a state's borrowing and rates, thus accumulating a lot of debt, which leads to lower spending and investment, as well as a wage freeze, which results in the cessation of economic growth; a decrease in the purchasing power of the population facing uncertainty about future incomes and their stability, which leads to lower demand for goods and services, while some economic sectors are seriously affected; stagnation of the real estate market; decrease in exports, which affects the economy of several countries; decrease in investment in the business environment and prevention of new job creation, which ultimately means a decrease in economic activity resulting in less revenue for the state when collecting taxes and duties; increase in inflation; increase in unemployment and decrease in labour supply; increase in bankruptcies (Adeniran and Sidiq, 2018; Elyassi, 2021; Edey, 2009).

Other events that influence the global economy, such as the war between Israel and Palestine, the earthquakes in Turkey, are some of the most important causes of the current global recession. If there is a dramatic

downturn in economic activity over a long period of time, then it is an economic depression. Thus, the fragility of the economic system and business environment is demonstrated by a series of economic and financial events, such as (Layton and Banerji, 2003; Achuthan and Banerji, 2008; Leamer, 2008; Tallaksen, 1995; Abberger and Nierhaus, 2008; Christiano et al., 2015; Chung et al., 2004): declining GDP, government default, falling stock values, declining volume of supply of goods and services, rising prices, declining purchasing power, declining supply and demand in the labour market, declining supply of existing goods and services, bankruptcies, declining investment, declining bank lending to the population, rising inflation and falling personal income, declining volume of stock market transactions etc. (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Key elements of global economic fragility**



*Source: Osaghae, 2007; Lenzen et al., 2012; Leiva-Leon et al., 2020.*

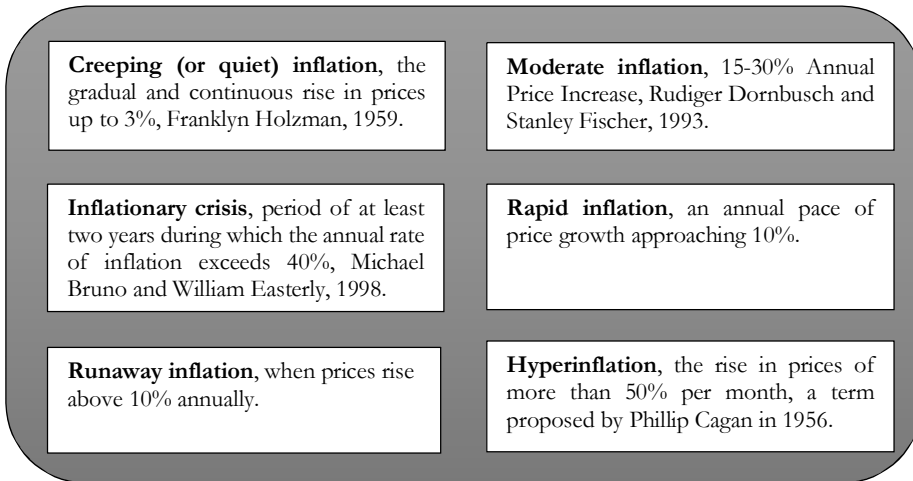
The recession may be triggered by the sharp rise in fuel prices, as well as rising gas and electricity prices. Basically, with these increases in fuel, gas and energy prices, absolutely all other prices will rise, as producer prices rise. However, recession often cannot be identified and predicted immediately, as there are a lot of other dynamic factors that can influence the direction of the market and the economy. Other enabling factors are defined by rising interest rates and falling consumer confidence translated into caution, for example falling purchases of all kinds (Claessens et al., 2009, 53-54).

Very important to watch is the development of inflation, and if massive increases in inflation are recorded, there will automatically be a fall in people's incomes and thus a fall in purchasing power

In general, high inflation can predict the occurrence of recessions, and the drivers are the depreciation in the value of cash, based on falling output; rising prices of consumer goods; falling imports and exports; rising demand over supply; and the issuance of cash far in excess of the needs of circulation and supply of goods and services (Dex online, 2023). Inflation calculation is based on the general price index IGP; the consumer price index and the purchasing power of money index IPCB (Gherase, 15.11.2017; INS, 15.02.2017). Also, the minimum basket takes into account all the goods and services needed by a household during a year and the annual inflation rate is the value of the entire basket in a month compared to the same month of the previous year.

Perceived inflation is related to specific expenses, such as daily food and transport are felt differently. For example, those on low incomes will feel the effects of inflation very differently from those on middle or high incomes. Thus, the frequency, but more importantly the type, quantity and quality of goods consumed according to needs, define personal inflation (European Central Bank, 2023). Inflation takes several forms, as follows (Figure 3).

Among the first signs of a recession are rising unemployment, freezing and even falling wages, increasing budget deficits through massive indebtedness of the population and some companies, rising inflation, etc. In such situations, the population is put in difficulty, even in danger where incomes are cut while prices rise.

*Figure 3. Forms of inflation*

*Source: Gherase, 15.11.2017; Nikitin, 1995; Forbes, et al. 2022.*

In general, the factors that can lead to an economic depression include dramatic stock market crashes, bank failures and so on, as well as various contractions in the money supply (Calomiris, 1993, 61). Monetary policy and price flexibility must be in step with the national and international macro-economic situation, since globalisation often has a 'domino' effect on external economic and financial relations. Thus, if one country is affected by various factors that cause a recession, it is likely to be felt to a greater or lesser extent in other neighbouring countries.

On the other hand, the recession can have a major negative effect on employees, with the risk of them developing certain mental health problems caused by increased stress at work. In conclusion, there is a clear link between the recession, stress at work, burnout and the health of working people. In addition to mental health problems caused by stress and burnout, employees can also suffer from various physical ailments due to increased workload and strain. However, the relationship between the recession and the occurrence of various employee health problems is not fully explored. One of the best measures to prevent the emergence of health problems among employees during recessions is the effectiveness of social protection measures (Regidor et al., 2014; Giorgi et al., 2015; Van Hal, 2015).

## **Recession in Romania compared to the EU**

Recession means a whole "chain" of socio-economic events difficult for the government to manage, starting from the increase in food and service prices translated into higher inflation rates, leading in some cases to lower production and the creation of large discrepancies between job supply and demand, but especially to the closure/insolvency of many small and medium-sized enterprises translated into higher unemployment rates and lower monthly incomes of the population. Of course, speculation can also occur through unjustified price increases, making the economic activity of some businesses and the daily lives of citizens difficult.

The current socio-economical context has affected all segments of the population, imposing new rules of socio-economic interaction, and we are now witnessing a fundamental change in the whole of society. The rapid and unpredictable metamorphoses in the evolution of labour market tensions make it difficult to anticipate trends in the impact that the pandemic and the war may have on the macroeconomic level, taking into account the characteristics, structure and level of development of each EU Member State's economy. But we are talking about disproportionate effects on the economy of each individual country, revealing new vulnerabilities.

In 2022, twenty-two Member States reported a budget deficit. The largest deficits were recorded in Italy (-8.0%), Romania (-6.3%), Hungary (-6.2%) and Malta (-5.7%). Twelve Member States recorded deficits above 3% of GDP (Eurostat, 2023). The widening budget deficit can be seen as a symptom of the recession in that countries find it more difficult to collect sufficient taxes from their citizens in a period of economic depression or recession. Depending on the society, this can also be interpreted as, among other things, a limitation of administrative capacity to collect taxes. A budget deficit in a country with a highly digitised tax system should be interpreted differently from the same situation in a country with a profound deficiency in estimating the amounts it needs to collect from taxpayers.

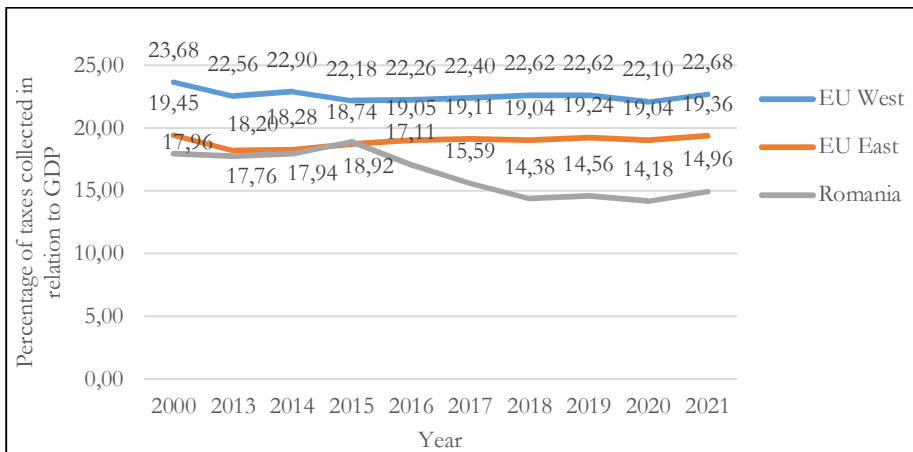
As far as the progress of the digitisation of administration in Romania is concerned, we can say that, especially in the context of the pandemic, remarkable progress has been made. The weak point in the digitisation of the administrative apparatus is access to the internet, which can be characterised as profoundly unequal between large urban and rural areas (Doran, 2022). The implications of the disparity of access to the internet

in territorial profile are that a part of the population, together with its representatives, faces a low degree of digital literacy, and the implementation of modern taxation systems will thus suffer.

An interesting point about the list of countries with the largest budget deficits in the EU is that it confirms North-South and East-West disparities. We can see in graph 2 how all the countries in the top of those with high budget deficits in 2022 are part of either Southern or Eastern Europe (Smętkowski, 2013).

We can see how tax collection is relatively constant in both Western and Eastern Europe, at least compared to Romania. Fluctuations for Western Europe over 21 years below 2%, for Eastern Europe less than 1.5%, while in Romania we are talking about a variation of almost 4%. One of the potential explanations for this situation refers to the accelerated GDP growth in Romanian society compared to conglomerates of EU countries. According to the same data, there are countries with a significantly higher variation of tax collection in relation to GDP than Romania, for example Ireland by more than 10% in the period 2000-2020. This example is relevant as it demonstrates the existence of a trend of decreasing the share of revenue collected in relation to GDP, as a political-economic option of certain EU Member States (Graph 2).

**Graph 2. Tax collection in relation to GDP**



Source: World Bank, (2022), Tax revenue (% of GDP)

The evolution of unemployment by age group at EU level suggests a difference in trend between Romania and the rest of the member countries, both in the West and in the East. Unemployment in Romania is atypical for the 15-24 age group, especially for the year 2022, when an increase of 1.8% is recorded. In contrast, unemployment among 55-74 year olds is consistently lower than in the rest of the EU. It should be noted that for this age group, Romania is very close to the trend in other Eastern European countries, excluding Bulgaria.

It can be seen from Eurostat data that the unemployment dynamics for the broadest age group, 25-54 years, is atypical in Romania compared to the rest of the EU. While in the period 2021-2022 unemployment has decreased significantly in both East and West, in Romania it has stagnated at 4.6%. There may be several explanations for this, including the influence of circular migration for economic purposes. There is a possibility that a larger share of the unemployed in Romania are in fact working people who undertake several types of seasonal activities, both inside and outside the country.

International Monetary Fund estimates for 2024 put us at the top of the EU in terms of budget deficit at -6.01%. By comparison, the same estimate for Bulgaria is -3.21% (IMF, 2023). This comparison is easy because it tells us that Romania's public debt will most likely increase more than other countries in the region. The increase in public debt is relevant as Romania has a higher public debt to GDP ratio than other Eastern and Central European countries such as Estonia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia and the Czech Republic, as we can see in table 2. But public debt is lower than in Poland, Slovakia, Croatia, Hungary (Eurostat, 2023).

**Table 2. Unemployment by age group  
(percentage of the active population)**

UM: %	2020			2021			2022		
	15-24	25-54	55-74	15-24	25-54	55-74	15-24	25-54	55-74
EU27	17.6	6.7	4.9	16.7	6.4	5.2	14.5	5.6	4.6
EU West	20.26	7.16	5.65	19.02	6.74	5.84	16.37	5.70	5.01
EU East	15.56	5.32	4.51	14.97	5.12	4.23	13.56	4.46	3.79
Romania	21.6	5.20	4.1	21	4.60	3.8	22.8	4.60	3.6

Source: Eurostat, online data code UNE\_RT\_A

Romania's economy has grown at a pace unmatched by the rest of Eastern Europe. However, economic progress is lagging behind the welfare of the population in line with the pace of growth. Although Romania's GDP grew by two and a half times that of Hungary between 2005 and 2021, other macro-social indicators such as purchasing power, investment in public services, infrastructure, etc., are not showing up, or at least not at the same pace as economical growth. It should be noted that the Romanian economy in 2005 was deeply underdeveloped in relation to the country's population. Although we were two or more times larger than countries such as the Czech Republic or Hungary, the GDPs were comparable (Table 3).

**Table 3. GDP at current market prices (billion PPS), 2005-2021, Central and Eastern European countries.**

Central and Eastern European countries	2005	2010	2015	2019	2020	2021	Change in 2021 compared to 2005	Growth in % in 2021 compared to 2005
Bulgaria	65	84	95	116	114	123	58	89.23
Czechia	185	221	267	311	297	316	131	70.81
Croatia	54	65	70	84	78	88	34	62.96
Latvia	26	28	36	42	40	43	17	65.38
Lithuania	39	47	60	73	73	80	41	105.12
Hungary	141	165	190	223	217	238	97	68.79
Poland	434	607	734	873	873	953	519	119.58
<b>Romania</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>452</b>	<b>284</b>	<b>169.04</b>
Slovenia	39	43	47	58	56	61	22	56.41
Slovakia	73	103	117	119	114	120	47	64.38

*Source: author's processing of Eurostat databases*

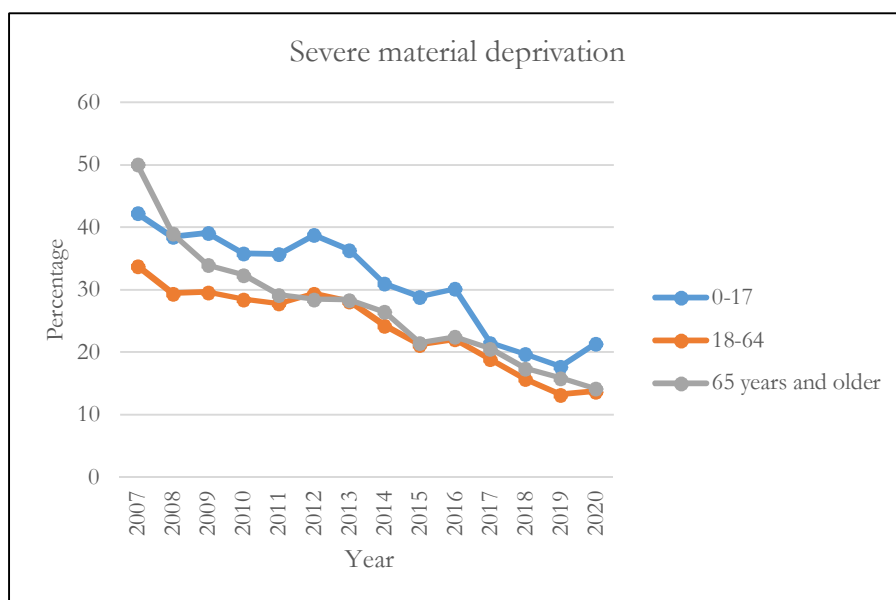
Severe material deprivation is an "indicator showing a definite lack of the necessary and desirable elements for leading an adequate life". Until 2008, the social category most affected by severe material deprivation was the elderly. From 2008 to 2020, those most affected by severe material



deprivation are children and adolescents. Romania's EU membership has almost halved the rate of severe material deprivation, from 38% in 2007 to 14.8% in 2020.

Like other indicators, such as child poverty, a social phenomenon for which Romania ranks first in the EU, suggests that the current economic context has had a greater impact on young minors. While in 2007, people under 17 years old in Romania were intermediate in terms of severe material deprivation between those of working age and those over 65, in recent years severe material deprivation has affected them more severely. In 2020, the differences in rates of severe material deprivation were comparable between the 18-64 age groups and the over-65s (Chart 3).

**Chart 3. Social and material deprivation**



Source: NSI Tempo, SAR112B matrix

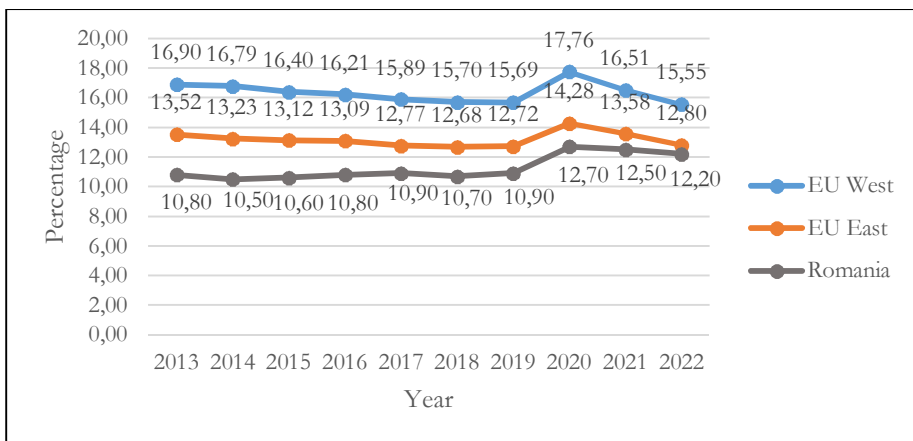
The percentage of GDP allocated to social assistance places Romania below the average for both Western and Eastern EU countries. Contrary to neoliberal discourse or common knowledge, Romania is not a country that invests large amounts in social assistance programmes (chart 4).

"Romania also has a modest financial allocation for social protection compared to other European countries, with the amounts allocated for social exclusion being relatively low compared to other European countries, but especially in relation to the share of people in extreme poverty" (Arpinte, 2019, 55).

Although spending on social assistance follows the same trends as in the rest of the European Union, the share of allocated revenue is lower than in countries such as Hungary or Poland. A little-discussed issue in the social assistance sphere is the efficiency of investment. Given the difficult bureaucratic context, the lack of digital working methodologies in line with today's standards and the limited number of trained experts in the field at national level, it is likely that the current allocations will not achieve the expected results. The accessibility of services is also a limiting factor.

We can see how after 2020, even if social needs have decreased since the pandemic, they remain above the level of 2019 or previous years. This reality suggests to us that although GDPs have increased at EU level, poverty in most of its forms has declined linearly with the exception of 2020, and unemployment is decreasing, some social categories require more state assistance. The inflationary context and rising living costs generate a greater need for intervention for the least privileged quintiles of the European population than in the pre-Pandemic world.

**Chart 4. Social assistance expenditure as a share of GDP**



Source: Eurostat, online data code GOV\_10A

## **Conclusion and measures**

This paper has sought to compare the established scientific consensus on recession with contemporary social reality. We can say that, despite the fact that some indicators such as GDP, poverty rates in most of its forms and unemployment do not have a typical recessionary trend, the social reality is different. The choice to generate more inflation to compensate for the global economic context can be characterised as a fiscal artifice, the effects of which are not sustainable over time. The devaluation of personal savings, the increase in taxes, the rise in prices for basic foodstuffs and in rents are in fact pointing to a much more serious economic situation than we might see from an analysis of macroeconomic indicators.

In general, recession severely affects employment, leading to increases in unemployment; it slows or even stops international trade and the exchange of goods; it reduces purchasing power and thus reduces output. In the context of the 2020-2023 period, we cannot say that all these symptoms of recession are present. On the contrary, with the exception of 2020, the trends in the remedying of social problems have followed the same trend as before the pandemic.

Among the general measures that can be taken by governments are the following (Adeniran and Sidiq, 2018; Koo, 2011; Jakob, 2013; Lux and Westerhoff, 2009):

- a) Governments can increase investment in infrastructure, while eliminating taxation for some citizens considered vulnerable, but also for some small and medium-sized enterprises in order to support them during a financially critical period;
- b) Adjusting tax policy so as to stimulate economic growth, the arrival of new investors, but especially the approach of progressive taxation to ensure equity in access to goods and services for all citizens;
- c) Increase state contributions to social and preventive health programmes to protect the vulnerable;
- d) A monetary policy approach that allows for the management of rates and interest rates so that governments encourage borrowing and investment;

- e) A regulatory policy approach in the implementation of rules that, on the one hand, prevent economic instability and, on the other, stimulate economic growth.

Shifting the tax system towards progressive taxation becomes an imperative in the context of accelerating social inequalities and widening disparities in access to resources between people. We can say that, like the 2008-2013 crisis, the privileged have more possibilities to retaliate to the recession. The ability to negotiate with a potential employer, the possession of passive income-generating assets or the willingness to relocate for economic purposes can be differentiating factors between winners and losers in the context of a recession. Thus, moving to a progressive taxation model could help to reduce social disparities and reorient towards caring. Adopting a progressive taxation system is the easiest way for our society to overcome implicit biases about the "deserving poor and the undeserving poor" (Bridges, 2017).

## **Authorship**

B.G.V. had the initiative of this article and invited H.M. to work together. The authors collaborated and worked together on each chapter of this work. Both authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## **Acknowledgements**

N/A.

## **Funding**

The authors did not receive any funding for research writing or publishing this article.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The authors declare no conflicting interests.

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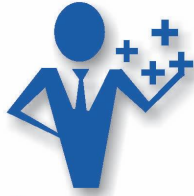
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JCPP

Year XXIV • No. 4/2024

EDITURA  
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ISSN 1582-8344

