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INDICATORS OF SOCIAL TRUST IN ROMANIA – A QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

***Abstract:** The paper discusses the attitudes towards interpersonal and institutional trust in post-communist Romania. Based on data from the European Social Survey, round 5 (2010), the analysis includes indicators of the two types of trust, and employs correlation analysis and cluster analysis to distinguish between the trust-related behavior of different social groups. The findings of the research show that the state of distrust, more obvious in the institutional environment, but also present in personal relationships is still present, but its sources and effects tend to be different. These findings are important for sketching an evolution of mentalities, during transition, and as a starting point for further studies in business-related behavior and social dynamics.*

Key words: *trust, post-communist Romania, cluster analysis.*

JEL Classification: Z 13, C83.

Introduction

Approaches to communism as political religion (Burrin, 1997) tend to overlook its paradoxical relationship to trust. Normally, faith includes trust, both institutional and interpersonal. On the contrary, communist “faith” systematically undermined each of the two (Kornai, Rothstein, Rose-Ackerman, 2004). A climate of interpersonal suspicion (see Stelian Tanase, *At Home There’s Only Speaking in a Whisper*, 2007), and the double measure in facing the authorities are its most enduring consequences, in terms of mentalities’ shaping. Romanian communism adhered to this general paradox. The communist party lacked an official history, which is to be blamed on leaders’ mutual distrust, with dramatic consequences, but pretended to build the future. They claimed openness, as an obligation, in relation to the authorities, while encouraging “hide and seek”. The double play is always visible, blowing trust away. Hypocrisy and corruption replace honesty, honors are preferred to honor. Rothstein, in the aforementioned work, brings into

discussion the Mafia, which is based on internal trust, and external distrust. Mafia pursues the accomplishment of ideals (unorthodox, but still) – remember the well-known slogan “as boys, they said they would die for each other. As men, they did” from *Once upon a time in America*. Contrarily, internal distrust is characteristic to communism. Its propaganda targets only the external distrust, while the system gradually decouples from its former ideals. From time to time, leaders in disgrace are accused of having compromised the noble ideals.

Concurrently, “the many unsung” (Hutcheon, 1996) develop a parallel system of trust. Its consequences, in the short, as well as in the long run, are both good and evil. The good aspects are those contributing to the creation of a resistance, less visible in Romania than in other states of the socialist block (Lucian Boia, 2001, speaks of *non-adherence*, as more appropriate), which was based on interpersonal trust. People who knew each other – those who were involved, for instance, in the hand-to-hand delivery of protests to Radio Free Europe, or who didn’t know each other – a writer encrypting a message, and his readers tacitly deciphering it, have rebuilt a quasi-trust, whose complicated relationship with honor, solidarity, freedom should be investigated more in detail. The conceptual analysis of this trust-in-distrust phenomenon exceeds the scope of the present research, as it should be studied in relation to Czesław Miłosz’s “captive mind” (1953; see also Walicki’s revisiting of the concept in 1990). What is to be retained is that the phenomenon vanished together with the regime which made it possible, and like any social phenomenon it cannot be reproduced, not even for study purposes. Thus, the good consequences did not outlive their political genitor. The bad consequences did. Among them, the question of *whom you know*, in order to solve smoothly problems involving bureaucracy, institutional barriers, malevolence, is the direct source of post-communist corruption, a very biased, misappropriated “trust”.

Consequently, the two classical types of trust (Allum, Patulny, Sturgis, 2010) particularize, in communism, as follows:

- *Institutional trust* fluctuated between reliance upon a paternalistic state (Barr, 2005, discusses the feeling of insecurity, in Eastern Europe, after the dissolution of the almighty state), and protection of the private space, which was invaded by the intruder state. A study by Bollerup and Christensen (1997), dedicated to nationalism in Eastern Europe, argues that the historically excluded nations of Eastern Europe (suffering from the “margin of the empire” complex) took pride in the apparent international power of communism, and were happy to belong, at last, to a pedigreed family. Becoming the centre of an empire, after centuries of marginality, was a promise which revived nationalistic tendencies, and alimanted the trust in a powerful state. *We were economically independent, or our leaders were proud, would not accept comprise* are the most common justifications of Romanian nostalgia, in post-communism. This is, summarized, one side of

institutional trust, as fake as its promises. Still, its existence, as we will see, undermines post-communist institutional trust. The institutional trust, as described above, in connection with nationalism, implies suspicion towards strangers (*We do not sell our country*, the anti-privatization slogan of the 90s, emerges from this distrust), which potentially contributes to euro-skepticism. The other side, as previously mentioned, implies a totally different relation to the state, seen as the object of suspicion, fear, even horror. Vladimir Shlapentokh (2006) in his *Fear in Contemporary Societies* speaks of the two dimensions of the fear of the state: the Hobbesian, positive, fear, synonym with the external order of the law, and the Orwellian, negative, fear, present in totalitarian regimes. The later is the fear of an absurd control, annulling intimacy, the right to private space. In this second paradigm, the trust in state is minimal, the state is not protective, but informal communities (e.g., groups of friends) should protect themselves from the indiscretion of the state.

- *Social trust*. In studies by Putnam (2000), Newton and Norris (2000), social trust is linked to voluntary association of people, for a common goal. In other words, cooperation is made possible by trust and, in its turn, generates social trust. Communist regimes denied the right to free association, replaced by tight social control. Thus, one of the important premises of social trust was abolished. Delhey and Newton (2005) go further, stating that governments which are trusted by their citizens also stimulate social trust and willingness to get involved. So, against the common sense, widespread in Romania, that a powerful civil society appears as an alternative to a poor government, the two forms of trust are interwoven. This might, in fact, explain why the powerful civil society is not, actually, that powerful... As “good government”, in the Western sense of the concept, is out of question, in communism, social trust is further undermined. Still, a resistance through trust, in small groups, as previously mentioned, is characteristic to the communist regime.

Sapsford and Abbott (2006) distinguish between *confidence*, the rather institutional side of the matter, and *trust*, referring to the direct human interaction. Above these two there is, in the two researchers' view, the trust in the general order of the state, the assumption that *things are going in the right direction*. Communism functioned somewhat outside this trust, as anyone saw that things were not going into the right direction, which created an expectance of catastrophe, or even a paradoxical trust in catastrophe. Victimization oneself, as a cultural trait of the East, further stimulated this dynamics. Our hypothesis is that the ones claiming that it

couldn't possibly be worse were, actually, much less than the ones expecting it to be worse. Sapsford and Abbott, quoting Sztompka (1999) and Kochanowicz (2004), examine both sides of the matter. The first possibility, analyzed by us under institutional trust, is that the disintegration of the regime created a feeling a vacuum, of *now what*, which stimulated distrust and panic, in post-communism. The second one claims, on the contrary, that fear and suspicion alimented during communism gave rise to the general post-communist distrust. This context of distrust affects quality processes in all fields of business (Dima, 2009).

Fukuyama (1995) argues that high-trust societies are more likely to prosper, as people associate freely and set up businesses, while low trust societies need the intervention of the state-in-control-of-everything, in order to make people work together. Thus, the communist centralized economy was an effect of distrust, and distrust (*divide et impera!*) was purposely cultivated, to maintain centralization. Still, Fukuyama and Putnam (in Bac, 2008), are also the ones to claim that social inequality, and unequal distribution of wealth stimulate distrust. Communist "equality", which was only a myth ("all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than other"), has to be considered as a major source of distrust. If, in America, a sudden change in your neighbor's lifestyle would generate suspicion, and consequent notification of the IRS, in communist countries such changes (for instance, journeys abroad) would generate, at the social community level, the silent suspicion of collaborating with the regime, and lead to an exclusion from the lines of the trustable peers. Some of this mutual distrust, stimulated by the witch hunt after the fall of communism, persisted in post-communism, sabotaging, to a certain extent, free association (in either business or civic organizations).

Our assumption is that post-communism, on the one hand, diversified institutional trust, in the sense that not only national, but also supra-national institutions compete for this trust and, on the other hand, determined the disappearance of the groups which nurtured social trust. Thus, the hypothesis of this paper is that institutional trust is reinforced in post-communist Romania, but not in respect to national, but to international institutions, while social trust is undermined. We will not approach matters of corruption, or performance of the considered institutions, limiting research to the genuine trust that communism replaced with a perpetual specter of betrayal.

Methodology

The research uses data subsets from the *European Social Survey* (ESS), round 5 (2010), regarding post-communist Romania. The variables chosen were grouped into several modules:

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a) trust-related variables:

- *ppltrust* (“most people can be trusted, or you can’t be too careful”), measured on a Likert scale from 0 – you can’t be too careful to 10 – most people can be trusted;
- *trstprl* (“trust in the country’s parliament”), measured on a Likert scale from 0 – no trust at all to 10 – complete trust;
- *trstlgl* (“trust in the legal system”), on the same scale;
- *trstep* (“trust in the European parliament”), on the same scale;
- *trstun* (“trust in the United Nations”), on the same scale;

The trust-related variables include the general predisposition to trust, from which the social trust emerges, and the two components of the institutional trust, trust in national institutions, and trust in international institutions.

b) political participation:

- *mmbprty* (“member of political party”), where 1 = yes, 2 = no;
- *vote* (“voted last national elections”), where 1 = yes, 0 = no;
- *lrscale* (“placement on left-right scale”), from 0 – left, to 10 – right;

c) social and work environment:

- *stflife* (“how satisfied with life as a whole”), measured on a Likert scale from 0 – extremely dissatisfied, to 10 – extremely satisfied;
- *sclmeet* (“how often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues”), measured on a Likert scale from 1 – never to 7 – every day;
- *inmdisc* (“anyone to discuss intimate and personal matters with”), where 1 = yes, 2 = no.
- *rlgdgr* (“how religious are you”), measured on a Likert scale from 0 – not at all, to 10 – very religious;
- *emplrel* (“employment relationship”), where 1 = employee, 2 = self employed, 3 = working for the own family business;

d) values and attitudes:

- *ipfrule* (“important to do what is told and follow rules”), on a Likert scale from 1 – very much like me, to 6 – not like me at all;
- *ipudrst* (“important to understand different people”), on the same scale;

The items we have chosen place an emphasis on conformism and tolerance, as we consider these values to be well connected with predisposition to trust or distrust.

- e) demographic variables:
- *edulvl* (“highest level of education”), from 0 – not completed primary education, to 6 – second level of tertiary;
 - *marital* (“legal marital status”), where 1 = married, 2 = in a civil partnership, 3 = separated (still legally married), 4 = separated (still in a legal partnership), 5 = divorced, 6 = widowed, 7 = Formerly in civil partnership, now dissolved, 8 = Formerly in civil partnership, partner died, 9 = Never married and never in civil partnership;
 - *gndr* (“gender”), where 1 = male, 2 = female;
 - *frndy30* (“how many friends, other than family, younger than 30”), where 1 = none, 2 = 1, 3 = 2-5, 4 = 6-9, 5 = 10 or more
 - *frnd070* (“how many friends, other than family, older than 70”), same scale as above.

We have opted for measuring age as social age, the age of the entourage, rather than biological age, as we believe this approach is more adequate for the purpose of the research.

The methods used included descriptive statistics (frequency analysis and cross-tabulation), correlations, and cluster analysis.

Results and discussions

According to descriptive statistics, opinions are rather dispersed, in terms of general trust. Still, the ones who tend to be very prudent (scores below 3), count for more than one third of the respondents, in cumulative percents, while only about 10% tend to be very trustful (scores over 7), which entitles us to say that the general societal trend inclines most likely towards distrust.

The number of respondents trusting neither of the two systems exceeds five times, roughly, the number of those trusting both. The decline in trust, along the scale, is visible.

In the case of institutional trust viewed through the lenses of confidence in international institutions, the number of those not trusting them at all and of those completely trusting them are fairly comparable. The frequencies are increasing, in the second part of the scale, towards the trust pole, unlike the case of the attitude towards Romanian institutions, where distrust tends to be the rule.

Although the level of trust is generally low, some interesting variations can be noticed, pleading for a conservation of the traditional social structure. Thus, in younger groups of friends, the one best friend seems to be a catalyst of trust, while in groups of older friends only communities of 10 or more increase trust, which suggest that these communities are reminiscences of the communist period groups of friends which cultivated a somehow semi-clandestine trust. There is a significant negative correlation of -0.364 between the frequency of social meetings and the existence of someone to discuss personal and intimate

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matters with, suggesting that there are two levels of socialization, preserving the communist stratification of relationships: the extended group of friends, bound by superficial relationships, and the confident(s), usually only one. There is a slight positive correlation of .049 between trust and religion, showing that religion is still seen as a practice apart from everyday life, which begins to influence social behaviors, but not enough yet.

Men seem to be slightly more trustful than women, who may be more prudent. Either those married, or those never married nor involved in a relationship tend to be more trustful which, again, pleads for a traditional social structure. Trust increases with, presumably because those higher educated are more tolerant and less bound by prejudices. Dan (2012) states that one of the missions of education is to foster trust. Contrary to Fukuyama's theory, those employed tend to be much more trusting than the self employed, or those working for a family business, which perpetuates the safety anchor which existed in the communist society. In a transition system which is not, yet, legally coherent, self-starters tend to experience rather distrust, to become suspicious, which, of course, impedes on the dynamics of free association and creation of business communities, thus hindering prosperity. The correlations between trust and the two values considered are shown in **Table 1**:

Table 1. Trust-values correlation

		Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful	It is important to do what is told and follow rules	It is important to understand different people
Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful	Pearson Correlation	1	.110**	.041
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.064
	N	2129	2093	2091
It is important to do what is told and follow rules	Pearson Correlation	.110**	1	.390**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000
	N	2093	2107	2103
It is important to understand different people	Pearson Correlation	.041	.390**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.064	.000	
	N	2091	2103	2105

****.** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), round 5 (2010), data subsets for Romania

Although tolerance is more powerfully correlated with trust, there is a significant correlation between trust and conformism, as well, which is inherited from the communist period, when people not disturbing the “well” functioning of the system were perceived as trustworthy.

The political implication of respondents in the sample is at a minimum, as although 66.1% declare to have voted in the last national elections, only 5.8% are members of a political party. Thus, we can't presume that the levels of trust are influenced by political options. Regarding the left-right scale, the responses are equilibrated, with a slight prevalence of the right semi-scale, which may be explained as a reaction to the communist left. The influence of the left-right scale placement on general trust suggests that extremes, to the left, or to the right, are associated with distrust, while people close to the right margin of the scale tend to be more trustful. This can be, again, be seen as a reaction to communist, leftist distrust.

The cluster analysis, based on the considered variables, has split the sample in five clusters, as follows:

Table 2. Cluster centroids

	Most people can be trusted or you can't be too careful		How satisfied are you with your life as a whole ?		How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues ?		How religious are you ?	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cluster 1	3.32	2.609	5.10	2.749	3.12	1.694	7.22	2.223
Cluster 2	4.17	2.906	6.54	2.271	3.54	1.520	7.20	1.946
Cluster 3	3.44	2.542	5.63	2.637	3.25	1.534	5.90	2.357
Cluster 4	4.11	2.624	6.08	2.275	3.81	1.580	6.47	2.165
Cluster 5	3.58	2.626	6.60	2.139	4.55	1.578	6.33	2.235
Com-bined	3.74	2.693	6.02	2.476	3.68	1.663	6.67	2.230

Source: European Social Survey (ESS), round 5 (2010), data subsets for Romania

According to the computed frequencies of the demographic variables, the first cluster is composed mainly of females, widowed, low educated, very religious, either employed or working for a family business, having rather old

friends, who rarely engage in social activities. Persons in this cluster have the lowest level of trust and the lowest level of life satisfaction. We may label it as the *excluded* cluster.

The second cluster is composed exclusively of women, with secondary or post-secondary education, without a prevalent marital status (the percentages of those married, divorced, or widowed are roughly equal), employed, with many young friends, with moderate social life, and very religious. They exhibit the highest level of trust and their life satisfaction is also high. They tend to be the *modern employees*.

The third cluster is composed of men, with a very high level of education, married, self-employed, very relational, with young, as well as old friends, moderately socialized and religious. They tend to be rather distrustful and unsatisfied with their life. These are the *entrepreneurs*.

The fourth cluster is composed of men, exclusively, very low educated, married or divorced, with no clear employment status (rather equally split between the three), moderately socialized and religious. They tend to be rather trustful and satisfied with their life. They are the *undecided*.

Finally, the fifth cluster includes men and women in a roughly equal proportion, highly educated, never married, with lots of young friends, self-employed or working for a family business, very eager to socialize and moderately religious. Their level of trust is low, while their life satisfaction is high. They are the *hedonists*.

Cases are roughly equally split between the clusters, the third one being slightly smaller.

What do these clusters tell about the structure of post-communist Romanian society, filtered through the lenses we have chosen, as variables? There are two clusters, that of the *excluded* and that of the *undecided*, which are perpetuating previous social structures. They are distrustful, not eager to get involved, without a clear employment pattern, and actually not expecting their lives to change. The *modern employees*, considering that the survey was conducted in a period of economic boom (as data were released in 2008), tend to equal material easiness with happiness, and be very trustful, as if nothing bad can happen to them. We have examined their institutional trust, finding out that while levels of trust in national institutions are rather low (3.40 for trust in the national parliament, and 3.69 for trust in the legal system), the ones in international institutions are significantly higher (5.71 for the European parliament, and 5.98 for the United Nations). These employees tend to be the cross-national employees, more involved in their work than in the social dynamics of the country. As the mean for *voting* is 1.93, close to 2, we may suppose that the majority of the respondents in this cluster did not vote in the last elections. Their trust is, then, rather generic, than oriented towards national realities.

The *entrepreneurs*, who tend to be more involved, are disappointed by the system. While their trust in national institutions is very low (2.26 in the Parliament,

2.17 in the legal system), the international side does not compensate: 3.62 is the mean of their trust in the European Parliament, and 3.59 in the United Nations.

Finally, the *hedonists* put their trust in Europe and the world (5.88 for the European Parliament, and 6.15 for the United Nations), are disappointed by the internal situation, but not willing to change something (their mean in *voting* is also close to 2 – did not vote in the last elections), just to live their moment. They may be, biologically and socially, too young to get involved.

This structure reveals a mixture of communist residuals and post-communism ambuscade, in a general climate of distrust. Some of it is inherited, in the case of clusters perpetuating communist ways of life, with minimum involvement, high conformism, old, conserved groups of friends, and a religiosity which does not produce effects in the social life, being rather hidden; some other is generated in the process of creating new structures (*i.e.*, entrepreneurial behavior), which are undermined by bureaucracy and malevolence. The two, although they come from different worlds and systems of reference, integrate, and lead to the final picture, of low general trust, both social and institutional.

As far as institutional trust is concerned, our premise was confirmed, in the sense that external institutions tend to be more credited than internal ones, at the level of the entire population. In social relations, not very tight, with small differences between the clusters, a two-level structure is preserved. On the one side, there is the general group of friends, the entourage, which is kept for socialization purposes, and on the other side, the confidants, usually only one, who are intended for serious matters. Thus, social trust is set apart from private trust. In which ways this trust in a very close person undermines the entrepreneurial trust in oneself is a question for further research. As for the relationship between private trust and institutional trust, in communist and post-communist societies, we may quote Tullberg's (2007) discussion of Fukuyama's claim that private trust is a substitute for the lack of institutional trust. During the communist regime, it was widely acknowledged that the system, dysfunctional at a large scale, strengthened friendship and solidarity, at the micro-social level. Private trust was a surrogate for institutional distrust. The Swedish researcher argues that institutional trust is built on private trust, and the two are not competing, as Fukuyama suggests. Still, in communism, these two types of trust were structurally different. Tullberg quotes a Czech proverb, "Everybody who does not steal is stealing from his own family" (Zsolnai, 2002), as a reflection of corruption, rather than of institutional-private sphere divorce. In post-communist Romania, a piece of urban folklore expresses the same idea: "There is not pity to steal from the head thief, the state". Mentalities die hard, and private trust is replaced by a sort of low-scale Mafia, where, like discussed in the beginning of our article, external distrust is compensated by internal trust. The "we, us and ours", which is a constant of Romanian social life (see Caragiale's satires of the mid 1800s) is thus recycled in another format, devoid of the constrained dignity of individual or small group survival of the communist period.

Conclusions

Romanian post-communist society, from the point of view of trust, looks like a mosaic of the *excluded* and the *engaged*. Trust is essentially a matter of expectations and experience. Our research has proved that those socializing more with people having lived their youth and maturity in communism tend to be more distrustful and less satisfied. The *entrepreneurs*, illustrating the other party, of the *engaged*, are also distrustful, but their reasons are different. Thus, the big picture of the low levels of general trust shouldn't be interpreted as a homogenous reality. Its mechanisms are rather opposite, although the effects simulate a convergence. Communist beliefs and post-communist initiatives aliment, in variable proportions, the general distrust. Similar to the communist period, when both propaganda and resistant private trust were build on apparently the same idea ("we are surrounded by enemies"), only that one's "saviors" where the other's enemies, and vice-versa, the post-communist lack of prosperity generates distrust and witch hunting. Although these phenomena existed during the communist rule, they are not inherited, in post-communism, but re-created, starting from residual communist realities in new, post-communist circumstances. New species of distrust replace the previous monolith, as "enemies" diversify.

Coming back to the sets of variables enounced in the methodology, we may conclude that while institutional trust, as proven, is low, social trust is witnessing disequilibrium. While its political participation component is almost inexistent, the social, intimate environment, as inherited from communism, as an alternative to the threatening state, is still in place. Conformism and tolerance form a continuum, on which it is difficult to decide where one ends and the other starts. These issues deserve a more thorough examination, in a further research.

The main limitations of our approach arise from the use of secondary data, which do not permit enough flexibility in studying nuances and vague transitions from one mentality to the other, which would require a more focused collection of data, backed up by qualitative research, allowing for a more in-depth social research. In addition, we cannot speak of only one dominant mentality, in the communist society. A mosaic is not replaced at once, but repositions itself continuously. This leads to the amalgam of clusters which was outlined by the research. None of them has a clear orientation towards trust and satisfaction; they all float in the indeterminacy of the lower-median part of the scale. To what extent this social composition interferes with economic transition, and which influences which, is the subject of a further expansion of the research.

Acknowledgements: *This article was supported by research projects PN II_RU PD 642/ 2010 and PN II_RU TE 351/ 2010.*

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