WHY DO SOCIETAL AND INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE MATTER IN THE NEW SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE ROMANIAN SOCIETY?

VERONICA DUMITRAȘCU[1]

ABSTRACT

In the last years, Romania has passed through multiple crises: sanitary, economical, political and institutional. In a Romania shaped by insecurity and uncertainty, both societal and institutional resilience are important instruments for social cohesion. The article explores the concept of resilience, focusing on its societal and institutional dimensions. In times of crises, resilience must become a societal and institutional purpose for Romania. Promoting civic and political participation for all citizens, improving dialogue between political class and civic society and cooperation between institutions, rebuilding trust in state's institutions and preserving democratic governance are key to build a strong resilient state.

Keywords: resilience, societal resilience, institutional resilience, social cohesion, trust, trust in institutions

INTRODUCTION

Since 1990, Romania has undergone profound transformations, marked by structural changes from the post-communist transition to the integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. These shifts were followed by multiple crises–sanitary (the pandemic), societal and political instability, social polarization, crises of institutional legitimacy, border pressures caused by the war in Ukraine, and more. Post-pandemic transformations and crises stemming from international instability require a reassessment of the vulnerabilities and resilience mechanisms at both societal and institutional levels.

The article explores the concept of the resilience, concerning its societal and institutional dimensions, emphasizing the challenges and vulnerabilities of

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[1] PhD. Researcher, Institute of Sociology Romanian Academy, Bucuresti, sector 5, Calea 13 Septembrie nr.13. E-mail address: veronica.dumitrascu@gmail.com

the Romanian society and the importance of the institutional and societal resilience in the new realities of the Romanian society. The importance of this article resides in the need for a socio-political diagnosis of the Romanian society, focusing on its vulnerabilities, especially at the institutional and societal levels. The analysis considers the concept of resilience from a dual perspective–institutional and societal–looking at both the capacity to withstand and to adapt to the contemporary crises. The paper reconsiders the concept of "resilience" and its importance, contributing to a better understanding of how uncertainty and distrust in the state and its institutions took to instability and insecurity.

THE CONCEPT OF RESILIENCE: SOCIETAL
AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSIONS

The concept of resilience has gained significant prominence in academic and political discourse in recent years. The term has acquired multiple connotations and dimensions, being used in various fields and contexts.

From its "heuristic, metaphorical, and normative" dimensions (Holling 2001; Brand and Jax 2007; Pickett *et al*. 2004), the concept has been used by various disciplines, being analyzed from ecological and social points of view (Walker *et al*. 2006; Folke 2006). The term of resilience has been found in natural and physical sciences, and then in social and political sciences "as the identification of global threats such as the economic crisis, climate change, and international terrorism has shifted attention to the response capacities of places and social systems" (Hill *et al*. 2008; Swanstrom *et al*. 2009 apud Schwarz 2018).

The Stockholm Resilience Centre connects resilience with ecosystem management, advancing research "to understand complex social-ecological systems and generate new insights for improving management practices and long-term sustainability" (McAslan 2010, 3).

The sociological perspective on resilience focuses on applying the concept to social systems and their ability to recover and adapt. Adger (2000, 347–364) defines it as "the ability of groups or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances resulting from social, political, and environmental change."

It is important to distinguish between **social resilience**, which refers to "the capacity of individuals and communities to withstand external shocks and contribute to community preparedness, disaster response, and post-disaster recovery" (Kwock *et al*. 2016; Dumitraşcu 2020, 292), and **societal**

resilience, which is more concerned with "the internal resources of communities," such as cohesion, trust, and solidarity (ibidem). Societal resilience was defined by others as "the ability of communities to flexibly absorb major disturbances and quickly recover from the inevitable decline in basic functionality" (Elran 2017, 301). As Lesenciuc (2024, 94) mentioned, the adjective "social is related to human individual, but societal refers rather to society in the aggregate". In Tönnies's terms, social resilience could designate the society and societal resilience- community. As the author mentioned above underlined, community resilience could be understood as "the nation resilience to the threats to the state, more precisely, to its security" (Lesenciuc 2024, 94).

Haavik (2020) states that studies on societal resilience often focus on "the expansion of the discourse of societal safety and security on risks regarding climate change and global migration through networks of living standards, scientific developments, and political practices". McAslan (2010, 3) emphasizes that, beyond individual resilience, **community resilience** is shaped by social interactions and relational networks, reciprocity, trust, and social norms. Other scholars (Platteau 2000; Cantor and Rayner 1994) promote the concept of **social capital** as a means to assess a community's potential to resist disruptive hazards. Mayunga (apud McAslan 2010) underlines that "a community's ability to measure its social capital is the key to facing future disruptive events." He proposes some elements of social capital (trust, norms, networks), economic capital (income, savings, investments), and human capital (education, health, knowledge, information) can serve as indicators of community resilience. He also notes that "the notion of social capital aligns closely with sustainability, which itself is connected to the resilience concept" (McAslan 2010). Though often linked, resilience and sustainability are distinct in approach and meaning.

In accordance with the attributes of the term "resilience", **institutional resilience** refers to "the capacity of organizations, such as governments or corporations, to anticipate, prepare for, respond to, and adapt to both incremental changes and sudden disruptions to ensure the continuity of operations and the fulfillment of their objectives"[2]. As The European Atlas of Resilience (Bănică 2021) mentions, "high institutional resilience is associated with an ability to absorb shocks more easily, while the opposite is correlated with low resistance to vulnerabilities".

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[2] https://www.studysmarter.co.uk/explanations/architecture/land-and-property-management/institutional-resilience/

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL
RESILIENCE IN RECENT CRISIS

Regarding institutional resilience, the analysis of this concept takes into account, as Drigă (2020) mentioned, "the resilience of socio-ecological systems that largely depends on the institutional factors". In the study of resilience, mentioning "the size of the shock faced by the system" (Drigă 2020), the functioning and the structure of the institutions are playing an important role. As academic literature (Drigă 2020, 15) mentions, institutional resilience is based on some factors: "responsiveness, adaptability and avoidance of slippery slopes". A social system is resilient if it may cope with "the unexpected changes of the environment", it can adapt and may resist to some external shocks. Some researchers noted the concept of "<absorption capacity> - that is the size of shock that the system can cope with or <the speed of recovery> from a specific shock (Walker *et al*. 2004 apud Drigă 2020, 15). An institution is resilient if it copes with and resist in front of the shocks and it may adapt to external changes.

A presentation mentioned some "particular characteristics that institutions will need to increase or acquire" in order to be more resilient. There are six attributes: "decisive; trustworthy; interdependent; prepared; data-fluent; and adaptive" (EDUCAUSE Top 10 2023).

In accordance with institutional resilience characteristics, it is relevant to mention the importance of the governmental structure and decisions, the trust in institutions "as part of the organizational culture", the importance of the interdependence and collaboration between institutions, the need of the institutions to be better equipped and prepared "to changing circumstances" and the presence of the most appropriate leaders able to develop the most adaptive institutions to new realities. By fostering effective leadership and risk management strategies, institutions can better face challenges such as economic shifts, natural disasters, or technological transformations. Legislative instability, excessive bureaucracy, inefficient leadership, and poor management of human resources and decision-making processes are key factors that undermine institutional resilience.

Recent crises have led to institutional instability, particularly due to public distrust in political and governmental institutions. The **deficit of public trust** is a strong indicator of declining institutional resilience. Trust indicators reflect citizens' perceptions of institutional performance and serve as a barometer of effective governance.

Trust in Institutions – Romania (2017–2022)
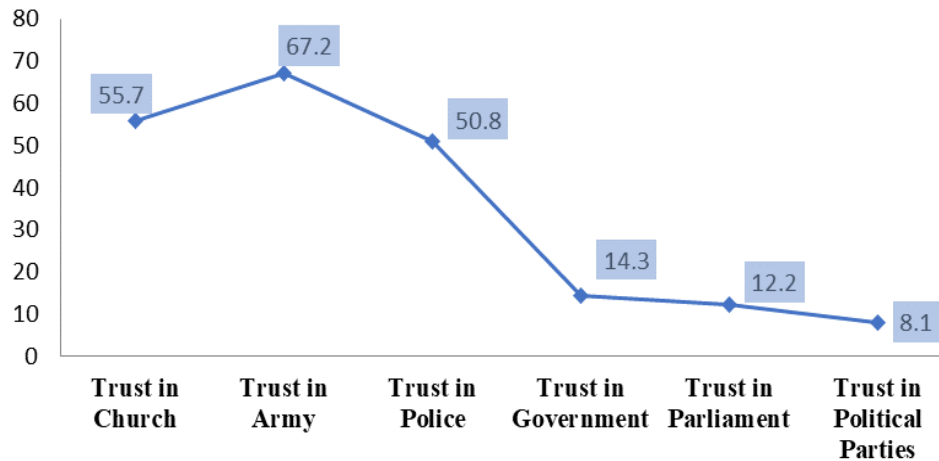
Trust in core institutions, particularly those related to order and tradition (Church, Army, Police), remains relatively high among Romanians. However, the recent years marked by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have slightly eroded trust even in these institutions. As expected, **trust in political institutions is declining**, correlating with lower voter turnout. A report mentioned by the European Institute of Romania underlined the fact that "the lessons learned during the pandemic highlighted deficiencies and exposed vulnerabilities, revealing that public policy documents governing crisis responses suffer from several shortcomings" (Mihai 2021).

The succession of crises revealed institutional vulnerabilities related to poor coordination and cooperation among authorities, decreased institutional trust, and political pressures. Esaiasson *et al*. (2020) argue that during crises–such as wars or terrorist attacks–support for government institutions usually increases. These effects are known as "***rally around the flag***" effects (Dumitrașcu 2021). This effect was most notable during the pandemic. Schraff (2020) suggested that "collective anxiety in the face of rising COVID-19 cases depresses usual cognitive evaluations of institutions and causes citizens to rally around existing institutions as a lifeline" (apud Dumitrașcu 2021).

While some authors argued that the pandemic boosted trust in political leaders–especially in countries with fewer cases—data from Morning Consult Political Intelligence (analyzed in Dumitrașcu 2021, 141–144) showed this is not always the case. For instance, in **France**, public support remained low regardless

of case numbers. In **India**, leadership maintained high trust despite the pandemic's evolution. In **Canada**, **Australia**, and even **Germany**, leaders enjoyed increased support in 2020 due to early pandemic management but lost trust as the crisis prolonged and lockdowns were extended.

The crises of recent years (pandemic, war in Ukraine, economic hardships, rising inequalities) have led to a global instability and increased insecurity and fear. In this context, **populist leaders and parties** have gained more trust, capitalizing on public feelings of uncertainty and distrust in the state and its institutions.

SOCIAL AND "AFFECTIVE" POLARIZATION
DURING ROMANIA'S 2024 ELECTIONS. THE ROLE OF SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Against the backdrop of widespread insecurity, societal cohesion has weakened. All crises—especially the pandemic—have fueled social polarization by generating antagonistic groups (e.g., pro-/anti-virus, pro-/anti-vaccine, pro-/anti-social distancing). Misinformation and distrust in authorities and political decisions, massive labor migration, and ideological and social polarization have contributed to **social fragmentation** and the weakening of social cohesion. **Civic solidarity** among citizens has not been consistent, oscillating between spontaneous mobilization and widespread apathy.

According to the "Geeks for Democracy"[3] Civic Romania Barometer (May–June 2023), "in the last ten years, nearly a quarter (22%) of Romanians have participated in public demonstrations. Over one-third participated in protests against amnesty and pardon measures (37%)". The same study highlights that "the main reasons for declining participation in social movements are lack of trust in government institutions and apathy or disillusionment with the political system". The **Participatory Democracy Index** (from the Truedem project database[4]) measures citizens' active involvement in both electoral and non-electoral processes. Data from 1992 to 2020 show an increase in the index from 0.35 to 0.59.

In the last period, Romanian society has passed through multiple crises (political, economical, and cultural) that have led to social polarization. Romania's elections have taken to society polarization. The institutional distrust and the disappointment in political class took to a shift towards populist nationalism. "Dissatisfaction over economic stagnation and a perceived disconnection between the political elite and ordinary citizens, created fertile ground for growth in anti-establishment rhetoric" (Colibăşanu 2025).

The elections polarized the nation. Media and the internet are stimuli that may deepen social polarization, especially in electoral periods. "Recent findings in

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[3] https://g4d.ro/

[4] https://www.truedem.eu/

the political sociology have demonstrated the role played by the social network in generating social polarization" (Grecu 2021). Other authors highlighted a particular case of polarization- "affective polarization". Affective polarization can be defined as "the simultaneous affinity toward one's own party and fellow partisans (in-group) and hostility toward opposite political parties or compatriots with opposing political identities (out- group(s))" (Torcal *et al*. 2023). There are some theories about "the drivers of affective polarization". "The point of disagreement is whether it is primarily an expressive tribalism phenomenon, induced by political and social identities (and their mutual overlap) itself, or it is rather a rational reaction to policy disagreements (Huddy *et al*. 2018). Torcal *et al*l. (2023) emphasized the fact that "affective polarization can be a result of an interaction between policy disagreement and identity consideration", underlying the role of the media and online communication in exacerbating the hostility towards political opponents. Especially in electoral campaigns, social platforms algorithms "amplify political polarization, favoring the distribution of content that generates high engagement, including false or distorted information (Tucker *et al*. 2018 apud Stănescu 2024).

Social media platforms are used as powerful instruments to subvert democratic processes. These are used "to exploit the distrust in the electoral process". Despite the benefits of using the media platforms in electoral processes, there are also some risks associated with these platforms, "such as amplifying populist discourses, creating ideological echo chambers, and exploiting users' vulnerabilities through advanced manipulation techniques" (Stănescu 2024, 362).

A study published in 2023 showed that "negative emotional framing such as anger, fear, and sadness of false claims leads to more interaction among users than positive emotions" (Hosseini and Staab 2023). So, negative "emotional framing" are more likely to be shared on media. This happened in disinformation campaigns in Romania where the content used in social media was supposed to provoke emotional response.

The division within Romanian society from recent elections was fueled by the growing dissatisfaction of the Romanians in the way that political class has governed in recent years, but also by the distrust in institutions and in political leaders. Concerning these, emotion and perception prevail, not reason. The emotions like disappointment, hate, fear or contempt were used in the electoral campaigns by the parties to attract the citizen's votes. The sovereign-nationalist parties took advantage of the people's frustration and distrust in institutions and politicians. The 2024 elections led to a heightened polarization of political positions and a radicalization of the discourses. The Romanian society was split between *right-wing political sympathizers* and central- leftist democratic electorate. It was the most divided society until now. In these moments, the social cohesion is declining.

The role of the social resilience is to maintain social cohesion despite ideological divides. A resilient society is better to cope and adapt to crises (e.g.,

pandemics, natural disaster), even external interference and disinformation on social media. "The ability of a community to come together in any kind of crisis (whether it's a natural disaster, a pandemic or a geopolitical crisis) and to support each other can make a difference in the capacity of a state to cope with the crisis and to recover" (Dumitraşcu 2020). Also, to combat disinformation, a resilient society may encourage civic engagement and collaboration between institutions and the dialog between political class and civil society. Trust and cooperation may become the main instruments to maintain the health and stability of democracies.

CONCLUSIONS

In the last years, Romanian society was marked by increasing political polarization and multiple crises. In a Romania shaped by insecurity and uncertainty, both societal and institutional resilience are important instruments for social cohesion, collaboration and for maintaining a health democracy. A lack of resilience may lead to an erosion of trust in institutions, a lack of civic engagement, political apathy, insecurity, distrust in political leaders, a weak of social cohesions and of collaboration between institutions.

In times of crises, resilience must become a societal and institutional purpose for Romania. Promoting civic and political participation for all citizens, improving dialogue between political class and civic society and cooperation between institutions, rebuilding trust in state's institutions and preserving democratic governance are the main key to build a strong resilient state.

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