AN OVERVIEW OF ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENT IN ROMANIA BETWEEN 2013–2023

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ABSTRACT

In modern sociology, the founding scholars of sociology of mobility emphasized that today's societies have automobility at the core of their social life (Martin 1999; Urry 2004; Sheller and Urry 2006). Hedges and Company (2025) estimates that in the world there are currently 1.644 billion vehicles at a population of 8.228 billion. The complex system of automobility – "both of the humanist self as in the notion of autobiography, and objects or machines" (Urry 2004) has been playing a crucial role in shaping modern societies, and democratizing movement. But achieving the dream of free movement brought about unintentional consequences from which road accidents are the most worrying ones. World Health Organization (WHO), in the news report published on the *8th UN Global Road Safety Week* (12–18 May 2025) that road accidents lead to the death of 1.2 million people worldwide (WHO, 2025), almost ten times the annual total of conflict-related deaths in wars, which in 2023 amounted to 122 000[1] (Peace Research Institute Oslo 2024); these making accidents one of the leading cause of deaths and injuries in the world (the 12th according to WHO 2023 report).

In Europe, according to the "Annual statistical report on road safety in the EU 2025" (EC 2025) Romania, alongside Bulgaria, occupies the first place in the number of road fatalities with 81 deaths per million inhabitants at an EU annual average of 46 fatalities per million inhabitants. based on a rapid literature review, and on a secondary data analysis, this article presents an overview of road traffic accidents in Romania between 2013–2023.

***Keywords*:** mobility, road accidents, automobility, somatic society, sociology.

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[1] This number includes only a rough estimation of the deaths that occurred in the Russia-Ukraine war 2022–2025 and in Palestine since October 2023. Statistics published by the US Congress in June 2024 estimate that the number of troops that lost their lives (Russian and Ukrainians) surpassed the 500 000 deaths threshold and 62 000 deaths in Gaza.

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INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Road accidents are defined in scientific literature, in national and international reports and in the Romanian legislation as a traffic event that meets cumulative the fallowing three conditions: has been produced on a public road; it led to the injury or death of a person or to material damages; at least a moving vehicle was involved in the event[2]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, *Global Status Report on Road Safety 2023*) annually approximately 1.2 million people die and 50 million incur non-fatal injuries with rates higher in low- and middle-income countries, these numbers have remained almost unchanged since 2007 (see data from WHO, 2009, 2013, 2015, 2018 and 2023). A significant increase has been noticed in 2016 when deaths in road accidents were 1.35 million (WHO 2018) ranging from 9.3 deaths per 100 000 population in high income countries (see Europe in Table 1) to 26.6 deaths in low-income countries (see Africa in Table 1).

Table 1

Rate of road traffic death per 100 000 population

		Africa	Americas	Eastern Mediterranean	Europe	South-East Asia	Western Pacific	World
Rate of death per 100 000 population	2013	26.1	15.9	17.9	10.4	19.8	18	18.3
	2016	26.6	15.6	18	9.3	20.7	16.9	18.2

Source: World Health Organization. (2018). *Global Status Report on Road Safety 2018*. p. 5.

[2] (Authors translation of the fallowing quote from *Ordonanța de Urgență nr. 195 din 12 decembrie 2002 (republicată) privind circulația pe drumurile publice*:

„SECŢIUNEA a 5-a Obligaţii în caz de accident

Art. 75. Accidentul de circulaţie este evenimentul care întruneşte cumulativ următoarele condiţii:

a) s-a produs pe un drum deschis circulaţiei publice ori şi-a avut originea într-un asemenea loc;

b) a avut ca urmare decesul, rănirea uneia sau a mai multor persoane ori avarierea a cel puţin unui vehicul sau alte pagube materiale;

c) în eveniment a fost implicat cel puţin un vehicul în mişcare.

In the 27 member states of the European Union (European Commission, 2025) 20 384 lives have been lost due to road accidents and 1.14 million people have been injured. The death toll in the last 10 years dropping by 16% – from 24 226 deaths in 2013 to 20 384 in 2023, the decrease being significant compared to the very small change of the total number of road accidents from 916 974 in 2013 to 900 861 in 2023. Most accidents take place on rural roads (53%), 38% on urban roads and only 8% on motorways. From the total number of road crashes pedestrians are 18%, cyclists 10% and mopeds and motorcycles 19%, and 44% car occupants; by age group the most deaths 46% occur in category 15–49 years old. In the European Union the average deaths per million inhabitants is 46, with Romania and Bulgaria having the highest rate at 81 deaths per million inhabitants; rates lower than they previously had, but still higher than the European average.

THE STUDY OF ROAD ACCIDENTS – THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Body and automobility are major topics in sociology, since 1990s. Researchers have come to the conclusion that today's societies are governed by two systems: 'somatic society' (Turner 2008) and 'automobility system' (Urry 2004). The "somatic society is a social system in which the body, as simultaneously constraint and resistance, is the principal field of political and cultural activity" and to think of the body as an object would ignore the corporeality of human existence (Turner 2008, 12). Thus, in contemporary sociology, the study of the lived experience and lived body (Leder 1992) is essential to understand the changing foundations of societies, as "the body is not simply a thing in the world, but an intentional entity which gives rise to a world" (Leder 1992, 27). The complexity of the 'somatic society' is determined by developments in technologies that facilitates the emerges of 'the automobility system' (Urry 2004).

John Urry (2000, 59) opines that modern societies are societies of automobility and their socialites 'are sustained through technologies of movement'. The system of automobility is the social system that "involves autonomous humans combined with machines with capacity for autonomous movement" (Urry 2004, 26). It is a system with two keys: 'the car' and the 'fluid interconnections' it determines, as people enter on their social scenes through their mobility (Urry 2004). In contemporary societies the intertwining of 'the somatic system' with 'the automobility system' helped people overcome body limitations, but brought about new body vulnerabilities, especially because of the 'dark side' of automobility, road accidents.

There is a long tradition of studies on road accidents from life sciences and engineering. In them the injured body is depicted as an *alter ego* of individuals in

order to focus on biological processes or its anthropometrics. Even in articles from social medicine where narratives of the body are used in the empirical research, people are removed from the analysis and the empirical data is interpreted quantitatively, investigating only the biological processes (for example Marucci-Wellman *et al*. 2017; Fitzpatrick *et al*. 2017; Bertke *et al*. 2016; Bunn *et al*. 2014; Leclercq *et al*. 2014). Also, journal *Accidents Analysis and Prevention*, first published in 1969 centres around the automotive medicine.

There is a growing international sociological and anthropological literature on automobility and the body related to the cars, parking, motorcycling, and bicycles but it fails to address the topic of road accidents from interactional and individual (experiential) perspective losing sight of the main actor involved, the individual with its embodied materiality (see for example the articles from *Mobilities* (2006) and *Body & Society* (1995)). Furthermore, in the vast sub-field of sociology of automobility the studies published on road accidents have in their focal point – road safety, road infrastructure, circulation rules or risk factors in road accidents (see Gift 2024; Ullah *et al*. 2019; Basuki and Kubota 2016; Pinch and Reimer 2012; Nichols and Güngör 1999). Moreover, in the sociology of the body the topic is almost missing, for example in the journal *Body & Society* that is being published since 1995, there is only one article that approaches the topic of road accidents. In this, David Le Breton (2004) analysis *The Anthropology of Adolescent Risk-Taking Behaviour* and opines that the great number of adolescents involved in road accidents could be explained by using the risk-taking behaviour key.

Also, there are earlier studies that suggest the need to create a sociology of drivers (Armstrong and Jamieson 1973), and a sociology of accidents (Hacker and Suchman 1963; Green 1992), traffic sociology (Rothe 1992), and even one for a sociology of accidents and disasters (Matthewman 2012) in order to describe, explain and understand the long chains of social-technical-biological-economic interconnections that are linked to the number of road crashes and road fatalities. But what is missing from the literature are the sociological studies focused on the social nature of road accidents, and the analysis of mobility as a reflection of the social, political, and economic realities of societies.

Regarding the methodological dimension, most studies from social sciences or from studies that bring a social light upon the analysis of physical trauma post-road accident are limited to informal analyzes of the quantitative data collected. The attempts to understand the social reality of physical trauma post-road accident researchers have employed the use of: questionnaires on the qualitative of life post-trauma (Cagnetta *et al*. 1999) or on the causes of road accidents (Joewono *et al*. 2017, 2) narratives of the bodies (Marucci-Wellman *et al*., 2017; Fitzpatrick *et al*. 2017; Bunn *et al*., 2014); or secondary data analysis (Sharma *et al*. 2001).

Briefly mentioning social aspects of road accidents are the studies form physical sciences and engineering, life sciences and economy, presenting

technological, biological. The recommendations and conclusions of these researches have been used to find ways to reduce road accidents through: new technological developments (eg: sensors, safety gears, autonomous systems incorporated into the vehicles that prevent drivers from acting in ways that are evaluated by the autopilot as possibly dangerous), toughening the legislation regarding the use of public roads, raising the level of road surveillance, raising awareness through leaflets or through days or weeks dedicated to road safety (At the international level, United Nation are organizing a week on this in May, in Romania since April 2025, the third week of May has been declared *The National Week of Road Safety*[3].), or through measurements for reducing the costs of accidents[4].

In Romania there are just a few studies on the topic of road accident from engineering and life studies (see for example Toadere 2015; Raicu *et al*. 2014; Dicu *et al*. 2013; Călinoiu *et al*. 2012; Daina 2012), a few secondary data analysis (see Tomescu and Casapu 2009) but no in-depth anthropological or sociological endeavours. There are only a handful of documents from National Institute of Statistics and from Research and Crime Prevention Institute (Ministry of Administration and Internal Affairs, General Inspectorate of Romanian Police, Traffic Directorate) concerning reporting the number of road accidents, fatalities and injuries.

A sociological understanding of road accidents is a matter of urgent concern. The seriousness of road accidents is not only given by their direct consequences (material damages, injuries, deaths), but also by their social context and social consequences. There are numerous literature gaps to be filed by future sociological studies, but maybe the striking one is the lack of unified data on road accidents at the national level and the omission of the individual and its embodied materiality from the international and national researches in sociology of automobility and sociology of the body. Sociological researches could bring new insights on three level of analysis: 1) at the individual (experiential) level by broadening the phenomenological study of the body by attempting to understand the way human practices are organized around physical trauma; 2) at the interactional level, by

[3] Law no. 42 from 7th of April 2025 regarding the establishment of "The National week of road safety".

[4] The costs of road accidents have been estimated by the WHO (*Global Status Report on Road Safety 2013*) to be around 3% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in most countries. In Romania the medium cost of road crashes that lead to the death of serious injuries of those involved is calculated by *Autoritatea Rutieră Română* (Romanian Road Authority). It is the sum of six costs: human, medical, loss of productivity, property damage, administrative and others. For Romania based on data collected between 2018 and 2023 the costs are estimated to be: 2.321.651 euro for an accident with multiple deaths; 2.045.516 euro per an accident with a single deceased person; 361 169 euro per an accident resulting in serious injuries to multiple people; and 325.377 euro for an accident that leads to the serious injury to a single person (data available at: https://www.arr.ro/s-i-r_doc_512_costuri-medii-ale-accidentelor-cu-persoane-decedate-si-ale-accidentelor-rutiere-grave_pg_0.htm#).

following narratives of physical trauma, could depict the sociology of 'doing' physical trauma, the social construction of injury, the management of the injury. Also, it could depict how in social body determine changes in the automobility system; 3) at the societal level, could bring into focus a consistent image of the amplitude of road accidents that could help institutions involved in the effort to reduce road accidents. By doing so, researchers could reduce the criticism faced by sociology of the body, accused of becoming too abstract (Turner 2008) and to that of sociology of automobility that it leaves the body out of its investigations (Martin 1999).

In light of the scarcity of sociological studies that touch the topic of road accidents, in the next section of this article we will focus on presenting an overview of the road accidents in Romania between 2013 and 2023, and identify a series of future variables that could be studies in order to better understand the particularities of Romanian social-historic-politic-economic context that play an important role in the current number of road accidents.

ROAD ACCIDENTS IN ROMANIA 2013–2023

In Romania, at the end of 2023 there were 10 333 293 vehicles and 8 669 974 people hold a driving license (Road Traffic Bulletin 2023) out of a population estimated by the National Institute of Statistics (2023) to be 19 053 815 residents. Having a surface of 238 397 Km^2 the country's road networks encompasses: 997 km of highway, 70 km of express roads, and 17 677 km national roads, but 79.6% out of the total infrastructure is made up of county roads 35 046 km (40.6%) and municipal roads 33 665 km (39%) (Road Traffic Bulletin 2023), in total 86 388 km of public roads. Although in comparison with other European countries, Romania has a lot to improve in it-s road infrastructure, there are some improvements compared to 2013 when we had 84 887 km public roads for a car park of 5 985 660 vehicles and 6 791 626 people holding a driving license out of a population of 21 305 097 (Road Traffic Bulletin 2013).

Thus, data published by the Romanian Police (*The Statistics of Main Activities of the Romanian Police in 2015*) showed that between 2010 and 2015 the fatalities in road accidents decreased from 2377 to 1893, but the serious accidents had slightly increased from 9253 to 9312, and the number of injured people hospitalised augmented from 8509 to 9056. In addition, in 2015 there were 20915 non-fatal accidents with 24047 injured people (*Ibidem*). The vulnerable road fatalities were car occupants (40%) pedestrians (38%), cyclists (8%) and motorcyclists (4%) (European Commission, *Traffic Safety Basic Facts 2016*). For Romania the 2015 analysis of the data on road accidents in correlation with their territorial distribution revealed that the majority of the road accidents took place in

urban areas, contrary to the European tendency where the majority of road accidents took place in rural areas.

The urban area with greatest number of accidents was Bucharest-Ilfov where in 2015 there were 4621 accidents with 125 death and 5303 injured people (National Institute of Statistics, 2016, *Registered vehicles and road traffic accidents in 2015*). Bucharest in the world ranking of the congestion level, out of 295 cities, the Romanian capital occupied the 6th place, after Mexico City, Bangkok, Istanbul, Rio de Janeiro and Moscow (see https://www.tomtom.com/en_gb/trafficindex/). For Bucharest, analysis of types of urban mobility revealed that in 2015 pedestrian trips (1695748) tended to be equalised by the number of car trips (1654788) (Bucharest City Hall, 2015, *Sustainable Urban Mobility Plan for Bucharest-Ilfov Region*). But today Bucharest occupies the 4th place in Europe (taking into consideration the European countries not just the EU countries) based on its congestion level after London, Dublin and Barcelona, and 22 in the word (amongst the 22 cities there are 12 from Asia, 6 from South America and 4 from Europe) (see https://www.tomtom.com/traffic-index/ranking/).

Although the number of vehicles and holders of driving licence is significantly higher compared to 2013, in the context of an infrastructure that have gained only 1501 km of public roads, it can be noticed that the number of road accidents have had years of increase from 24 827 accidents in 2023 to 31 146 accidents in 2019 to 22 806 accidents in 2020 (during the COVID pandemic), then increased again in 2021 to 26 805 accidents to 28 962 accidents in 2023, but overall there is a decrease of road fatalities with 17% from 1 861 deaths in 2013 to 1 545 deaths in 2023 (EC, 2025). Out of the total number of fatalities pedestrians and cyclists where 592, 95 drivers of mopeds and motorcycles, and 677 car occupants (*Ibidem*).

Compared to the 2013 data, there is also a shift regarding the place where most accidents take place, as in 2023 the serious accidents occurred in rural areas 41%, 37.2% in urban areas and 21.7% outside towns and villages (Road Traffic Bulletin 2023). The majority of serious accidents happened in normal meteorological conditions on dry roads, during the months of summer and first half of September, on Fridays, between 3pm and 7pm, but the fatal accidents happened usually between 3am and 4am (*Ibidem*). The number of seriously injured has also decreased significantly from 8 158 injured in 2013 it steadily decreased to 3 539 injured in 2023 (EC, 2025).

Despite the picture depicted above by data of road accidents, the issue is scarcely researched by sociologists and anthropologists from a comprehensive matter and the critique formulated by Norbert Elias in an article published 30 years ago is still valid – that road accidents data is interpreted in an impersonal manner, although “the principal role is played by the people involved” (Elias 1995, 23).

DISCUSSION

The importance of studying road accidents is incontestable. Their economic and technical impact has been extensively researched, a lot of metrics regarding road accidents have been gathered throughout the years, but very little has been done to understand the social realities behind table of variables most of the macro and mezzo analysis are limited to presenting number of road accidents per million people, or road fatalities depending on demographic characteristics of those involved and the characteristics of the environment in which the accident occurred. This data is valuable for building a first sketch of the social reality of road accidents, but are not linked with crucial characteristics of each country like social-historical context, political evolution, trust of citizen and residents of a country in the state's institutions, the link between the evolution of road accidents and public means of transportation, to name just a few.

For Romania, there seems to be two major urgencies, the need to have a big national database of road accidents, and sociological studies that can offer a comprehensive view of road accidents context and consequences in order to project strategies that helps in reducing the number of serious road accidents without the risk of implementing policies that might have more negative consequences than positive.

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