

Romania: From 'rich' dictatorship to 'poor' EU country



*Development and remaining problems of the country after EU membership.
In areas of: Elderly Care, Poor Families and Corruption.*



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Final Exam Project
Europe in the world
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Romanian elderly: Small pensions, big concerns

BUCHAREST - Because Romania is still in a transition phase from communism to capitalism, many things are not in order yet. Where many EU countries are working to reach modern targets in 2020, Romania needs to heal the wounds. The elderly care is one of those wounds. Old people have small pensions but European burdens and that make it difficult for the elderly to survive. Almost in all cases the children make a financial contribution.

Financially difficult times for Romanian elderly people

Wherever in the world you come there is unrest about pensions. Because the population is getting older, it is a legitimate question if the youth still bring enough money into the cash desk to provide the elderly, who are done working, of their old age provision. This concern is even bigger in Romania. With a pension of about 245 euros per month, Romania is one of the problem countries in Europe. In 35% of the cases, the older ones risk falling into poverty and social exclusion, according to research by the EU Commission.

When you live in Romania as an elderly person at home and are physically in order, it is difficult but possible to finish the month with your pension. This is a different story for the elderly who need constant care. In Romania you have state elderly care. These institutions are known for their bad treatments. There is no attention for the patient because there is not enough staff around. The Romanian population therefore often looks further to other possibilities. But those options are expensive. Whoever wants to be in a private institution in the capital city of Bucharest has to grab in his or her wallet. For about 800-900 euros per month you will be provided with all the care you need. That is four times the pension amount that the most people in Romania have. But how can people pay these institutions?

Good care is only reserved for rich people in Romania

When you walk through the suburbs on the south side of Bucharest you can end up in a neighbourhood where you find a beautiful white wooden church. Many flats can be found around the it. Homeless people see this area as a meeting place. They usually lay down between the garbage. When your navigation system guides you through the streets and small paths next to the flats, you end up at private institution Geron. Walking through a beautiful and maintained garden you enter the centre. The hall is clean and looks modern. The door is being opened by one of the social workers, Andreea Teodorescu.

Andreea is a cheerful young lady. The long and difficult days with the elderly seem to cost her nothing of her energy. The social worker answers all the questions you have and show you the whole building.



Photo: Jordi Wolf. Common room for the elderly

Downstairs you first come into a communal space. Here are some old people playing games like chess or backgammon with the staff members. In the corner you will find a kitchen. The building has several floors. The rooms of the people can be different, there are two but also four-person rooms. Everything shows that this institution is for the richer Romanians. The building is clean, there is a lot of staff around and the older people seems to be at ease. Most of them are playing games, watching TV or sleeping in a chair.

Andreea has to admit that she has a favourite patient in between. In her case it is a blind man who needs constant care. The man calls Andreea his mother. And is visibly happy when Andreea walks into the room and talks to him. He makes jokes and hold her hand. He is visibly disappointed at the moment when she says she has to continue her work.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Andreea with her favourite patient

A year ago Andreea's grandmother was in this institution. Her grandmother had previously been in a different elderly centre, but this institution could not provide her care. Her grandmother did not have a generous pension and had therefore not enough to pay for this kind of centres. That is why Andreea helped her with the amount she missed every month. "It was great for my grandmother to see me every day. We played many games with numbers. My grandmother used to be an accountant, so she liked that. Happiness is in small things. To laugh at them, play a game with them, have a conversation with them, change their whole day. For that you need people," Andreea said. Eventually, Andreea's grandmother died in the institution. Despite the money she paid every month to her grandmother's care, she is still happy that she has brought her grandmother to this private centre. It is something that you see a lot; Romanian children who give a part of their salary to their parents or grandparents even if they also don't have it financially well. The elderly need the financial help. These children often live and work in the capital or in another country. There it is possible to earn more money to support their family.

The difficulty of opening a health care institution in Romania

The Geron institution has been there for some years now and can no longer be ignored in Bucharest. Yet it was certainly not easy to survive in the beginning. Aurelia Curaj, director of the elderly centre travelled all over the world. Particularly in the Netherlands, she saw healthcare institutions which were a lot better than these in her own country. Her dream; to open a similar healthcare institution in Romania. "From the beginning we have been helped a lot by the Dutch. They learned us to think about care in a certain way. They came here to build this institution. I put all the good things I saw abroad in practice. I have seen a lot of good things in western Europe and America. I truly believe that the evaluation of needs is the key to get better care." According to Aurelia Curaj do the nurses need to ask the patient what they need. Curaj says that it is not possible to know that without talking to the people.

But at the moment that the health care institution was finally there, the problems started. It was not easy to find financial support. If it were up to Aurelia, the patients would pay much less. "I wanted to open a health care institution that was accessible to everyone. But I can not ask less of the patients than we do now," Curaj says. The institution has 30 patients on average. These pay an 800-900 euros per month. A third of that money goes into the building, to, for example the rent. A third goes to taxes for the state. So only one third remains as money for the patients themselves, according to Aurelia Curaj a disgrace.

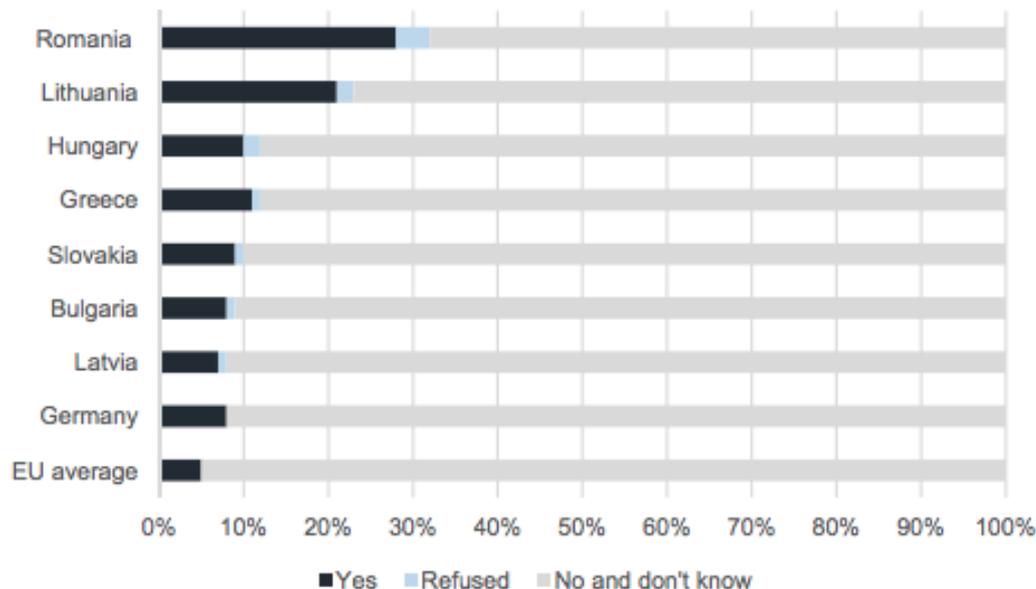
Corruption is still a big problem in healthcare

Director of the Geron elderly centre, Aurelia, indicates that corruption in particular makes it difficult to collect money. "Because of corruption, the money does not come where it should be. It is therefore totally unattractive to invest in Romanian health care".



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Director Aurelia Curaj in her own institution Geron.

Corruption in the Romanian health care system is a big problem. An estimated 28% of all Romanians who go to public health institutions have had to deal with bribery to get the service they need, according to the European Commission reports. That is six times the EU average.



Source: Special Eurobarometer 397, 2014 (fieldwork February – March 2013), p.89.

Rapport updated in 2017 with same numbers

The Geron centre also has to deal with politicians who make their life difficult. "We get a fine every month. For example, when we want to bake a cake and therefore removed the butter from the refrigerator, we get a penalty. The butter had to remain in the refrigerator because of safety. I understand that, but they just search for ways to punish us", Aurelia says. According to the director, the fines run between 200 and 4000 euros per month. Money that the institution could use well to improve care. "When we solve the corruption here, we also solve the problem in health care". Despite the setbacks, the woman remains driven to expand her healthcare facility and also help patients with chronic illness in the future.

Home care is slowly developing

When you leave the capital in Romania and head north to the Moldavian border you come to the town of Bacau. A city that has been known as a place with problems over the years. Many homeless people and a lot of poverty. Where the city still had 205,000 inhabitants in 1992, there are now only 170,000 left. A lot of people left the city to Bucharest or to other European places. Something you see in the whole country. Millions of people left Romania to search for economically better circumstances. Someone who always remained faithful to her city is the 85-year-old Afrodita Lichi.

When you want to find the woman, you have to pass two barking dogs and a couple of chickens through her backyard. Arriving at her house you find yourself in the living room, kitchen and in the hall at the same time. The cottage is very small and it is hard to imagine that once a family lived in it. Afrodita has lived here since 1959 and raised two sons and a daughter in this small family home.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Along the dogs to Afrodita Lichi's house



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Afrodita Lichi's kitchen

The children of the elderly woman now no longer live close by. The two sons have moved to Australia. The daughter lives a bit closer to home in Bucharest, but that is still four hours away. Of course, Afrodita is missing her children, but we are dealing here with a very positive woman. " I Skype every day with my sons. We laugh then and they check how it goes with me. We also talk a lot about politics", Afrodita Lichi says.

The life of Afrodita Lichi without home care

The 85-year-old woman would no longer be able to deal her life without help. She gets help in every possible way. The laundry is done for her, the groceries are taken for her, the house is cleaned, the bed made and food is cooked. A large part of this help is provided by home carer Justina Ghiurca. From the beginning there was a connection between the two lady's. "Afrodita is a very positive and sweet woman and people like her makes my work so beautiful and grateful", said Justina Ghiurca.

The 85-year old elderly woman can not stop talking about her help in a positive way. "Without her I would not know how to keep myself alive," Afrodita Lichi says. The woman likes to talk about politics and has a clear opinion about the current situation in the country and about elderly care. "Many things are better now. We had fought hard for our freedom. But we might have been smarter if we had not thrown away everything from communism. In the days of communism, we did not know poverty". She mainly misses traditions that the country formerly had. But according to her, no country is perfect and she certainly sees points for improvement.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Afrodita left with her home carer Justina on the right

Day care for them with less money

In Afrodita's city, Bacau, is since the mid-90s the elderly home Community Support Foundation (FSC) standing. People do not stay here to sleep, but come by during the day for help and activity's. That can be for anything; physiotherapy, psychological help or just singing together and playing games. The elderly found a place here to come together. "We offer people a place that helps prevent boredom. Many people come from the neighbourhood and they come on their own transport. So people are still reasonably healthy," says psychologist Baluca Bitleona.

Baluca Bitleona has been working for FSC for 16 years now. Over the years she has fulfilled various roles within the centre. Because of her current role, she is more in conversation with the elderly and she likes that, but sometimes it is difficult. " You get to hear more about the pains that people have. Working with people who are alcoholics is particularly difficult. Every day you set up a program for them. It is then very nice to see if it goes better with them and they leave the glass at the table ", Baluca Bitleona says.

The centre requires a small fee of 3-4 euros, also for the home care they provide. This is an amount per hour. But in 50% of the cases the foundation does not want the elderly's money. These old people fall into the lowest economic category. For them, even the small amount of 3-4 euro's is too much to miss.

As mentioned, the problems with pensions are huge. The working people have to pay for the people who have been worked out. The problem, however, is that in the past investments were not well invested by the pension funds.

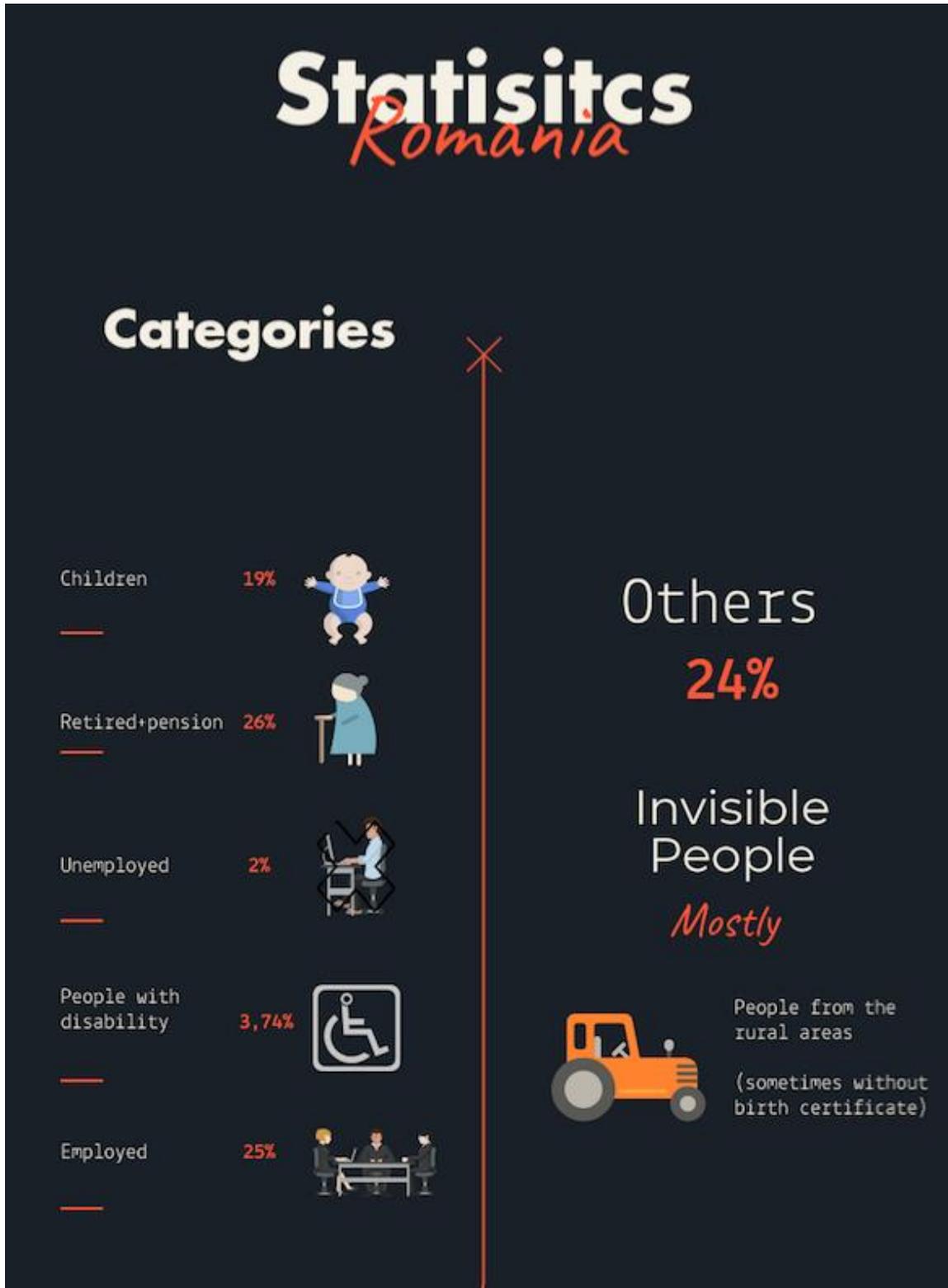


Photo: Jordi Wolf, The elderly in Bacau come together to sing together

The country also had to make a transition from communism to capitalism. And that has not been easy. Many things such as health care had to be arranged again. Romania is currently in the phase that Europe expects the country can come to the same level then the other EU country's. But in reality the country is still mainly busy wringing wounds instead of preventing them.

There is a lot of unemployment. On paper there are only 2% unemployed, according to figures from the Ministry of Work and Social Justice. But according to that same report, the category 'others' is huge (24%). This category includes people who have never been given a birth certificate, invisible people. These people live far outside the cities in rural areas. So even now on paper Romania does not seem to be doing that bad in terms of unemployment. Only a quarter of the population is at work. And this group must get the money for the

elderly people. For the time being, Romania will still be busy for some time before they can really compare themselves in financially ways with the rest of the EU countries.



Infographic by Jordi Wolf

Children now run away from home to come to the institutions

BACAU - For a year or seven ago, the children in Romania still ran away from the bad institutions. This because of the aggressive and bad care they got. Now they are running to the day centres. The problems at home, that you often see with children who grown up into poverty, give the children a reason to seek their help elsewhere. Now seven years later some aspects improved but according to the World Bank has Romania in 2018 the largest poor population in the EU.

It immediately reflects the problems in Romania. Yes, there are improvements within the help institutions. Children no longer see it as a place where they are abused both mentally and physically. Most day centres have become safe places. Places where the children can blow off steam. A game of football with friends, making homework together, and a place where someone listens to the problems they have at home. There are now people who care about them, they are no longer invisible. But the fact that these day centres are needed to let a child feel that, says a lot.

Bucharest after midnight

Officially there are non, or hardly any street children in Romania left. After criticism that Romania received at the beginning of this century, they have done everything to get the children off the streets. The government speaks about many poor families, but they 'all have a roof over their heads'. When I walk through the streets of Bucharest after midnight, I notice how many young children are still outside. In the age category from 12 to 15 years.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, a 14-year-old Roma boy who offers himself for sex

There are three boys outside a dance club, hanging against a stair railing. The boys are 13 and 14 years old. These are Roma children, you can recognize them by their tinted skin colour and clothing style

When you stay outside for a while and keep an eye on what the boys are doing, it is noticeable that one of them is approaching men in a certain category. The men are old and run out of the club lonely. At the moment that men with these characteristics walk out of the club, the boy's attitude changed. He is going to hang out a little more against the handrail. He looks at the men insistently. I slowly start to understand what is going on here, the boy is trying to seduce the men.

I decide to walk towards them together with a local woman who acts as an interpreter. In the beginning there is no trust between the boys and me. The boys are on their guard. After they have received something to eat, they also offer me and my interpreter sex for a small amount. At first very cautiously and careful, but

after a while words like blowjobs and fucking are spoken out loud. One of the boys speaks, that is his task. It is a heavy set boy who offers his friends to have sex with with us. It seems that he is interpreted as least attractive by the old men and therefore leads the conversations. Even after we told him four times that we do not want sex with them, the boy continues to offer it. For him it is hard to believe that someone is nice to him without ulterior motives.

Over time the boy starts to understand that we only want to talk to him. In exchange for some candy and cola is that no problem for the kid. An old man passes by, he looks between the 60 and 70 years old. In the middle of our conversation with the boy he makes a hand gesture to one of the boys to come with him. He holds a note of 50 Romanian Lei in his hand, this is about the value of 10 euros. The boy wants to walk to the men first, but we can stop that. Not because we think we can solve something with this. But because we can not let it happen under our eyes. The response of the people around us are varying. Most people actually feel that you should not interfere with this kind of things.

Saying goodbye to the street remains difficult

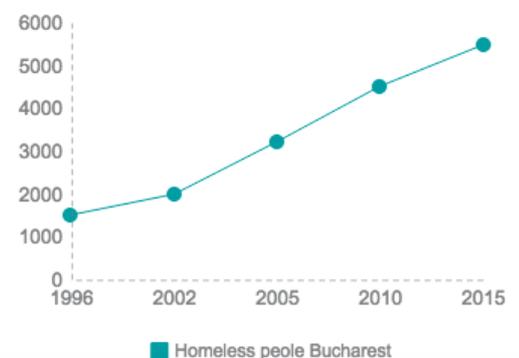
It is something you see often in Romania. People have become accustomed to a certain attitude towards, especially Roma children. Where street children have often disappeared, there are still enough homeless people to be found in the streets of the capital. Also many young boys and girls. Sabina Nicolae is executive director at Samsocial din Romania, an organization that works for homeless young people. " We provide free healthcare, medicines, psychological help, basically everything you can think about ", says Nicolae.

The organization has more projects in which it for example supplies babies with milk, food and pampers. But the project with homeless youth is one of the larger projects that has been going on for years. "We try to get them off the street and let them go to school. And eventually get a job of course. We monitor all the performance they deliver, but that goes with small steps".

The NGO has a place where people can clean themselves, where their clothes are washed and where they get something to eat. According to Sabina, the street children are gone but the amount of people living on the streets only grows.

Sabina Nicolae has been in the profession for such a long time that she knows that getting people off the streets is not easy. " The longer people live on the street, the harder it is to get them off. People get used to the street life. They have become accustomed to the idea that they will ever die here, "Sabina Nicolae said. According to the executive director it often happens that people do well for a long time, but eventually go back to the street. " We have cases what we have been working on for years. We have doctors who go every week to the same place. We constantly hope that we can convince people to let them help them self to get off the streets". West Europeans often think that many people in Romania always lived on the streets, but that is not true. "In the days of communism nobody lived on the streets.

According to the University of Bucharest



Infographic made by Jordi Wolf

Everyone had work and enough to eat. I am not saying that everything was good about Communism, but we were a financially healthy country with a great agrarian sector and now we changed to a poor EU country ", Sabina Nicolae says. The older generation was not used to get poor at all. Everybody had the same financial situation. Everyone could go to school. The education was for free. So the level of education was higher then right now. Because there is more poverty, children can't go to classes and are less highly educated. According to the director, a higher level of education is a way to help Romania back on top.

Poor families in the rural areas

There are many problems with poverty in Bucharest. But it is still by far the richest city in the country. Four hours north in the direction of the Moldavian border you enter the Bacau area which have financially an even more difficult time. The city with the same name as the area has a heavy time, but especially the rural areas around it are left behind.

There is a big road that runs between Bucharest and Bacau. This road is easily accessible. On the side are all new, uninhabited houses. The houses have been build up by people who now work and live abroad. They apply as an old-age provision. The moment you leave the main road; it becomes a lot harder to drive. Winding roads with many holes in it. At the moment that you are off the main road for several hours, you don't see a lot of cars anymore. It looks like you are going back in time here. People working on the land, by hand, without machines. They use horse and wagons to move the hay instead of tractors.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, a man in the rural area transports his wood with horse and wagon

One of the places that is far away from the main roads is Podu Turcului, slightly more than 5000 inhabitants. Here is a day centre for children. Cristian Brasoveanu is a social worker here. "I love working with children. Some need more attention than others," says Cristian.

Only very poor children are in this day centre. They do their homework and play with each other. One of the children here is Andrei. He is 11 years old and has absolutely not an easy life. One of his parents is earning money abroad in Italy, the other is in prison. Andrei therefore lives with his grandfather and grandmother. It is a small community, because of this gossip, news quickly goes around, also about Andrei. The social worker uses the gossip to ask Andrei how he is doing on the bad moments.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Children play hide and seek in the day centre

This boy is just one example of many. It is difficult to imagine, but even drinking water is not self-evident in the rural areas of Romania. Family's make their own food. And you only get help from the state if you are really poor. To give an example, you have your own piece of land and a cow and the government considered you as rich. Even if you do not even have money to feed the cow.

The Roma represent a large proportion of poverty

A few villages further you enter the village Dealu Morii. When you enter this village you will see many tents on the land. Roma families live here. It doesn't matter if it is 35 degrees in summer or minus 20 in winter. When you visit a similar day centre you will only find Roma children here.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Roma children play cards on the grass

The teacher Carmen Bascalescu speaks English well and work at the daycentre because she wants to make a difference. " They are all smart children. So I like to help so that they can get a chance to make something of their lives, Bascalescu says. Everywhere you look here you see poverty. Really old people are working hard on the land. According to Eurostat, 48.5% of children in Romania have a chance of poverty and social exclusion. This makes Romania the second worst country within the EU in this area. In rural areas, the risk of poverty is three times as high as in the urban areas.

From street children to day centres

Families are also struggling in the cities. In Bacau, street children could be seen everywhere for years. But not everyone accepted that it always had to stay like that. Gabriela Achihai, president of Fundatia de Sprijin Comunitar, an organization that is committed to poor families, wanted to do something about this. In 1992/93 she worked with a group of doctors and nurses to give primary health care in very poor villages in the rural area. The doctors were in the beginning from the UK, but later replaced by Romanian doctors.

But there was not really a safe place for children. For a long time, the institutions were a place that the street children were afraid of. They were beaten here and mistreated in other ways.

Gabriela Achihai indicates that Romania has been ready for change since 2007. All major institutions were closed and replaced for day centres. " You also see a lot of poverty in cities. Parents teach their children to steal and make money easily. And not just the Roma ", says Gabriela Achihai.

In recent years there has often been discussion about whether Romania should be part of the Schengen zone. Romania is together with Bulgaria and Croatia the only country within the EU that can not travel freely to any other European country. According to Gabriela a good thing. "At the moment both parents need to give permission to let their child fly. For 50 euros you are in a different country. This in any case prevents children from traveling to Spain or Italy and living on the streets there ".



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Gabriela Achihai working at her desk in Bacau

Is the current help enough?

Adrian Popa is an employee at day centre Cominitar Mozaik in Bacau. Parts of his work are guiding the children in their homework, talking to them, playing with them. "I want to be their friend. So they trust me to share things with me," Adrian Popa says.

Adrian gets help from volunteers in his work. The volunteers consist of older pupils from the local high school. Adrian and the volunteers help the 10 to 12-year-old children with their homework. The institution has a school board with all the names on it. Behind it you can earn pluses and minuses. "They do not like to do their homework. They are difficult children who come from difficult home situations. I am therefore always positive. For example, I always say yes. When children ask if they are allowed to play football, I start my answer with Yes of course, but finish your homework first "

Adrian Popa says.

Adrian studied in France but is now completely settled again in Bacau. He has a wife and two small children here. "We also do not have it easy. I live in my parent's house because I can not afford my own home at the moment "

According to Adrian, these children have a hard time at school. He thinks that it is mainly due to the situation at home. Parents are often not involved in the performance of the children at school. "And it is precisely school that is so important to help these children. There are a number of very creative children in my group. Education is everything " Adrian Popa says.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, children in the center doing their homework

Future of the children in Romania

The young father worries about the future of youth in Romania. According to him, many children lack upbringing. "They have to learn a lot and I am not talking about English and Mathematics. I mean that they have to learn how to deal with each other. Sometimes I take that father role on me, I just have to. I think it is important that they learn to be creative. Think out of the box. I hope that can help them in their own lives. ", Adrian says.

Education is also a problem in Romania. According to a report by Professor Philip Alston of the United Nations Human Rights Council, 17.3% of children in Romania drop out of school prematurely. And this is only an average. This percentage is much higher on the rural area's and in Roma families.

Despite all the improvements that Romania has had in recent years in the field of poor families, the country is still not where it would like to be. The European Union's 2020 goals of reducing poverty appear to be a heavy task for the Eastern European country.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, Day center children play football on the square, Adrian Popa on the right side.

Corruption prevents Romania from making financial progress

BUCHAREST – In the recent months, there have been many protests against corruption in Romania. Corruption is something that has been going on for years in the country. In recent years, corruption among police, has slowly decreased. But for example in the healthcare sector corruption is still clearly visible.

Corruption is one of the biggest problems within Romania to help the country move forward. For example, in the housing market there are far too few investors who want to put their money in Romania. Simple reason, they just do not know where the money will come.

Victor Alistar is Executive director and lawyer at Transparency International. An organization that is committed internationally against corruption. Romania is one of the countries on top of the lawyer's list. "We try to help in three areas in Romania"



Infographic made by Jordi Wolf

Corruption in various fields

Corruption in Romania is a problem in several sectors. For example, in healthcare. "It is quite normal in Romania that people pay an amount to a doctor or nurse to gain access to medication," said Victor Alistar.

An estimated 28% of all Romanians who go to public health institutions have had to deal with bribery to get the service they need, according to the European Commission reports.

Previously, the problem with corruption was mostly with officials such as the police. Nowadays, according to Victor Alistar, it has just turned the other way. "When, for example, an official has to check a care institution, there are so many rules he can check that he always finds small errors. If he returns without giving the institution a fine, they think he has been bribed," says Alistar. According to the executive director, it is not so bad that they want to tackle the entrepreneurs, but they are afraid of being accused of corruption if they do not give financial penalty's.

When people or institutions approach Transparency International for help, they first look at the legal path to be followed. We indicate what the route can be and then also see what happens with complaints. If, for example, are not seriously addressed, we approach the person or institution our self.

Corruption in the Rural Areas

According to Victor Alistar, there is sometimes the idea that there is more corruption in the rural areas. According to him, that is not true. But because the people here are poorer and corruption hits them harder, it is more noticeable. That is why there are also programs running to prevent corruption in local politics.

Corruption is something that stops progress Romania in financial ways. People are starting to get annoyed and have been on the streets in recent months to show their dissatisfaction. Romania has the regulations about corruption fairly in order. That is not the problem of the country. The problem lies with compliance with those rules. Controversial legislative proposals that should make corruption easier have so far been rejected. " Romania has made a lot of progress over the last 6 to 7 years. But something will really have to happen if the country really wants to move forward ", Victor Alistar says.



Photo: Jordi Wolf, EU and Romanian flag together in the street of Bucharest