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SOCIAL MINIMA AND THE GUARANTEED MINIMUM INCOME PROGRAM IN ROMANIA, 1995-2024

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ABSTRACT. The present paper provides a qualitative historical analysis of the evolution of the Guaranteed Minimum Income (GMI) program in Romania between 1995 and 2024 in relation to envisaged social minima. It argues that the transformations of GMI reflect the interplay between demand for cheap labour, regulations over precarious employment, and behavioural control for allegedly securing the "employability" of beneficiaries, with little (if any) concern for benefit adequacy. As elsewhere in Europe, labour market dualization was accompanied by the possibility to cumulate income from precarious labour with social assistance benefits. For the active-age recipients, GMI benefits did not replace market income and guarantee a social minimum, but rather they compensated for low income from casual work with some minimal social transfers and subsidies. Importantly, GMI included public health insurance, without charging beneficiaries. The decrease of GMI in real terms during the last two decades was accelerated by the effective decoupling of social assistance benefits from the national minimum wage and the long-term abandonment of a reference-budget for goods and services that could have served as a benchmark for both. When such a minimum basket was finally reintroduced in 2020 as a policy instrument for the annual indexation of the national minimum wage, social benefits were excluded from its scope. The reform of GMI, designed in 2016 but implemented only in 2024, slightly simplified the bureaucratic load and increased the threshold for social aid, but it did not substantively alter eligibility rules and mechanisms of behavioural control. To date, there has been no relation between the value of GMI and the computations of social minima.

Keywords: social minima, Guaranteed Minimum Income schemes, poverty, precarious labour, Romania.

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Introduction

Since its incipient form of "social aid" introduced in 1995, and subsequent reforms in 2001 as guaranteed minimum income *(venit minim garantat)* and later in 2024 as minimum income for inclusion *(venit minim de incluziune)*, the means-tested guaranteed minimum income scheme (GMI) in Romania remained a residual measure of social protection with low coverage and inadequate benefits[2]. In a country with almost 3.6 million people living in households at risk of monetary poverty (Eurostat, 2025), only cc. 232 thousand households received GMI as of March 2025, and the average amount of the benefit was less than 115 Euro/month. To date (May 2025), for a single person of active age GMI was set at cc. 71 Euro/month, while for an older person above 65, who does not qualify for old age pension, at cc. 105 Euro/month. In the first quarter of 2025, only 4.4% of the social protection budget (that excludes pensions and unemployment benefits) was spent on GMI (Ministry of Labour, Family, Youth, and Social Solidarity, 2025). Subsequent governments in a rather hectic political milieu paid lip service to the European Commission with revised versions of national social inclusion and anti-poverty strategies while failing to define coherent social minima and upgrade benefits and services correspondingly.

The present paper provides a qualitative historical analysis of the evolution of the GMI scheme in Romania between 1995 and 2024 in relation to envisaged social minima. It argues that the transformations of GMI reflect the interplay between demand for cheap labour, regulations over precarious employment, and behavioural control for allegedly securing the "employability" of beneficiaries, with little (if any) concern for benefit adequacy. As elsewhere in Europe, labour market dualization was accompanied by the possibility to cumulate income from precarious labour with social assistance benefits. For the active-age recipients, GMI benefits did not replace market income and guarantee a social minimum, but rather they compensated for low income from casual work with some minimal social transfers and subsidies. Importantly, GMI included public health insurance, without charging beneficiaries. The decrease of GMI in real terms during the last two decades was accelerated by the effective decoupling of social assistance benefits from the national minimum wage and

2 For coherence, in this article the conventional term "guaranteed minimum income" (GMI) program is used for both the previous scheme (Law 416/2001) and the novel scheme (Law 196/2006, implemented in 2024). In a similar vein, "means-tested child allowance" is used with reference to additional support received by low-income families with dependent children under subsequent legislations. The name of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection changed several times in this period, depending on the political coalition at government. For the sake of simplicity, only a shortened version of its title, Ministry of Labour, will be used hereafter.

the long-term abandonment of a reference-budget for goods and services that could have served as a benchmark for both. When such a minimum basket was finally reintroduced in 2020 as a policy instrument for the annual indexation of the national minimum wage, social benefits were excluded from its scope. The reform of GMI, designed in 2016 but implemented only in 2024, slightly simplified the bureaucratic load and increased the threshold for social aid, but it did not substantively alter eligibility rules and the mechanisms of behavioural control. To date, there has been no relation between GMI and the computations of social minima.

My empirical inquiry consists of an examination of legislative changes concerning GMI, along with measures of benefit coverage, adequacy, and poverty reduction effectiveness. Previously undertaken interviews with social workers in charge of implementing GMI (Raț, 2019) provided useful insights into the bureaucratic maze of claiming and obtaining the benefits. This article refrains from a detailed analysis of implementation problems, such as excessive paperwork and lack of support services (Ciornei, 2017; Țoc and Buligescu, 2020), and it certainly cannot do justice to the lived experience of GMI recipients (Bojincă, 2009). The nature of the empirical material (legislation, strategies, implementation documents etc.) also limits the possibilities to analyse the politics of policies, to investigate actors and the role of social networks in agenda setting and policy making (for an analysis of political discourse on GMI see Arpinte, 2017, 2019). These remain beyond the purpose of the present paper. Instead, it seeks to show that low-skilled precarious workers have been basically denied a social minimum while they participated in a program that nominally *should have* provided precisely such a social minimum. The lack of an adequate minimum pushes GMI recipients into a vicious circle of undertaking precarious labour while officially unemployed and stuck in informality. This argument is consistent with Luana Pop's earlier assessments on the lack of effective regulations that could support GMI recipients transitioning from precarious, often informal labour relations into wage employment (Pop, 2023). As discussed below, contractual day labourers in agriculture, community work providers, seasonal transnational migrants in labour-intensive sectors, and other categories of precarious workers gained eligibility to social assistance benefits that top-up their income to the level of GMI, but the latter is not anchored in any coherently designed minimum consumption basket or poverty line.

In contrast with *de jure* changes of the national wage system, which in 2020 finally introduced the use of a *minimum consumption basket for a decent living* as a benchmark for the national minimum wage, the reform of minimum income protection makes no reference to such social minima. Neither the new legislation, nor the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan for Romania - PNRR*

(2021) provide guidelines on how to set the value of GMI, except from requiring its annual indexation according to the inflation rate. This undermines the very essence of a social minimum as a *social right,* and it further deepens the dualization between the minimum wage and social insurance, on the one side, and social assistance, on the other side. It also contradicts the principle (or the utopia) of GMI as an instrument of de-commodifying welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Standing, 2007) or as an "automatic stabilizer" at times of economic crisis (Eichhorst et al., 2023). However, there is hardly any empirical evidence that the Romanian GMI program or its new incarnation as *minimum inclusion income* have been designed to serve that purpose on the first place. Rather, its legislative history sketches a picture of attempts to maintain *some* state control over precarious workers and their families, while keeping their benefits much below a social minimum.

Social minimum in Romania

> "The European Pillar of Social Rights highlights the principle that everyone lacking sufficient resources has the right to adequate minimum income benefits ensuring dignity at all stages of life, and to effective access to enabling goods and services" (Conclusion No. 6, Council of the European Union, 2020: 2).

As of August 2025, there is no official operationalization of a social minimum in Romania, despite the constitutional responsibility of the state to safeguard the living standards of the population[3]. Five years ago, the Parliament endorsed the law on the minimum consumption basket for a decent living (*coșul minim de consum pentru viață decentă*) that should serve as a baseline for the national minimum wage (Law No. 174/14.08.2020). This minimum consumption basket contains daily consumption items (food and beverages, personal hygiene etc.), transport, communication, and housing costs, and it should be computed annually by the National Institute of Statistics (*Institutul Național de Statistică* - INS) following a methodology developed by Guga, Mihăilescu, and Spătari (2018) and commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES). INS constructed the basket only in 2022, explaining the long delay by the fact that the minimum consumption basket, as presented in the annexes of the law, contained several underspecified details that the institution had to clarify first, and then obtain

[3] Article 47 of the Romanian Constitution, adopted in 2003.

the endorsement of the National Council for Statistics[4]. Consequently, for January 2022 the government set the minimum wage without accounting for the value of a minimum consumption basket, moreover, the gross minimum wage was set below the most recent available updated value of the basket (FES, 2020). More specifically, the *net* minimum wage (1524 lei) represented only 56% of the minimum consumption basket costs (2708 lei). The ombudsman raised this issue[5] without any tangible outcome so far. By 2025, the minimum net wage increased by 68% (2574 lei), and it represented 65% the minimum consumption basket costs (3971 lei) for a single person, for the previous year[6].

The return to a minimum consumption basket as a tool for social dialogue came almost eighteen years after this policy instrument was abandoned. As elsewhere discussed (Pop and Raţ, 2016), soon after the change of the political regime in December 1989, the Research Institute for Quality of Life (ICCV) started to compute a *minimum decent* consumption basket and *a subsistence* basket (Barbu, 1992; Molnar, 1999; Mihăilescu, 2010). For a short period, from 2000 until 2004, an annually indexed *Monthly Minimum Consumption Basket*[7] computed by a national commission served as a policy tool (see also Mihăilescu, 2010). After 2004, no such instrument was *de facto* employed, although the list of social inclusion indicators approved by the government in 2005 (see HG 488/2005) contains the *rate of severe (extreme) poverty,* measured against an absolute threshold based on a minimum basket containing items for basic needs. ICCV continued to update minimum consumption baskets (Mihăilescu, 2012) while other policy actors designed alternatives such as the minimum basket for the elderly issued by the National Council of the Elderly (Consiliul Naţional al Persoanelor Vârstnice, 2015), the reference budget for a healthy food basket – within the *Reference budgets in Europe* project (Storms et al. 2014; Goedeme et al., 2015; Pop and Raţ, 2016), and later by the experts commissioned by FES (Guga et al., 2018).

[4] See, for example, Niculescu, D. (2021). Până la urmă, INS n-a apucat să stabilească coşul minim de consum înainte ca Guvernul să stabilească salariul minim pe economie. Avocatnet.ro, 30.11.2021. https://www.avocatnet.ro/articol_59770/Pan%C4%83-la-urm%C4%83-INS-n-a-apucat-s%C4%83-stabileasc%C4%83-co%C8%99ul-minim-de-consum-inainte-ca-Guvernul-s%C4%83-stabileasc%C4%83-salariul-minim-pe-2022.html (12.08.2022).

[5] Avocatul Poporului (Romanian Ombudsman) (2022). Raport privind respectarea dreptului la muncă şi protecţia socială a muncii [Report on labour and social protection rights for workers]. Bucureşti: Avocatul poporului.

[6] Press Release of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung on the minimum consumption basket, 22.10.2024, https://romania.fes.de/ro/e/comunicat-de-presa-actualizarea-cosului-minim-de-consum-pentru-un-trai-decent.html (30.05.2025).

[7] See Governmental Emergency Ordinance no. 217/24.11.2000 and the creation of a National Commission for the Establishment and Indexation of the Monthly Minimum Consumption Basket that functioned until 2004.

There is a stark difference between the envisaged usages of the minimum consumption basket in the early 2000 and twenty years later. Initially, it was aimed as a general policy tool for *both* wage policy and social benefits, most importantly unemployment benefits and the newly introduced GMI. In 2022, the law clearly stated that the minimum consumption basket for a decent living should serve as a benchmark only for the minimum national wage. Indirectly, some of the earnings-related social benefits within the insurance system, that are linked to the minimum wage, were safeguarded: maternity benefits, sickness payments, child-care leave benefits (the latter paid from general taxation but conditioned by previous work record). Other earnings-related benefits within the insurance system, most notably pensions and unemployment benefits, maintained their own benchmarks without any explicit reference to the consumption basket or the minimum wage. In the case of old age pensions, a minimum social pension (conditioned by work record) was introduced in 2009. For unemployment benefits, the benchmark was a Social Reference Indicator (*indicator social de referință,* ISR) introduced in 2008. ISR was generalized later (Law 292/2011 on Social Assistance) for a broad range of social assistance benefits, including GMI and universal child allowance, but then only selectively used in benefit indexation (Raț et al., 2019; Adăscăliței et al., 2020).

The fate of ISR is illustrative for the inconsistency of policy making in the field of minimum income protection for those outside of wage labour and lacking insurance rights, i.e. the most vulnerable categories of the population. ISR was introduced following a tripartite agreement[8] between the government, trade unions and employers' associations in July 2008 to gradually increase the national minimum wage until 2014 so that its value would represent half of the anticipated average wage. Trade unions argued that, as of 2008, the minimum wage corresponded to only 30% of the average wage, one of the lowest shares in the EU. The government accepted to implement a gradual upgrading of the minimum wage with the condition to limit the increase of public social spending by replacing the minimum wage with a new "social reference indicator" as a benchmark for a range of social benefits. The tripartite agreement stated that ISR should be annually indexed according to the evolution of the consumer price index, and the governmental emergency ordinance included this regulation (see OUG 126/08.10.2008 on the modifications of the Law 76/2002, article 127, point 3). As of January 2008, the minimum gross wage was 500 lei (cc. 125

[8] For a briefing of the tripartite agreement, see Constantin Ciutaca, July 2008, Eurofund: https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ro/publications/article/2008/government-proposes-decoupling-minimum-wage-from-social-benefits-and-contributions and https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ro/publications/article/2008/tripartite-agreement-on-minimum-wage-rises-for-2008-2014 (Accessed: 12.08.2022).

Euro), and the government set the value of ISR at that amount in the emergency ordinance. In October 2008, the minimum gross wage increased slightly at 540 lei. In 2012, following the previously mentioned new framework law on social assistance, ISR became the standard reference for social assistance benefits such as GMI and means-tested family allowance, but also the universal child allowance. The government declared that the indexation of these benefits will follow the indexation of ISR, and each benefit will be computed as a function of ISR[9]. Despite that, between 2008 and 2012 no indexation of ISR took place and its value remained stuck at 500 lei, while the minimum gross wage increased at 700 lei. In the following decade the minimum wage continued to increase, but ISR remained frozen, and together with it the values of GMI. However, the universal child allowance was regularly upgraded, revealing a discretionary application of the framework law on social assistance. Neither the 2008 tripartite agreement on the indexation of ISR nor the calculation of social assistance benefits and child allowances as a function of ISR were respected. In November 2020, following post-crisis economic recovery and the revival of the manufacturing sector, an alliance formed by major trade unions, left-wing activist groups, and academics launched the "Campaign for Decent Living and Work" *(Campania pentru viață și muncă decentă)* that provided empirical evidence for the positive economic impact of upgrading ISR (Adăscăliței et al., 2020) and demanded its urgent increase. In their appeal to the President of the country[10], the organizations reminded that while the consumer price index grew by 137% between 2008 and 2020, ISR remained frozen. Ultimately neither the president, nor the Parliament majority backed the proposal to upgrade ISR.

However, the renewed *National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2022-2027* (approved by HG 440/12.04.2022, hereafter *Social Inclusion Strategy*) set a statutory annual indexation of ISR by the inflation rate. Accordingly, the value of ISR increased incrementally by 5.1% in 2022, but as compared to the minimum wage the discrepancy deepened: ISR represented 34% of the net minimum wage in 2022, and only 26% by 2025. In a parallel

9 See Ministry of Labour, 28 December 2011, http://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/index.php/ro/comunicare/comunicate-de-presa/2048-ref-noile-reglementari-privind-acordarea-de-prestatii-sociale (Accessed: 12.08.2022).

10 See the appeal as published by one of the leading trade unions in Romania, Cartel Alfa: https://www.cartel-alfa.ro/ro/comunicate-57/solicitam-pre%C8%99edintelui-romaniei-promulgarea-legii-de-majorare-a-indicatorului-social-de-referin%C8%9Ba-declarata-constitu%C8%9Bionala-95/ (Accessed: 13.08.2022). The appeal to president Klaus Iohannis came after the National Liberal Party (the party that the president belonged to before taking office) attempted to block a legislative proposal on the increase of ISR at the Constitutional Court, but without success.

evolution, the *National Recovery and Resilience Plan for Romania (PNRR)*[11], endorsed by the European Commission in September 2021[12], asserted as an objective of social and territorial cohesion „modernising the Romanian social benefits system by implementing the minimum inclusion income reform" (PNRR - Factsheet, 2021: 2). This referred to a proposal dating back to 2016 to merge the three main means-tested benefits: the GMI (Law 416/2001), support allowance for low-income families with dependent children (O.U.G. 105/2003), and heating subsidy for low-income households (O.U.G. 70/2011). The same reform was also mentioned in the *Social Inclusion Strategy 2022-2027*. However, unlike the former, PNRR stated that the GMI program would no longer use ISR, and benefits would be set in nominal terms and annually indexed. There were no specifications concerning *how* the values of GMI would be set. The 2024 reform ultimately followed PNRR, and not the *Social Inclusion Strategy*. Thus, two main strategic documents for the field of social inclusion and poverty alleviation, issued just months apart, had very different approaches on ISR. Still, none of them discussed benefit adequacy with reference to a minimum consumption basket, and the idea of a minimum inclusion income failed to be operationalized in terms of the minimum living standards of various types of families. In contrast, the Romanian Economic and Research Council (*Consiliul Economic și Social)* provided a detailed analysis of the (lack of) adequacy of the minimum national wage to the consumption basket of several types of minimum wage earner families with dependent children (Cace et al., 2022).

Expert recommendations (see Lancker et al., 2020) on the need for a *binding* EU framework on adequate national minimum income schemes to consolidate earlier EU resolutions[13] had almost no echo in Romanian politics. Likewise, civil society preoccupations to introduce an EU Directive on adequate minimum incomes, initiated by the European Anti-Poverty Network, in collaboration with Caritas Europa, Eurodiaconia, and the European Trade Union Confederation in

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[11] See https://ec.europa.eu/info/files/factsheet-romanias-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en (Accessed: 12.08.2022).

[12] See the decision of the European Commission, 27.09.2021, https://gov.ro/fisiere/stiri_fisiere/Proposal_for_a_Council_Implementing_Decision.pdf (Accessed: 12.08.2022).

[13] The European Parliament resolution of 24 October 2017 on minimum income protection as a tool for fighting poverty, Strasbourg. See: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2017-0403_EN.html (Accessed: 12.08.2022), and also a similar opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on 20 October 2019 on Leaving no one behind when implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, articles 5.8 and 5.10, see https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/our-work/opinions-information-reports/opinions/european-framework-directive-minimum-income-own-initiative-opinion/opinions (Accessed: 12.08.2022).

2019, received almost no attention. The latter initiative ultimately failed in 2022, as it faced the opposition of Business Europe (see Shahini et al., 2024). Subsequently, the European Commission issued a "Council Recommendation on minimum income in 2022 to effectively support and complement the policies of Member States" (*The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan,* 2021: 27)[14].

To sum up: despite consistent effort of non-governmental and academic actors to build and adjust minimum consumption baskets, that also include a housing component, the idea of a social minimum has never materialized into a coherent benchmark across Romanian social policies. The Social Reference Indicator (ISR) could have hardly fill in this role, given that its very naissance occurred with the intention to curve down benefits and limit social spending. Moreover, despite the initial promise to upgrade ISR in line with the evolution of the consumer price index, such increase has never occurred. Instead, after 14 years, in 2022 ISR was for the first time adjusted to the inflation rate of the previous year, and after some incremental increase in 2023 and 2024, by 2025 its upgrading fell victim of austerity measures (Law 141/2025). These evolutions left room for considerable decline in real terms of GMI and strong pressure on beneficiaries to combine precarious work with social benefits. We turn to this issue in the next section.

Precarious labour and minimum income protection

Although the law on the Guaranteed Minimum Income (Law 416/2001) took shape only in 2001, the idea that social assistance benefits should compensate the budget of low-income households up to a minimum threshold dated back to 1995 (Law 67/1995). For the first year of the program, financing was ensured from the central national budget, but soon after, with the purpose to curtail costs, local authorities became in charge of financing this means-tested social assistance benefit, and they hardly prioritized it. In 1995, there were 559 thousand beneficiaries; by the end of 1999, only 88 thousand beneficiaries in the whole country (Molnar, 1999: 176). In 1997, households below the national poverty line could cover 22% of their consumption needs with the amounts received as social assistance benefits, while coverage was only 8% of the

[14] For example, the only feedback from Romania on the on-line platform designed to collect suggestions on the minimum income in the EU came from an NGO focused on music and culture, the George Enescu Foundation, and it asked for a uniform EU-level minimum income guarantee. See: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13294-Recommendation-on-minimum-income/F2908104_en (Accessed: 12.08.2022).

population living below the poverty line and 62% of those facing severe poverty (Teșliuc et al., 2001: 145). By the end of the 1990s, very high inflation eroded the real values of benefits, and coverage also diminished drastically.

The design of a bureaucratically more complex GMI scheme, that also provides statutory health insurance, was marked by the preoccupation to limit the eligibility of those able to gain income from informal work or agricultural properties, and to co-interest local authorities in cost-containment. Local authorities provided 25% of benefit financing, and they were fully responsible for the social inquiries required by means-testing and for the organization of the community work that beneficiaries ought to perform. Moreover, allegedly with the aim to prevent benefit fraud, the list of beneficiaries (single persons or families) and the schedule of beneficiaries' compulsory community work were required to be posted publicly at the mayors' office. In a country where public institutions were often suspected of corruption, the attempt to control local authorities overruled any possible confidentiality concern. „Transparency" requirement discouraged uptake in the case of those facing temporary income loss. In addition, the nature of the compulsory community work, usually unskilled physical tasks such as cleaning public places, performed under the surveillance of a local guardian, induced a fear of stigma. Initially, GMI required 72 hours of community work; this was later reduced to the number of hours of work that would correspond to the value of received benefits, at the rate of minimum wage per hour. Means-testing was strict: local authorities had the possibility to estimate the use-value of agricultural land and farm animals in the region, while national regulations excluded those who owned more valuable properties such as a second home, a car, or more than two hectares of agricultural land. The assessment of resources was coupled with the assessment of needs, although services for vulnerable families have remained scarce. The requirement of meticulous means-testing contrasted on the one hand with the deficit of qualified welfare personnel, especially in rural areas (Lazăr, 2015), on the other hand with the lack of regulations over benefit indexation. Unlike other GMI schemes in Central and Eastern Europe (Raț, 2009), the Romanian one failed to include statutory indexation according to inflation or the consumer price index.

In relation to work, the initial form of the law contained three main regulations. First, the obligation of up-to-work beneficiaries to perform community work according to a schedule set by the mayor's office. Second, the prerogative of local authorities to approximate the value of *potential* income from informal labour (mostly in agriculture) and impute it as *really existing* income during the warm season. This led to considerable fluctuation in the number of beneficiaries during the year, especially in rural areas, with benefit payments suspended during the summer and gained back before winter (Ministry of Labour and Social

Justice, 2018). Third, eligibility to GMI was conditioned by formal registration at the county-level employment office and the proof of not having rejected any vocational training service or job offer, despite concerns over the "employability" of beneficiaries (Simionca, 2019). A symbolic 15% increase of the GMI benefit was promised to families that include a wage earner, yet such situations were hardly possible, due to the large gap between the values of GMI and the minimum net wage. As a longitudinal case study of GMI beneficiaries in the Cluj-Napoca, the second largest city of the country, had shown, low educational credentials, fragile health, and the stigma of being a welfare recipient prevented moving out of benefits to wage employment (Ciornei, 2017). Consequently, the initial design of GMI (2001 – 2009) excluded precarious workers by imputing *potential* income from seasonal labour (without any obligation of local authorities to prove that such incomes *de facto* exist) and by strictly imposing community work that limited their availability for temporary occasional work.

Following Romania's EU accession in 2007 and a new wave of reports on persistent poverty and meagre poverty reduction effects of social transfers, as well as complaints from local authorities being unable to support their 25% required contribution to GMI, the government commissioned to the World Bank the analysis of GMI and asked for recommendations. The main outcomes of this endeavour were that in 2009 the financing of GMI moved fully at the national level, means-testing became more strictly standardized, and benefits increased slightly. Importantly, the qualitative study elaborated within this collaboration highlighted the difficulty of undertaking community work, as a rule heavy physical labour outdoors, without proper protection, the meagre values of benefits, and the importance of statutory health insurance provided by GMI. Beneficiaries regarded statutory health insurance as their main reason to apply for GMI and remain within the program despite its overwhelming bureaucracy and very low level of benefits (Bojincă, 2009).

From the point of view of the status of precarious workers, the most important change in GMI occurred in 2015, when income from contractual day labour was exempted from the imputed income to qualify for GMI. In rural areas, this meant a bureaucratic U-turn, as previously local governments were supposed to input even *potential* income from occasional labour. Following the neoliberal transformations of the Labour Code in 2011 and the subsequent legislation that formalized day-labour (Law 52/2011), income from day labour became exempted from the computation of social assistance benefits aimed to compensate income up to the level of GMI. Now, day labourers in agriculture could keep their GMI benefit during the season of agricultural work, and together with that their health insurance entitlement. This can be regarded as a way of subsidizing agricultural production in a country where agriculture provides around 10% of GDP. However, due to the high discrepancy between payments for day labour in Romania as compared to earnings that can be obtained in Germany, Italy, or Spain, seasonal transnational migration was often preferred to local day-labour. In that case, the family lost the GMI benefit due to missing from community work. As we will see in the next section (Figure 1), the total number of GMI beneficiary families and single persons showed a steady decline between 2015 and 2025, although, bureaucratically, eligibility broadened.

In 2018, three parametric changes reinforced already existing work-related requirements of GMI (see Law 192/2018). First, beneficiaries lost the right to refuse two out of three job offers presented to them, although this right to refuse was stated in the law on unemployment (Law 76/2002). Since October 2018, they had to accept the very first job-offer, and any vocational training possibility, otherwise their benefit would be cut and entitlement cancelled for 12 months. Second, local councils gained the possibility to trade the labour force of GMI beneficiaries with other public or private economic actors, i.e. to replace compulsory community work with labour performed for a company/local business. Instead of paying GMI beneficiaries as employees, the company would pay the local government for the labour performed by GMI beneficiaries. Their status did not change, meaning that they did not get entitlement to social insurance rights (pensions, sickness or maternity leaves, unemployment benefits etc.) and their health insurance was still conditioned by GMI. Third, the universal child allowance was no longer imputed as income, *de jure* broadening eligibility for families with children. In parallel, starting with November 2021, the heating subsidy (available only for the cold season) was supplemented by an energy support benefit granted throughout the year and based on the same means-test as the heating subsidy (Law 226/2021).

To summarize, right before the global financial crisis of 2009-2012, the financing of GMI became the responsibility of the central budget, with the intention to improve coverage in the poorest regions of the country. According to a recent study of FES (2018), there is a visible correspondence between the small number of available jobs in certain regions/counties (an indicator of lower economic development) and the relatively high number of GMI beneficiaries[15]. Nonetheless, ever since 2009, no significant indexation of GMI has occurred. Frequent audits from the National Agency for Payments and Social Inspection, in charge of supervising the administration of social assistance benefits, put pressure on local welfare offices to curtail costs and strictly control eligibility (Ciornei, 2017). The poverty reduction effects of GMI, measured by Țoc and

[15] See FES (2018). Monitorul social. Beneficiari de VMG versus locuri de muncă. București: FES. https://monitorsocial.ro/indicator/beneficiari-de-venit-minim-garantat-vs-locuri-de-munca/ (Accessed: 12.08.2022).

Buligescu (2020) with the help of household budgets microdata from 2016, were minimal. With the help of EUROMOD[16] microsimulations, Stroie (2022) demonstrated that, as of 2019, an exemption of 35% of households' wage income when establishing GMI eligibility would have resulted in a 2.5% reduction of the poverty rate, while the costs of this measure would have increased spending on GMI by 15% (Stroe, 2022: 6-7).

Access, adequacy, and enabling aspects of the GMI in today's Romania

The Council of Europe (2020: 5-6) highlighted three key dimensions along which minimum income protection should be assessed: access, adequacy, and enabling aspect. Access is defined from the perspective of universality, and it entails non-discrimination and mechanisms that ensure take-up from all those in need. Adequacy means that the value of benefits allows a dignifying life, according to the living standards and *national* poverty lines. The enabling aspect means quality services, including those for employment and legal advice, adjusted to individuals' needs.

Previous studies, most notably Frazer and Marlier (2016) concluded that in 2015 in Romania the adequacy of GMI benefits was among the lowest in the EU, with very limited coverage and only partial take-up of benefits among those who should be eligible for them. Furthermore, they demonstrate that poverty reduction effects were very low, with partial decrease in the median poverty gap (Frazer and Marlier, 2016: 35-36, Annex 1A). Based on national experts' evaluations, they assert that the GMI program is very ineffective in linking its scheme to active labour market policies and quality services (Frazer and Marlier, 2016: 36). More recently, in 2021, in the context of the expected economic crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued an analysis of the functioning of GMI schemes in Europe (Coady et al., 2021). The study looks at the potential work disincentives of GMI and computes Participation Tax Rate (PTR), Marginal Effective Tax Rate (METR),[17] and benefit generosity (operationalised as percentage of median income) for a single person, a lone parent with two children, and a couple with two children in 2019. Romania is singled out as one of the countries with the lowest benefit generosity and the

[16] EUROMOD is a tax-benefit microsimulation model operated by the European Commission. See: https://euromod-web.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ (Accessed: 02.05.2025).

[17] Participation Tax Rate (PTR) means "the share of additional household income from moving into employment that is lost due to reductions in benefits and income taxation. […] The Marginal Effective Tax Rate (METR) is computed as the share of additional household income from an increase in earnings that is lost due to reductions in benefits and income taxation" (Coady et al., 2021: 10).

highest PTR and METR (Coady at al., 2021: 14; see also Table 1, p.19), given that the GMI benefit de facto stops after taking up even a minimum wage job. Benefit generosity for a single person is the lowest in the EU (GMI equal to less than 10% of the median income), while for single parents and couples with children it fells much below the EU average (GMI and other benefits for families with dependent children corresponding to 25% of the median income) (Coady et al., 2021: 15). These conclusions of low benefit generosity as compared to other EU countries and even other Central and Eastern European countries are consistent with previous analysis (Kuitto, 2016). Concerning the high values of PTR and METR as reported in the study commissioned by the IMF, one should be careful in interpreting them as indicators of work disincentives on their own.

Thus, within the overall Romanian welfare state, the GMI remained modest in terms of coverage, welfare transfers effort, and potential poverty reduction (Teșliuc et al., 2015; Adăscăliței et al., 2020). The envisaged reform put on paper in 2016 was implemented with more than 7 years of delay in January 2024, in line with PNRR. As mentioned before, the new scheme, entitled "Minimum Inclusion Income", encompasses three means-tested benefits, namely GMI, the support allowance for low-income families with dependent children (*alocația de susținere pentru familiile cu copii),* and the heating allowance for the cold season *(ajutor pentru încălzirea locuinței).* The GMI for a single person was set at 260 lei for people below the age of 60, and 300 lei for those aged 60 or above, targeting those who do not qualify for old age pensions. As of 2025, the amounts increased at 366 lei for a single person of active age and 533 lei for an older person aged 65 or above. The increase was possible because, unlike in the case of other social benefits, GMI no longer applies ISR as a benchmark, but it states that GMI benefits should be indexed annually, in March, following the evolution of prices[18]. Furthermore, in an unusual way for Romanian social policies, it operates with an equivalence scale to compute an adjusted family income: the first adult person in the family weights one, while any other adult or child 0.5. This equivalence scale underestimates the per capita living costs of large families, as Romanian households spend on average 33% of their budget on food (INS, 2022). The reform induced an increase in the amounts of benefits and, also in the number of beneficiaries, reflected in the increased share of GMI in the budget of the Ministry of Labour from 2% în 2022 to 4.4% in 2025.

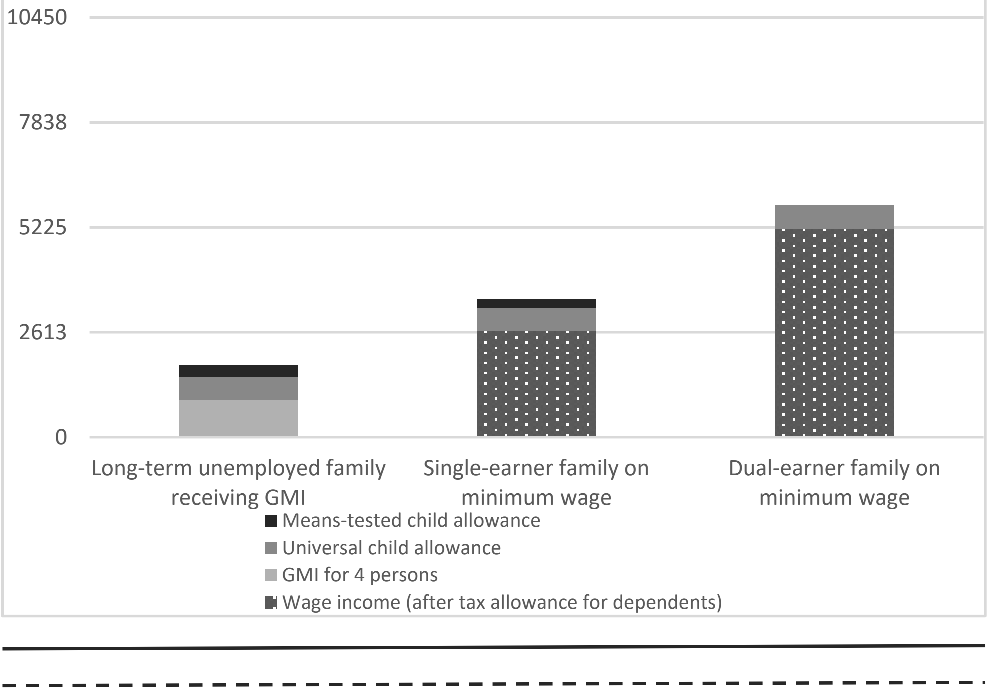
[18] For a detailed explanation, see: Niculescu, D. (2025). Venitul minim de incluziune. Ce valori au noile ajutoare sociale, după majorarea din această lună. AvocatNet, 31.03.2025, https://www.avocatnet.ro/articol_69246/Venitul-minim-de-incluziune-Ce-valori-au-acum-noile-ajutoare-sociale-dup%C4%83-majorarea-din-aceast%C4%83-lun%C4%83.html (30.05.2025).

The new regulations also allow replacing community work with participation in formal education through the Second Chance program for early school leavers, cover travel costs, and maintain the payment of benefits for six months for those who get employed with a two-year or longer-term contract (see O.U.G. 101/2021). Nonetheless, the reforms failed to include a detailed discussion of a social minimum, avoided the issue of benefit adequacy, and disregarded the long-term consequences of precarious work (Pop, 2023), especially in the case of GMI beneficiaries from marginalized communities, many of them inhabited mostly by ethnic Roma (Raţ, 2019).

Figure 1 offers theoretical microsimulations for the incomes of families with two dependent children according to their labour market situation: a long-term unemployed and/or precariously working family receiving GMI, a one-earner family, and a dual-earner family, each gaining the minimum wage. One can observe the wide gap between incomes provided by even *one* minimum wage as compared to social-assistance benefits. As of March 2025, a long-term unemployed and/or precariously working family with two school aged children, entitled to GMI, receive 915 lei/month as social aid, 286 lei/month as means-tested child allowance, and two universal child allowances of 292 lei/month (for each child). Altogether, their income is just 50% of the poverty threshold. In case that one of the parents gets employed at the minimum wage, they continue to receive means-tested child allowance, but at a slightly lower rate of 228 lei/month, while their social aid would be phased out. Their income would be around the poverty threshold, but much below the minimum decent consumption basket computed by FES (2024). In case that both partners work for the minimum wage, they would no longer receive any means-tested benefits, and their income would be 65% above the poverty threshold. However, that would be still only 55% of the minimum decent consumption basket.

These theoretical microsimulations exempt scholarships provided by the Ministry of Education, heating subsidies & energy supplement, as well as potential in-kind benefits granted by charities. However, the gap between GMI and the poverty threshold is too large to be filled in from these other potential sources, pushing beneficiaries to take up precarious work in the secondary labour market at home or abroad. This may lead to exclusion from GMI because of absences from compulsory community work, as well as to cuts in children's means-tested allowances and scholarships due to irregular school attendance. Wage labour might be preferable for GMI beneficiaries, especially on the long run, but access to wage labour is difficult due to their low level of education and the concentration of beneficiaries in the regions with the lowest rate of job vacancies (FES, 2018). Reliance on a combination or alternation of precarious labour and welfare benefits is typical especially among seasonal agricultural workers, but also among low-qualified labourers in the manufacturing industry[19]. As Pop (2023) rightfully argues, these precariously employed, and mostly self-employed workers face unrealistic costs when trying to formalize their status and join the public social insurance system (health, pensions, unemployment). This explains why GMI was instrumental for them to obtain and keep public health insurance.

Figure 1. Incomes of a family with two school-aged children in 2025



________ At-risk-of-poverty treshold (relative monetary poverty) estimate
----------- Minimum decent consumption basket estimated by FES for 2024

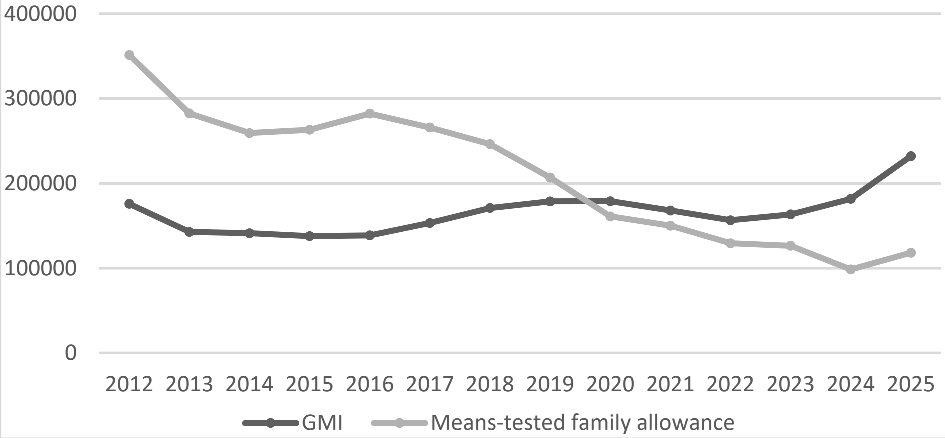
Source: Author's computation and graph based on data provided by the Ministry of Labour on social benefits in the first quarter of 2025 and the minimum wage. The at-risk-of poverty of poverty threshold (Eurostat definition) was estimated at 3500 lei for a family of two adults and two school aged children, based on its earlier value of 3400 lei in 2023 and the 5% inflation rate in 2024. The value of the minimum decent consumption basket was estimated at 10450 lei based on its value for the previous year computed by FES (2024).

[19] For an ethnographic case study of labour relations and the situation of the Roma from marginalized communities in a city from North-West Romania, see Deneva-Faje, 2025.

Figure 2 presents the evolution of the number of single persons or families who received social assistance benefits or means-tested child allowance during the last decade. Before the reform implemented in 2024, these were two different programs (GMI and means-tested family allowance), but by now they were united under the new GMI scheme, labelled as "Minimum Inclusion Income". For GMI, the numbers fluctuate around 170 thousand individuals or families until 2024, when a notable increase occurred. Data provided by the Ministry of Labour do not allow to count the number of *persons* receiving GMI, neither their age structure. However, we know from the 2021 study undertaken by the Ministry of Labour[20] that, at the time, 31% of GMI recipient households were single persons above 65 years old, 20% single persons below 65 years old, 17% lone-parent families, 16% families with less than three children, and 16% families with three or more children (Ministry of Labour, 2021). We can only assume that the increase in the number of GMI recipients following the 2024 reform is explained by the higher GMI eligibility threshold, especially in the case of older persons above 65 years old who do not qualify for pensions, and the possibility to cumulate social assistance benefits under GMI with disability payments. In the case of means-tested child allowance, we see a sharp decrease from cc. 350 thousand families to cc. 150 thousand families. This decline was not accompanied by an improvement of child poverty rates or poverty gaps, and therefore it is likely to indicate difficulties in the uptake of benefits. Indeed, as elsewhere discussed (Raț and Szikra, 2019) starting with 2011 eligibility to means-tested child allowance was conditioned by the proof of regular school attendance, and that led to the exclusion of families from marginalized, impoverished communities, who lacked the necessary resources to secure their children's daily school attendance.

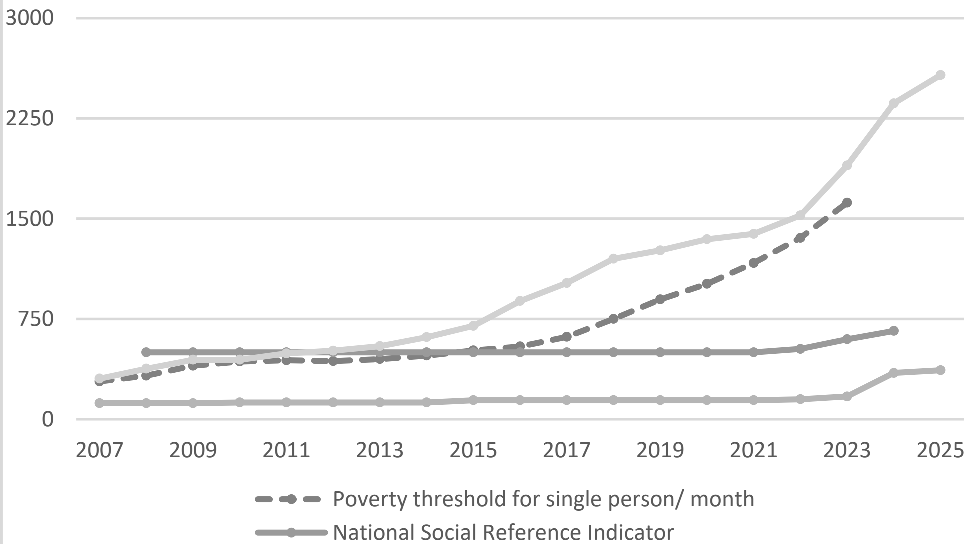
[20] In January 2021, the newly appointed liberal Minister of Labour, Raluca Turcan, launched a national-level evaluation of the GMI program to counter alleged "fraud" in the system. The evaluation was completed by the end of March, and the position of the Minister became more nuanced, as she realized that the program failed to meet the needs of beneficiaries and suffered from exclusion errors (not reaching out to all those in need). While the emphasis remained on the role of active labour market policies for GMI recipients, the data on the age and family structure of beneficiaries clearly indicated that such policies do not fit in a large share of cases. See the 30.03.2021 press release of the Ministry of Labour (2021).

Figure 2. The evolution of the number of families receiving GMI and/or means-tested family allowance



Source: Ministry of Labour, 2025. Author's graph.

Figure 3. The evolution of the Social Reference Indicator (ISR) in relation with the minimum net wage, the poverty threshold, the guaranteed minimum income and the minimum pension



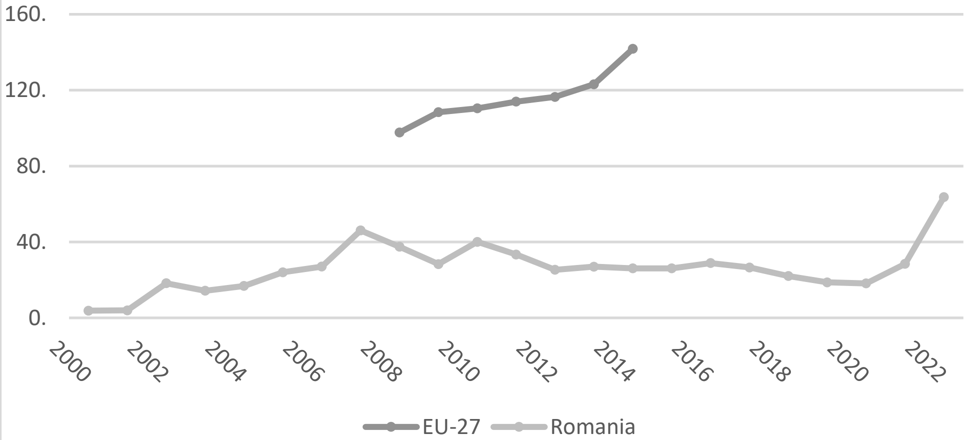
Source: Ministry of Labour, 2025. Author's graph. For an earlier version, see Adăscăliței, Raț and Spătari, 2020: 6.

To estimate benefit adequacy, the case of a single person household was used. As **Figure 3** shows, between 2007 (the year of EU integration) and 2022 there was no significant increase in the value of GMI, consistently with the lack of indexation of ISR. In 2023, when the latter was indexed by 5.1% (the inflation rate of the previous year), GMI increased correspondingly. The 2024 reform brought a more notable upgrading of benefits, yet the gap between GMI and the at-risk-of poverty threshold (relative monetary poverty) remained large. In 2007 the value of GMI for a single person accounted for 42% of the relative at-risk-of poverty threshold, by 2020 this figure decreased at 14% and, following the reform, in 2025, it increased at cc. 22% of the latest available at-risk-of poverty threshold (2023). As compared to the minimum national net wage (single person, no dependents) the relative value of GMI decreased from 40% in 2017 to less than 10% in 2022, and it recovered slightly at 14% in 2025, after the reform.

The analysis of the enabling aspects of GMI would require a separate study, as it should encompass the availability and quality of vocational training programs, access to Second Change schooling for early school leavers, and the experience of community work, the use of health care services in the public system based on statutory health insurance, access to and use of legal advice as *de jure* provided by GMI. It should also regard the synergies between the GMI scheme and the law on social marginalization (Law 116/2002) that targets GMI beneficiaries who cumulate several forms of vulnerability and/or deprivation. However, such synergies have rarely materialized, and the severely impoverished situation of marginalized Roma communities painfully demonstrates this (Vincze and Hossu, 2014; Raţ, 2019; Vincze et al., 2025). For the purposes of the present paper, we remain at the analysis of the welfare effort invested by the state for social transfers aimed to combat poverty and social exclusion. As **Figure 4** shows, expenditures on social exclusion benefits (not included elsewhere, thus without the support allowance for low-income families and without the heating subsidy & energy supplement) increased from 3.8 PPS/ inhabitant in 2000 to 46 PPS/inhabitant in 2007, and then decreased again, after the global financial crisis, to 18.6 PPS/inhabitant in 2019. Following the reform, it increased at 63.2 PPS/inhabitant in 2025. This is significantly lower than the EU-27 average of 254 PPS/inhabitant. In terms of percentage of the GDP, the share fluctuated around 0.2% of the GDP between 2002 (when GMI became effective) and 2016, and then it decreased to 0.1% of the GDP (Eurostat, 2025). In contrast, the EU-27 average was cc. 0.5% throughout this period. By 2023 (latest data available), spending on social exclusion benefits accounted for 0.4% of the GDP in Romania and 1% in the EU on average (Eurostat, 2025)[21].

[21] For 2023, see Eurostat: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Government_expenditure_on_social_protection.

Figure 4. The evolution of spending on social assistance benefits to address social exclusion in PPS per inhabitant

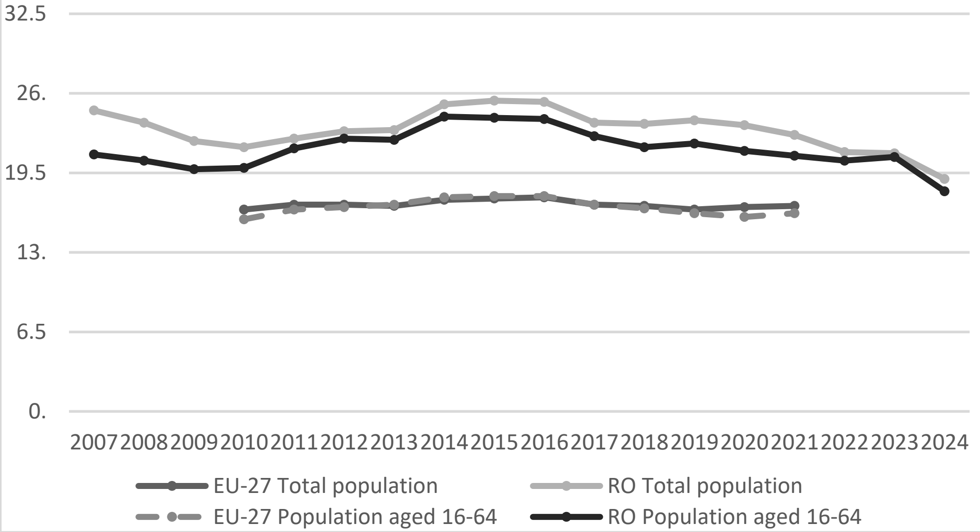


Source: Eurostat, 2025. Author's graph.

Figures 5 and **6** present the rates of at-risk-of poverty (relative monetary threshold) and the relative poverty reduction effects of social transfers (pensions excluded) between 2007 and 2024. We can see that, as compared to the EU-27 average, the poverty rate for the working age population (aged 16-64) is significantly higher in Romania, with a 25% peak in 2014 (in the aftermath of the global financial crisis) and a gradual, yet small decrease to 18% in 2024. In terms of relative poverty reduction, in Romania the figures are almost the same for the whole population and those of active age throughout this period. Whereas between 2014 and 2011 cc. 25% of those potentially facing poverty avoided falling below the threshold due to receiving social transfers, between 2012 and 2024 this decreased at around 15%, with a brief improvement in 2021, most probably due to the additional welfare measures introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. The EU-27 average was cc. 35% throughout this period, with a similar peak in 2021, when it reached almost 40% relative poverty reduction.

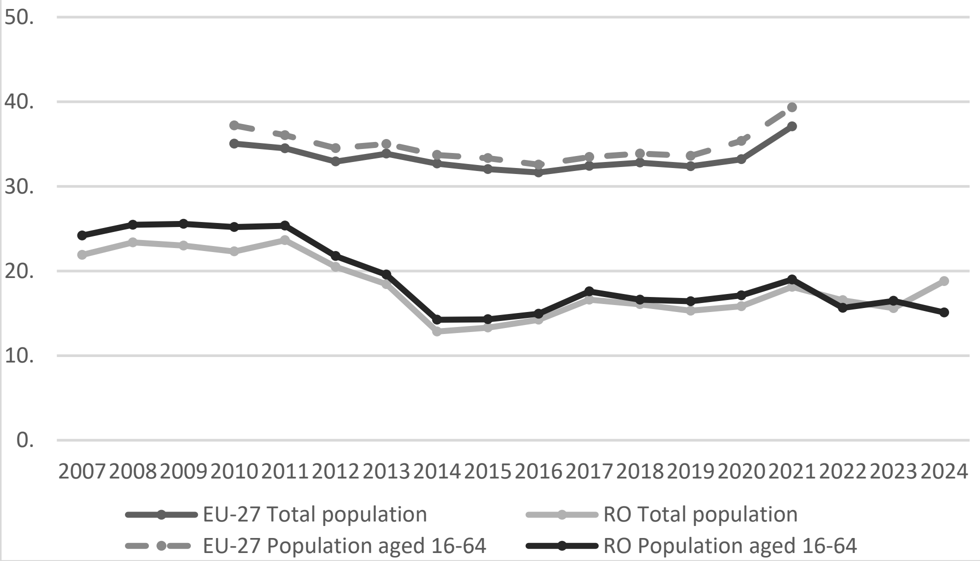
Due to the lack of data, a more focused measure on the poverty reduction effects of the GMI program was not possible. However, there are important differences in the at-risk-of poverty rates of the active-age population that indicate shortcomings of these programs. The poverty rate among those not occupied in the labour marker (except pensioners) fluctuated around 40% in the last decade.

Figure 5. The evolution of at-risk-of poverty rates in Romania and in the EU (monetary threshold)



Source: Eurostat, 2025. Author's graph.

Figure 6. The evolution of relative poverty reduction by social transfers (pensions excluded) in Romania and in the EU



Source: Eurostat, 2025. Author's graph.

Tellingly, self-employed persons confronted almost 70% poverty rate in the aftermath of the global crisis, that gradually decreased to around 60% and then went back to 68% in 2023. In the same period, in the EU-27, it fluctuated at around 25%. The stark difference is caused by the fact that in most of the EU countries this category includes free lancers in the service sector, liberal professions, artists, and craftsmen, while in Romania the majority of self-employed persons work in agriculture and gain very low incomes, at times combining them with social assistance benefits (see also Pop, 2023).

Tentative conclusions

This paper argued that the Romanian Guaranteed Minimum Income program fails to secure an adequate value of benefits for those legally entitled to receive it. The fact that the Romanian legislation on social assistance benefits does not operate with a minimum consumption basket or reference budget allows an arbitrary indexation of benefits, even in situations when such indexations were previously agreed with social partners and included in governmental executive orders. The role of the European Union is important for putting pressure on the government to give more attention to the issue of poverty and social exclusion, yet national strategic documents designed to address these issues need better coordination. Measuring the extent of non-take up of benefits and more nuanced insights into its causes, especially among precarious workers from severely deprived and marginalized Roma communities, would be instrumental to improve the enabling dimension of the GMI scheme.

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