

Urban Housing Problem in Romania: The Legacy of Communist Block of Flats

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Abstract

The Romanian housing question is different from other East Central European reality (see Enyedi, 1988; Szelényi, 1996). Due to the specific urbanization and modernization process (Ronas, 1984) that took place in the socialist era and the rapid privatization of the housing stock after the turn of the regime (Tosics-Hegedüs, 2003; Ronas, 1982), Romania faces an interesting situation. More than 70 percent of the urban population lives in so called block of flats, in large and sometimes overcrowded neighborhoods. 95 percent of these blocks of flat are privately owned (Pásztor, 2003), while the possibility to acquire one is low due to the high prices. In these circumstances the housing issue is one of the most disturbing structural and functional social problem, with certain cultural aspect – the social pressure upon the young generation to acquire their own houses is very powerful while renting is a strong social stigma (Zamfir, 2001) in so called culture of ownership.

Our paper tends to reveal the reasons of the Romanian urban housing-problem, and the problem of the block of flats inherited from the socialist era. It is expressive that a U.N. Report in 2001 considering the Romanian housing situation concludes that by 2020 only 17 percent of the country's housing stock will assure safety and proper living conditions. The cause of the most serious problem, besides of the rural clay and straw mortar houses, is the block of flats. As 70 percent of the urban housing stock is composed by this kind of estates we consider that right at this moment the issue of the block of flats is at the core of the Romanian urban housing problem. We will confirm the presumption that the Romanian housing problem is caused by two important factors: First, the heritage of the socialist system, which tried to solve the housing problem by *building mainly bad quality, low comfort providing block of flats mostly built of prefabricated elements which offered poor living circumstances*. Second, *the lack or low efficiency of the housing policy measures after the change of regime*.

Briefly, the social problem (Macionis, 2004; Castells, 2000) of housing is described and presented with empirical examples in conflictualistic perspective embedded in the larger process of the Romanian transition; the narrative is based on statistics, but some illustrative case studies are presented, too. All these could be an instrument not only for social scientists but also for social policy makers and real estate developers.

Introduction

When exploring the housing issue each social scientist should answer: Why becomes the housing issue a social problem? This issue is an important matter of the modern society. Its shortage or inadequate stage could generate a serious social problem, this way becoming one of the most important issues of social sciences and urban sociological researches.

In the present article we assume that the housing issue *constitutes a social problem with various social, economical and cultural implications*. By social problem we mean those phenomenons, which cause considerable damage to society and/or social group persisting over longer period of time and elicit a number of proposed solutions (Parrillo, 2002:3-8).

Concerning the specialized bibliography there are three types of approaches of the housing issue: In the first hand, according to the *economical viewpoint* the housing sector is an important part of the economical system. The housing consumption has an important role. While it is a basic necessity it is also one of the most expensive goods; it is not transferable in space: one should consume it, use it where it was built. The house is characterized by the social resources, by the economic standards of the society and by the disposable technologies. Its distribution is realized due to the market mechanism of supply and demand. (see Henderson-Ledebur, 1972, Hegedüs-Tosics, 1998, Myers, 1990). In the second hand due to the *culturalist approach*, housing has a strong cultural and social function: it provides shelter and security from the outside world, society and nature. It is also a status, a social and a cultural symbol (see Arias, 1993, Taylor, 1990, Kapitány-Kapitány, 2000). According to this approach housing is part of the aspiration of large masses to search for identity and self-expression during their lifetime. (S. Nagy, 2003). In the third hand the specialized bibliography considers the housing-stock *as a system*, which is strongly connected to the social, political and economical systems. This way its nature can be deduced from its subsystems and from the nature of other connected systems. Its characteristic themes are the housing shortage and the housing inequality. (see Hegedüs-Tosics, 1993, 1998; Szelényi-Konrád, 1969; Szelényi, 1990; Pásztor-Petrovici-Poledna, 2006; Lowe-Tsenkova, 2003).

This study tends to reveal the reasons of the Romanian urban housing-problem, and the problem of the block of flats inherited from the socialist era. It is expressive that a U.N. Report in 2001 considering the Romanian housing situation concludes that by 2020 only 17 percent of the country's housing stock will assure safety and proper living conditions. The cause of the most serious problem, besides of the rural clay and straw mortar houses, is the block of flats. As 70 percent of the urban house stock is composed by this kind of estates I consider that right at this moment the issue of the block of flats are at the core of the Romanian urban housing problem.

In the study I will confirm my presumption that the Romanian housing problem is caused by two important factors: First, the heritage of the socialist system, which tried to solve the housing problem by *building mainly bad quality, low comfort providing block of flats mostly built of prefabricated elements which offered poor living circumstances*. Second, *the lack or low efficiency of the housing policy measures after the change of regime*.

The analysis starts with the presentation of the procedures and distinctiveness, which defines the socialist urbanization and housing system. Then I will trace the peculiarities and changes concerning the last twenty years, focusing on the special urban social problems that are tide with the housing problem. During my analysis I applied for the data of Romanian census, the statistic yearbooks, the registers from the publications of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the researches made by my colleagues and myself.¹

¹ Thank you for Rudolf Poledna, Petrovici Norbert.

Housing, as social problem

The brief historical context

Even if the countries from the former communist block have a very different history, the most important common element in their past is the socialist heritage of 40-45 years, starting after the Second World War until the beginning of the 1990s. According to Remmert-Hegedüs-Tosics (2001), not even this can be considered as singular seeing all the countries, since Yugoslavia followed a special path of socialism (based on self-management and open relations with the west), while Albania can be considered just the opposite, having been the most separated, closed country of them all. The differences in the housing sector were also very substantial: Albania followed the original “Stalinist” model, extended with harsh controls over mobility, Yugoslavia was an alternative to the mainstream in the east European model, with a large role for self-management and for employers, Bulgaria could be described with a special version of the socialist model, based on a high share of – controlled – ownership, Romania was close to the mainstream version of the socialist model. (Remmert-Hegedüs-Tosics, 2001)

For better understanding we must get back in time and we need to highlight some of the major characteristics of the socialist regime regarding the urban development and politics of housing. According to the Soviet Marxism socialism means the dominancy of the working-class, characterized by an industrial, urban society. This is an ideological imperative, providing a fast industrialization and urbanization in concordance with it. As the confidence in the efficiency and strength of the socialism was stronger than the one in the capitalism, the theory was followed by fast action to receive the goals. (Andrusz, 2001). The major objective of the socialist project was the ultimate modernization of the Romanian society and the creation of the New Man (Kligman, 1998).

At the beginning of the 20th century Romania was characterized by a low level of urbanization, which remains much behind the one in Western Europe. In 1930 the level of urbanization was at a 21,4 percent (142 towns). In 1945, the socialism, a new political and economical system aroused that produced its own specific space-structure. It might seem strange, but considering only the numbers, this is the most intensive period of urbanization. Between 1948 and 1989 the proportion of urban dwellers within the whole population raised from 23,4 percent to 53 percent. This also means that socialism had resulted to build a very specific space-structure, which differs significantly from the space-structure of the western societies. Its nature, besides the oppressing (tending to control) character of the system, can be defined by the low intensity of the urbanization (urban life), due to the fast rhythm, and the relatively short time period of urbanization, and also to the low social integration ability of the cities (large towns).

Even so the socialism was missing all the significant elements of modernization, such as industrialization, market economy and a specific mentality, and these appeared only long after the Romanian change of regime. Though the antidemocratic communist regime after the Second World War tried to appear as an ideology of modernity, it repressed the existing actors of modernity and the processes started by these actors and realized a dictatorial, centrally directed economical system, in fact eliminating the basic elements of modernity (Kligman, 1998; Tismaneanu, 2007). As the Romanian society tried to gain on the Western European advance mainly by the tools of industrialization and urbanization (Verdery, 1996), the urbanization had risen at the highest level in the history of Romania (Ronas, 1982).

Table Nr. 1. *Indexes of urbanization in Romania between 1910 and 2002*

<i>Period</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of urban population</i>	<i>Percent of urban population</i>	<i>Number of cities</i>
Pre-socialist; capitalist	1910-1912*	2.065.020	16,2	118
	1930	2.865.027	20,1	142
	1941	3.512.909	21,8	147
Socialist	1948	3.486.995	22,0	153
	1956	4.746.672	27,1	171
	1966	6.220.089	32,6	183
	1977	9.395.729	43,6	236
	1985	11.370.092	50,0	237
Post-socialist	1992	12.391.819	54,3	260
	2002	11.436.736	52,7	265

*Source: 1930, 1941, 1992 and 2002 Census Data; * Romania formed by Moldavia and Walachia*

The forced industrialization – the increasing need to hire more and more workers in the newly built industrial plants (labor intensity) – generated a massive rural-urban migration (Rotariu – Mezei, 1999) and established real “urban jungles of block of flats” (apartment buildings) in the cities. Moreover, the official ideology thought that *urban* principally means *houses* – all over in the city including the historical city centers, the inner core of urban landscape (Petrovici, 2006). The urbanization also represented a good opportunity to reshape the social and cultural environment and to strengthen the socialist taste and esthetics (Pásztor, 2004; Troc, 2003). In this regard the façade of the new neighborhoods and the style of blocks was the reflection of the authoritarian system. The socialist housing practice was not only rising blocks but also demolishing old buildings - especially those representative for the capitalist regime: old apartment houses, old fashioned edifices, small factories, parks, even churches; searching for new spaces for blocks and to erase the undesirable past (Petrovici, 2006; Pásztor, 2004; Bodnár, 1998).

The new urban landscapes represented mainly uniform apartment buildings four or ten stories high; densely populated places with basic infrastructure (roads, public transport, commercial units, schools and kindergarten). To communist ideology thought that these new neighborhoods – having essentially living function – was going to be some kind of new small towns by themselves, representative for the regime and new social order (Csizmady, 2003). Practically all other functions of space were neglected in favor of housing (Troc, 2003; Pásztor, 2003). The relative homogeneity of the neighborhoods – many of the tenants come from the nearby village and being a former agricultural laborer, now factory worker – and the same age and quality of the buildings made these places similar everywhere in Romania. The flats mostly were owned by the state.

Housing as structural and functional problem

In the very end of the socialist period (e.g. mostly at the second half of the Eighties, but practically since the end of Seventies) some functional problems come out to the surface. Due to the massive in-migration and the acute need for new flats, the pressure upon the housing sector had dramatically increased. The free lots between the blocks were used to build new ones, increasing the density. Furthermore, the quality of the blocks declined; the number of second and third quality blocks were increasing. Additionally, among the new tenants the members of the lower class (low skill workers and the unskilled) were over-represented (Csedő-Ercsei-Geambașu-Pásztor, 2004). This boosted the tension and even conflict between the “old dwellers” and the “newcomers” (Troc, 2003). Side by side with the shortage of consumer goods and the “system of portions” specific to the “economy of shortage”, interesting urban villages were born. Specific forms of defensive traditionalism were developed (Peter, 2007). Some of the townies with rural background and agricultural skills started to plant vegetables behind the blocks and to raise ani-

mals - all this because of lack of food in the stores. Suddenly, an interesting mixture of urban and rural (rurbanisation) becomes obvious; the upcountry hutches gone to be part of the landscape (Mihăilescu-Nicolau-Giorghiu-Olaru, 1994; Pásztor, 2003).

After the change of the regime the dysfunctions of *cartiere* (neighborhoods) was gradually revealed. First, due to the economic restructuring many of the former factory workers were laid off. Colleges at the factory and neighbors at home, entire parts of urban dwelling zones spatially concentrated the unemployed: impoverishment and segregation went side by side (Kostinskyi, 2001). Suddenly some parts become “dangerous” for the employed majority and target for labeling and stigmatization (Ladányi, 2002). The post-socialist cities started to split in two parts: ones inhabited by higher social groups in areas that look western and others inhabited by those who have lost out in the post-socialist transition which tend to resemble areas in the cities of developing country (Tosics, 2003).

Another issue arose: the extensive privatization of the housing stock (Tosics-Hegedüs, 2003). Till the middle of Nineties the state sold the flats to the former renters. They took a “gift” (Remmert-Hegedüs-Tosics, 2001; Budisteanu, 2000), but in fact the state freed him by the responsibility to maintain the huge housing stock. Indeed, the complete picture is more complex; for example the restitution of nationalized houses of the former owners in pre-socialist period is very problematic. The majority of them are still waiting to take the possession of the confiscated houses. Those houses were mostly bought by the tenants, as well (for further information see Chelcea, 2003).

Accordingly, because around 95 percent of the flats are privately owned, the cultural pressure on the younger generation to get a flat is excessively high – the cultural norm and expectation is to have an apartment independently from any cost. Renting is highly stigmatized. This is a tricky and also unfair and unjust expectation, because only a fraction of the present owners bought their condo in the circumstances of free market. A majority of them took it directly from the state paying a symbolic amount of money (Noica, 2003). The prices – during the economic crisis too – are still high banning many from the opportunity to have one (UNECE, 2001).

The average age of the blocks is already a latent (not recognized) problem and in the next future will be one of the central issues. The degeneration in quality and condition will occur relatively in the same time. Later on we will discuss this in detail (Noica, 2003). In sum, the basic assumption is that the housing in Romania is a serious social problem. The present article tries to highlight this hypothesis.

Housing in Socialist Romania

In this chapter with the help of some synthetic indicators and statistics we will describe the most important features of the socialist housing system, focusing on the indicators concerning the block of flats. If using synthetic indicators to comparing the Romanian estate-stock with other post-socialist countries, it appears to be satisfactory and convenient. According to the census in 1992 the number of dwellings exceeded with 5 percent the number of the households. The number of the dwellings also exceeded by far the rhythm of population growth. Meanwhile between 1977 and 1992 the growth of population increased by 5,3, the number of dwellings increased by 21 percent.

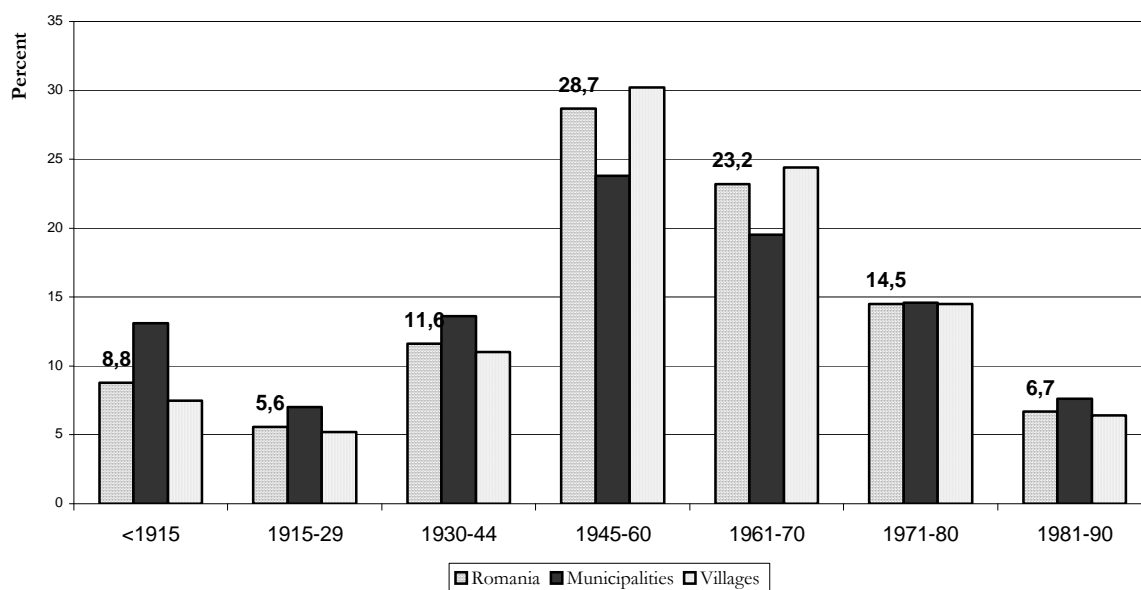
Table Nr. 2. *Housing consumption in 11 countries in transition, 1994*

Country	Dwellings/ 1000 inhabitants	Household/ dwelling	Persons/ room	Living space/ person (m ²)
Albania	219	1.00	2.70	8.0
Poland	296	1.06	1.02	18.2
Lithuania	329	1.06	1.30	19.7
Slovakia	334	1.00	1.14	21.9
Slovenia	338	0.95	1.33	19.0
Romania	341	0.95	1.19	17.4
Latvia	370	1.13	1.21	20.9
Hungary	385	0.99	0.92	32.1
Czech Republic	397	1.01	1.04	25.5
Bulgaria	405	0.88	1.00	16.7
Estonia	410	1.03	1.18	32.0

Source: Hegedüs J. - Mayo S.- Tosics I., 1996

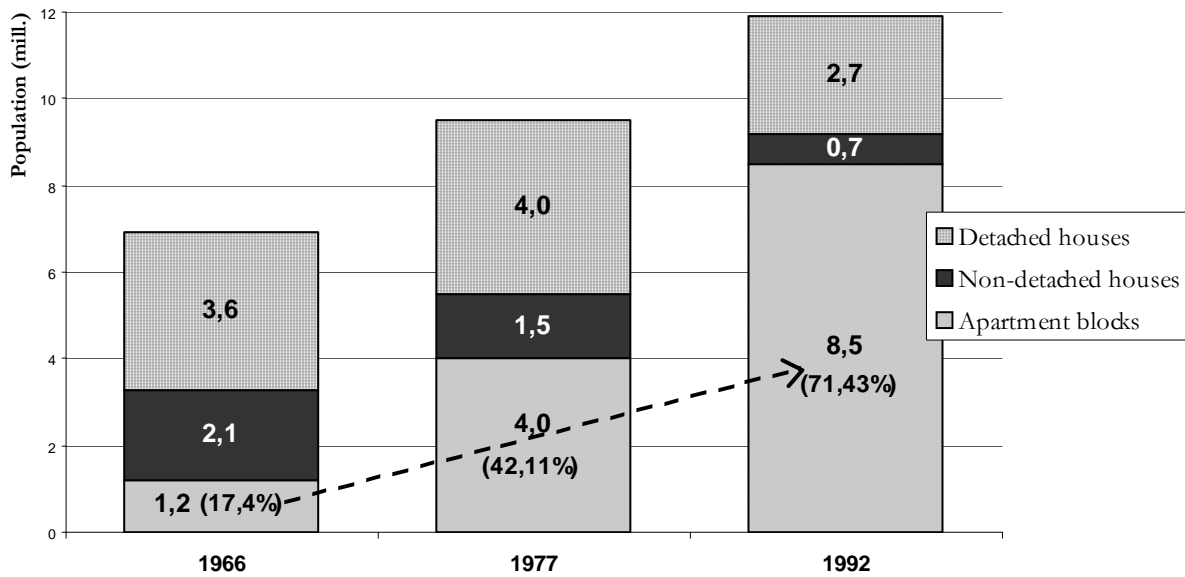
Romania's dwelling stock is relatively new in comparison to that of Western Europe, and quite similar in age to that of many countries in transition. The oldest part of the stock, previous to 1930, constitutes roughly 14 percent of the total, and only some 22 percent has been added since 1970. The 52 percent share from 1945-1970 is higher than in both Western Europe (33%) and comparable countries in transition (about 28%) Only Bulgaria has a similar share of about 49 percent. (UNECE, 2001)

Figure Nr. 1. *Age of the Housing Stock in 1992*



The age of building stock is the result of the extremely high rates of new construction during the first half of the socialist era. This new constructions are mainly apartment blocks. It is obvious from the analysis of the data that while in 1966 only 17,4 percent of urban population was living on block of flats, in 1977 this number exceeded the 42 percent, and at the beginning of the nineties it increased to 71,4 percent.

Figure Nr. 2. Urban population by dwelling types in 1966-1992 period



Source: 1966, 1977, 1992 Census datas

To understand the socialist housing system, one should understand the property relations of the era. It is a specific issue, for communism is a political and economical ideology that considers private property as the source of social inequality and generally of all social problems. In accordance with this the system engages to eliminate this form of ownership transferring it into public (state) property. In reality this meant that the state mainly owned the production agents, but not necessarily the movables.

The state of real estate was specific also. After 1950 in the process of nationalization of the large part of urban dwellings, most of the owners become tenants. The way to get a dwelling (rent) was centrally controlled, by allocation. If the living space was large enough (sqm/person) it might have happened that other were moved in the same dwelling with the former owners. As a consequence of these practices the quality of the houses went trough a fast declination process. Facing the problem, beginning with the 1970's the state started to encourage and finance the construction financed from private financial sources and also the purchase the buildings built from state funds. (Noica, 2003:113). These measures were mainly effectuated in rural areas, where it was easier for people to build houses financed from their private resources. As it is indicated in Figure Nr. 3 the number of dwellings in private property is much inferior to the ones in state property.

As a conclusion it can be stated that the real estate built from state funds were solely block of flats, and that by the 1990's the significant part of urban real estate was represented by block of flats in state properties.

Figure Nr. 3. *Number of dwellings in urban areas by type of property constructed between 1951-1990*

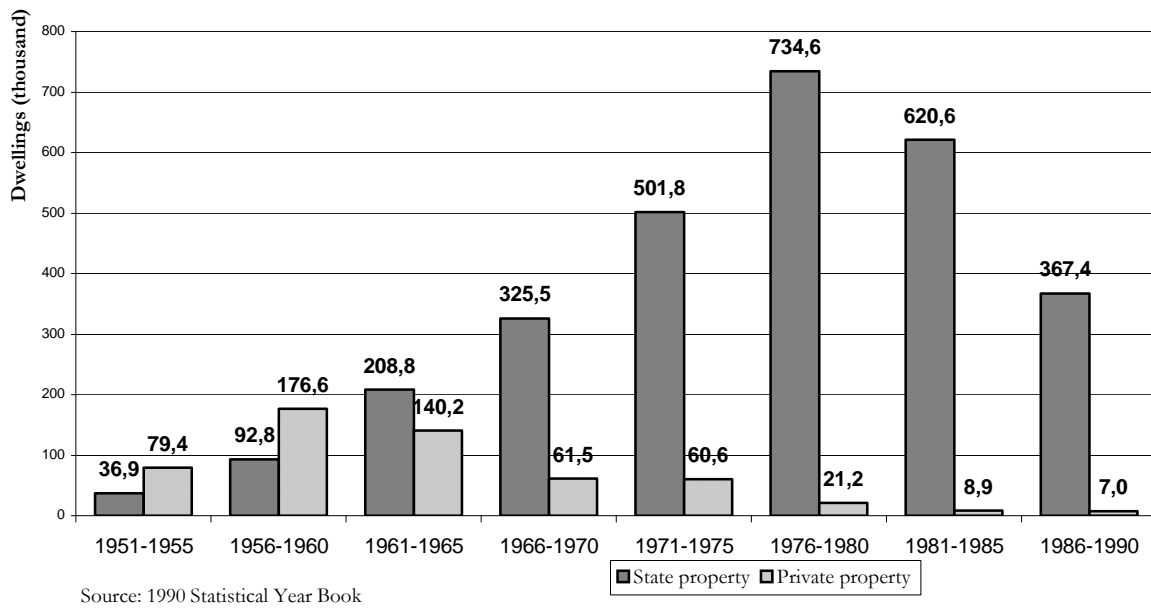
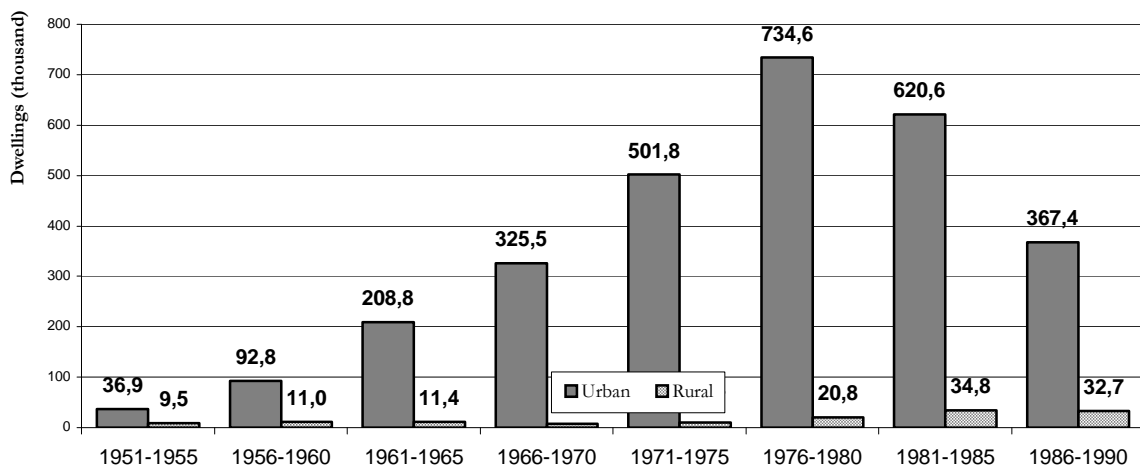
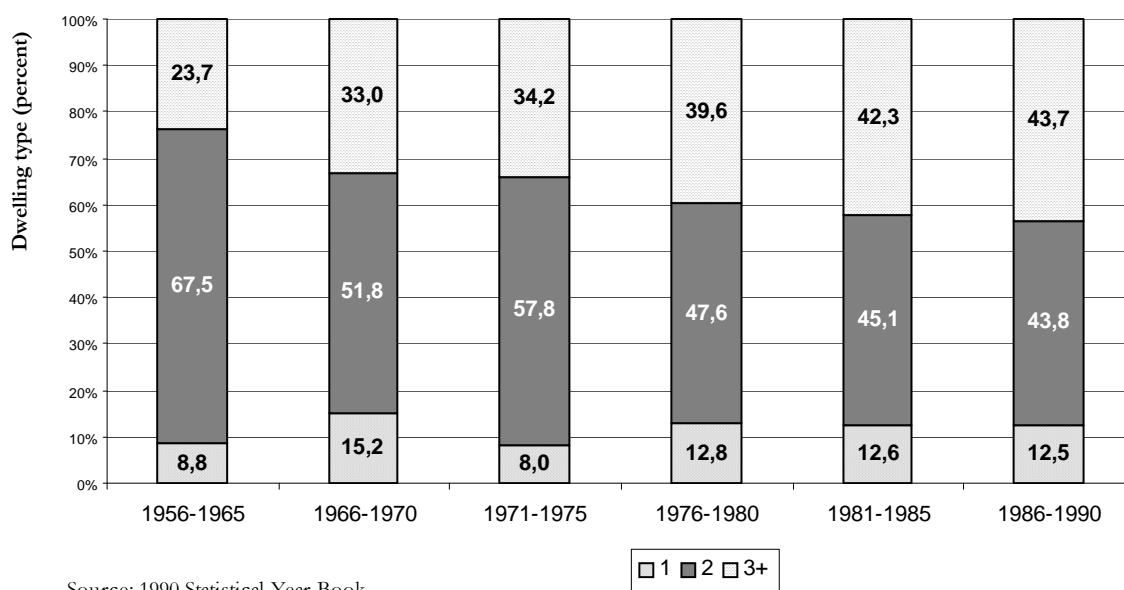


Figure Nr. 4. *Number of state property dwellings by areas constructed 1951-1990*



Concerning the quality of the flats we used the following variables: *measure, number of persons, the type of construction material and infrastructural endowments*. According to the census in 1992 the largest frequency have the two-room (48%) flats with 37-51 square meters. This are low-comforted, low-spaced flats. In the following figure you can see the change in measure of the building financed form state funds. Even though one can observe a continuous accession in measure it is only in the 1980's that the number of three or more-room flats transcend the number of two-room flats.

Figure Nr. 5. *State property dwellings by number of rooms constructed in 1956-1990 period*



Source: 1990 Statistical Year Book

The situation can be detailed if we consider not only the number of rooms, but also the living surface and the number of persons per flat. The average living surface in 1992 was 41,2 sqm. The one or two room flats with the most frequency had a much lower living surface. The average surface was 14,1 square meter for the one-room flats and 25,3 square meter for the two-room flats. If we consider the number of persons living in the same flat above the living surface of the flats the picture becomes even more nuanced. According to the data of the 1992 census there is a mismatch between the rooms available and those needed for different sizes of household. For instance there are 1,7 million households with 3 or more persons living in more than one- or two-room flats. This adds up to 24 percent of the total dwellings stock. In 10 percent of the flats the number of the persons is more than two persons per room. The 17,4 square meter/person compared with the situation in the surrounding countries show that Romania has a strong lag (See Table Nr. 2).

Table Nr. 3. *Occupied dwellings by household size and number of rooms, 1992*

Households size - person	Size of dwelling by number of rooms					Total (nr.)	Total (%)
	1	2	3	4+			
1 person	401.059	563.475	193.650	56.055		1.214.239	16,90
2	236.320	933.602	486.455	165.479		1.821.856	25,35
3	122.319	699.161	500.452	169.329		1.491.261	20,75
4	67.373	550.160	548.062	211.730		1.377.325	19,16
5	31.971	215.351	258.852	154.565		660.739	9,19
6	17.724	99.736	129.461	101.699		348.620	4,85
7	10.395	49.456	55.887	45.306		161.044	2,24
8	4.501	19.103	19.520	17.036		60.160	0,84
9	2.098	8.517	8.175	7.402		26.192	0,36
10+	1.990	8.116	7.670	7.535		25.311	0,35
Total (number)	895.750	3.146.677	2.208.184	936.136		7.186.747	100,00
Total (%)	12,46	43,78	30,73	13,03		100,00	

Source: 1992 Census.

Regarding the material of the buildings the block of flats is made of durable construction materials: brick with reinforced concrete skeleton, or reinforced concrete and prefabs. The biggest part of buildings stock made with wood-skeleton was build before 1945. The water and electricity supply is almost at a level of 100%. The gas supply covers about 90% and the district heating about 70 percent (Noica, 2003:130-032).

Statistics on availability provide only a partial picture of the situation. Far more significant is the quality, reliability and cost of the services provided. The UNECE Report (2001:24) shows that the price, the poor management and reliability of some networks (water supply and district heating in particular) aggravate the poor living conditions in much of the urban housing stock. The obsolete infrastructure in the old parts of most cities and the heating problem should be addressed as a top priority. Mass replacement and upgrading are urgently needed (UNECE, 2001). Meanwhile in some areas earthquake possibility distresses the buildings with unstable structures and bad infrastructure.

As a summary of the Romanian housing situation before 1989, we can pronounce that in spite of the macro-statistic indicators, which consider the housing estate quite satisfactory, a deeper examination indicates a significant imbalance. 70 percent of the urban immovable estate is represented by the block of flats built in the second part of the 20th century, during the communist regime. These are small, overcrowded, low comfort flats with inefficient infrastructure.

Though there have been dwellings in private ownership, the housing system was built on the logic of rental and housing-mobility. This means that the housing allocation for every person or family was adjusted to the personal needs, and with the chance of changes in the lifecycle (marriage, growth or decline in number of persons) and theoretically one could have changed it to a larger or to smaller one. Of course this did not really happen, the new flats were preserved for the continuously coming newcomers. But the criteria of allocation were, at least formally, adjusted to the need of the families (Noica, 2001).

As we have already mentioned, because of the forced industrialization policy there were built a large number but low quality block of flats. The block, as the typical building for the system was both solution for the problem of housing, and also an architectural key for space-adjustment. One can find block of flats all over, in the center as well as at the periphery of the towns. In other words, it is due to the ideology of the regime the blocks represented the regime itself. It is almost the sole form of city and space adjustment. The block, as an architectural creation and the perspective of the town is one of the fulfillments of the socialist regime. And by this it is the symbol of the “greatness” of the socialist regime, and its symbolic “triumph” over capitalism.

Block of flats in post-socialist Romania

Radical reforms of housing and urban policy in almost all post-socialist cities are seen as a necessary step because of their economic inefficiency and social ineffectiveness. During socialism the role of market mechanisms in city development were deliberately neglected resulting in destruction of resources for urban development (Petrovic, 2001). One of the problems is that new policy concepts have developed in an almost exclusively top-down manner (Stanilov, 2007). The political elite is usually open to economic globalization as internationalization. Westernisation and Europeanization are among the prime goals of post-socialist transformation. The new political elites of post-socialist countries are prone to pressure from international financial institutions to implement neo-liberal strategies that favor the fastest possible abandonment of all aspects of state socialism with the least possible role for the state compatible with free market and private ownership (Harloe, 1996:5). Such policy approach suggests a monolithic ideology based on the unquestionable superiority of a market-driven world in which there exists allegedly only one “correct” type of state-regulating policy – the minimalist and residual one (Ferge 1997:24; Deacon 2000:112).

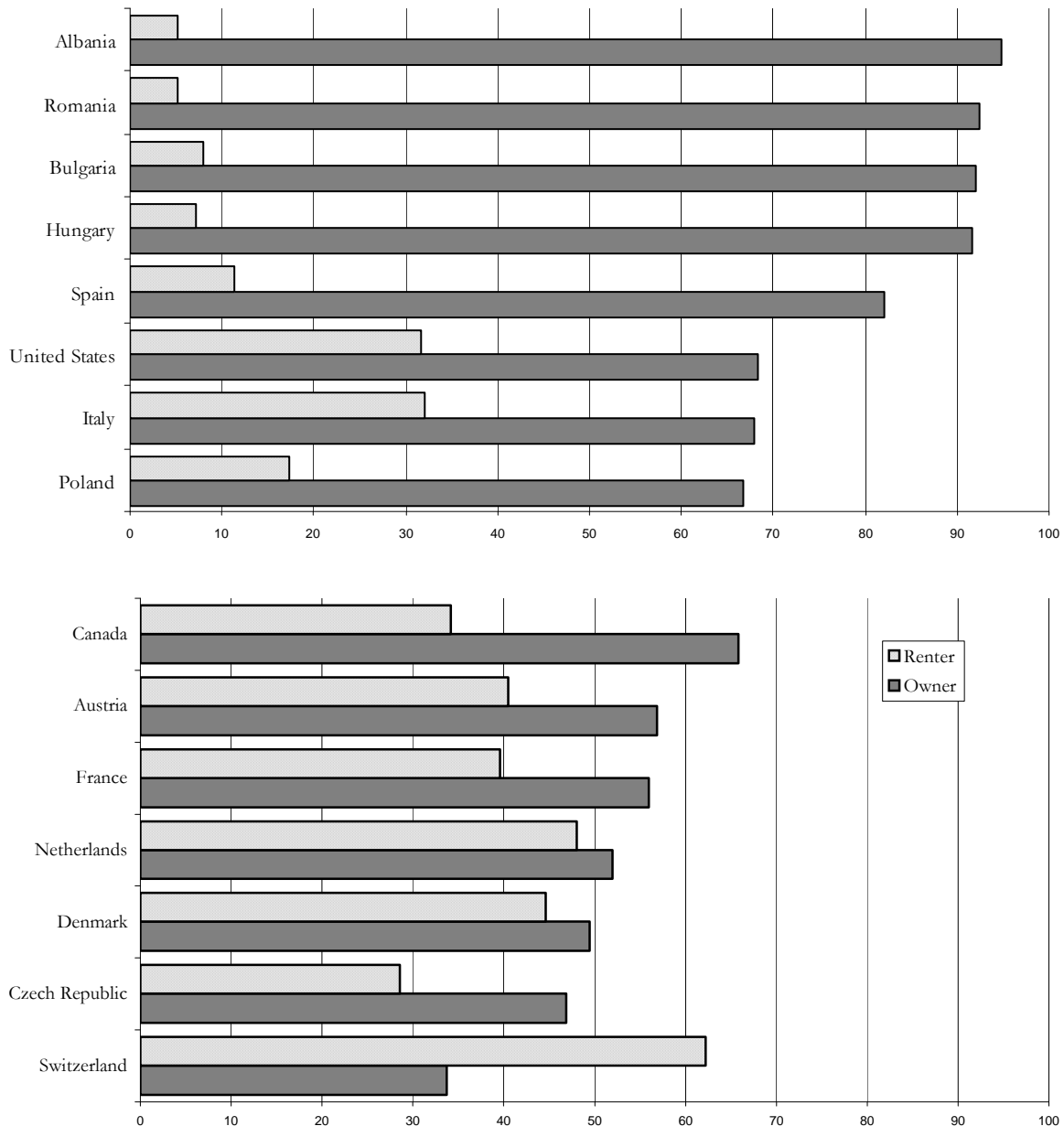
In the early 1990s, all the conditions for the housing sector changed dramatically, the general trend was a change towards the free-market direction: a property market appeared; the former huge construction companies were split up and privatized; the sale of construction materials was liberalized; restrictions on property ownership were lifted; and a significant portion of state-owned housing was privatized. All this paved the way for a market-oriented housing model.

In the case of Romania the law, which promoted the privatization² of the flats came into operation in 1990. As a result the Romanian housing policy was characterized by the lack of state intervention. The only justified measures were the ones, which stimulated the market mechanism.³ According to the survey data in 2006 93 percent of the flats in Romania were in private ownership. At this topic Romania is in the front line along with Albany, Bulgaria and Hungary. It is important to notice that in the western world private ownership of the homes are less characteristic. In England only 70 percent of the dwellers live in their own home. This proportion is under 60 percent in Austria and France, under 50 percent in Denmark, Netherlands and Germany and under 40 percent in Sweden and Switzerland. In these countries, just as in North America or Australia there do block of flats resemble our “blocks”. This type of building architecture has not been invented by the Eastern-European communist regime, it appeared as a part of the Northern, especially Swedish social policy after the Second World War. The block of flats built during the 60’s and 70’s followed this model. In this case we can rather talk about tenement houses or social homes.

² According to the Law 61/1990 each immovable in state property can be bought by the dwellers by cash or by state loan. Posterior there were several modifications, partly because of the return of nationalized immovable, partly because the change in the prices of immovable.

³ The Laws 19/1994, 114/1996, 152/1998 and 190/1999-es are pointing in this direction.

Dwellings by tenure in selected countries



Source: <http://www.uncece.org>

No matter how positive were the common feelings caused by privatization, the owners of these block of flats should consider that the privatization of flats can generate important and serious problems in the future, too. The high rate of housing ownership can result some unexpected problem.

According to the specialized bibliography we talk about housing problem in the case the social status (status) and the housing situation (the living circumstances, the place and quality of the house) do not match; when they are not in balance. Certain strata of the society can feel that their status is not reflected by the state of their home (Szelényi, 1969, Pásztor – Péter, 2007). This is exactly what happened as a result of the privatization of the flats: the majority kept with the flat the status also conferred to it, which was classified by the former system. This might be one of the most important problems. Moreover, right now the lack of housing is one of the most important poverty-risk factors. (Zamfir, 2001; Poledna-Petrovici-Pásztor, 2006).

Even though the socialist urban development (“systematization”) eliminated extreme poverty and the slums, the aim of building block of flats was also to homogenize and thus the emerg-

ing housing-structure exposed a larger number of people to the menace of poverty. Notwithstanding the homogenizing intention of the communist regime even before the change of regime one could observe the premises of structural stratification considering the residences. After 1989 with the appearance of market the segregation processes were started or accelerated (Pásztor, 2003). The change of regime and the instauration of the (totally) free market mechanisms made possible the change and option for living places. Even though according to a research made in 2000 by the Desire Foundation the residential areas with block of flats are more heterogeneous than the ones with houses: the people with higher incomes still live in higher proportion the block of flats than those living in houses with gardens (Pásztor, 2003). But the out migration already started. This is at the root of that process of separation, which leads to segregation processes in the block areas, and to the formation of possible slums (Weclawowitzs, 1998:66).

As we have shown before, the majority of public rented stock was in damaged condition when privatization started at the beginning of the 1990's. The new owners acquired their dwellings at a very low price directly from the state and most of them were able to pay off the debt quickly (otherwise high inflation would have washed it away). This was the immediate advantage of giveaway privatization, many people were practically housed free; they only had to pay their utility bills. This situation made the declining incomes more bearable and raised, at least theoretically, the possibility for renovation works (Budisteanu, 2000:6). As a consequence of privatization the administration and servicing of flats became the responsibility of the new owners. But this is almost impossible – I would state. These blocks were not built according to this logic. I will notice a peculiarity of Cluj/Kolozsvár. This city hosts the largest block of Eastern-Europe (it has 11 levels, 51 staircases, and 2244 apartments). If we count with an average of three persons in a family we will state that this block has around 7000 dwellers. (The largest village in Romania has approximately the same number of people.) In the case of renovation works (after inundation, change of drain pipes, gas pipes) not less than 2000 households (44 per staircase) should have to agree their interests. In the recent economical circumstances it is quite obvious that there would be persons and families who would not want to contribute. Of course the average size of the blocks is much lesser, but even this way in most of the cases the administration of the immovable would consider some hundreds of households.⁴

The absurdity of the situation is revealed by the ineffectiveness of the heat-isolation program. The European Directives for Romania considering the energy-efficiency specifies that between years 2008 - 2016, Romania should diminish by 9 percent his energy consumption. Beginning with 2002 Romania tries to correspond to this expectation starting different programs. The program with the most expectation was the one that started with the nr 1735/2006 Governmental Decision. The aim of this program was to support the heat-isolation of the block of flats. According to the decision one-third of the expenses would be financed from central budget, one-third from the local council budget and one-third would be supported by the dwellers. After the process the immovable will get an energy-efficiency warrant. Without this warrant beginning with 2010 it will be forbidden to make real estate transactions. To get the support from the central budget the dwellers will have to make documentation and to register it at the Local Council. This offer is undoubtedly favorable, for one of the most pronounced problems of these blocks of flats is the lack of heat-efficiency (UNECE, 2001, Budisteanu, 2000).

Two years after the program was started – in spite that the Ministry of Transportation, Public construction and Tourism considered it as a successful one (MRDH, 2008) – its effects are not even close to the expectations. In 2007 14 block of flats were insulated, in 2008 the number increased to 111. According to the ministry less than dwellers of 5000 blocks expressed their will to

⁴ We don't have exact data about the size of this immovable but as it was due to the Romanian socialist town planning, beginning with the 70s the wall-like, all-covering ornamented architecture was in vogue, which also had representative functions, too. (Petrovici, 2006). According to the registers the major part of the blocks was built during that period of time. And most of them are not block-like four leveled houses with one or two staircases, but much larger building than that.

join the program, but only 693 requests were accepted, and from these there are 372, which have a plan of work (MRDH, 2005, 2006). Comparing this with the number of 80.632 blocks of flats will show the real efficiency of the program. Meanwhile it seems that the dwellers are the ones to refuse it. It seems they are not able to make an agreement in financing the last third of expenses. The specialists interested in the process also lay the blame to the dwellers.

“Seven associations of owners out of the 300 existing in Deva tried to apply for this program. But all of them had to resign for they could not gather the 33 percent of the expenses of the investment. If only one dweller refuses to contribute, the program fails. The program is completely blocked in Deva, and the associations give authorization only for those dwellers who decide to finance the insulation program from their own sources.” I. B., president of the Association Union Owners, Deva

„It is a matter of mentality. People don't understand that the investment pays back quite fast, in 3-4 years, and the thermo-comfort effect can be experienced immediately, regardless of the season. The winter is warm the summer is cold.” A.I., executive manager of the Construction Society of Employers

A consequence of the change of regime was the very strong sense of ownership, and the attachment to the property (Verdery, 1996). In the case of the block of flats the sense of property was not related to the real estate (the immovable, block), but only to the flat: according to the principle: “everything that is common, is mine”. And what is common (owned by everybody) belongs to nobody. This is not only true with the financial side of the things, but also has another consequence: people are not interested to invest neither money, nor time in common places. The staircases, the areas around the living place are mostly neglected and usually dirty.

Other problems that conclude from the high level of real estate ownership is that this appears as a norm. It is socially expected that people should have their own homes. This puts a heavy burden to the shoulder of the younger generations of today. For them it is by far not as easy as it was 15 or 20 years ago to purchase their own flat. I think it is very expressive the large number of those people, who bind a significant part of their incomes for 25-30 years to buy their own home. I repeat, the young find themselves in a very specific situation, where the ownership of home appears to have a strong pressure from the part of society.

There is a large scale of possibility for the loans, which could help the young to finance them in their house purchase. But here appears the question of sustainability: how much do people risk, and for what do they risk. According to some economical analysis there are more and more who are not able to pay off the granted a loan. This shows that the young overestimate their possibilities and therefore they risk a lot to conform the strong social pressure. This matter raises a lot of questions: does it worth to risk so much, how much will the building worth when they finally can “own” it. Can it be called a good investment, if there is little guaranty that these blocks of flats will keep their prices thirty years later? The cultural dimension of “not taking into consideration” dimensions like that will be presented briefly in the closing part of the article traced along illustrative case studies.

The culture of ownership

A real *culture of (house) ownership* has been developed in last twenty years in Romania. The pattern is built around the property, as a central value; to have your place is compulsory, no matter the material, human or spiritual costs. The massive privatization of the housing stock drewled the main objective: to be an owner. The social pressure represents the main element, not taking into the consideration the personal costs (money, stress, familial conflicts, and economical consequences). This pattern is reinforced not just by the individuals, but also by the media and lately by the state. Due to this culture, the renter-landlord relations often faces conflict, because the tenants are powerless (legally speaking) and stigmatized. In the next pages we are going to present

along some interesting case studies (carried out in Cluj, and Miercurea Ciuc) how these elements work in everyday life – to have a closer look upon the mechanism.

The roots of culture of ownership - Flats as “gift”. They live in block of flat. Actually in a good one: located in a city center, good neighborhood, still high value on the market, and a decent capital city in a central Romanian county. On the other hand their house with big garden and beautiful trees was demolished at the very last days of communist period (august, 1989). So, we can say, they were forced to move in here. This family of intellectuals took the chance to buy the flat immediately the government made this possible in the early Nineties. The total price was 540 000 Lei (about 1753 US Dollars that time; 1 USD=308 lei, 1992). Right after the first installment were paid, the P.’s family decided to pay all amount of money as soon as possible. The rapidly growing inflation made that price ridiculously low. The present price of the condo is about 78 000 Euro. A huge amount of money - of course they couldn’t afford to get is now. (L.P., 64, teacher, male, university degree, Miercurea, Ciuc, Romania). But a case like this represents the minority. The vast majority of the actual flat owners moved into the cities from countryside during the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties and become the core of the new townies, as members of industrial working class. The state provided the apartments in the just built big neighborhoods without any other property in change. L.E. is an electrician, working at a local brewery company, now part of a huge international holding. He was hired one year before the Revolution (e.g. here December 1989), just like his wife, also an electrician in the same industrial plant. Being from a near village, the factory allocated them a two-room apartment in a four story block. With a baby in the way soon a three-room apartment were assigned to them in July, 1990. Soon after – as many others that time – they become owners paying a symbolic price. (L. E., 46, electrician, male, high school degree, Miercurea Ciuc, Romania).

The central element - The social pressure. C. P. is a young (32) upwardly mobile and agile specialist in engineering. He came in Cluj as a student, but after he earned a university degree he made a strong decision: to look for a good job in the capital city of Transylvania. Due to his skills, he succeeded to find a good job, with carrier perspectives. Although his long term intention is to buy a condo for his own (he agrees one hundred percent with the culture of ownership), now is a tenant in a newly build three story edifice. But he is a subject of a constant social pressure: their parents and former schoolmates (outside Cluj) have been asking him all the time to decide to take a loan from the bank and start to pay for “his own place”. Questions like “Why to pay for rent when you could pay for your future” or “your friend I. N. already has his own place, and you...” are central topics in their conversation about what does it mean to be a real adult with responsibilities. Once, while he was waiting in line to pay for a cable television at UPC’s office when the clerk identified him as a tenant, all the others whispered: poor guy. (C.P., 32, engineer, male, university degree, Cluj, Romania).

Consequences - Indebted. S. J. is a successful journalist (42), recently promoted as deputy editor at a regional magazine. Being married (his spouse is also a journalist with modest income) and with a baby on the way, they decided to buy a condo for their own. As a family with children they must have one – the relatives and friend used to say them. His salary being raised from 2100 RON to 2900 RON (1 Euro=3,5 RON in 2008) they started to prospect the real estate market and to look for an apartment. Practically without any money for the first deposit, they had to apply for a consumer loan and also for a mortgage. In the meantime a two-room flat become available, for 88 000 Euros. The deal was made; the total debt per month represented 460 Euro, more than a half of their total income - in year 2008. After two years, and with a little child to rise, and the new Ron/Euro currency (raised from 3, 5 to 4, 25), respectively the growth interest rate now they must pay almost 780 Euro per month. In the meantime the price of their home dropped 47 000 Euros. The S’s family tries hard to survive; no going out in the weekends, no holidays abroad, no new stuffs... (S.J. journalist, 42, male, university degree, Cluj, Romania).

Tenants and landlords. They are renting a two-room apartment in a twenty five years old block of flats in an acceptable neighborhood. Both of them are young professionals, travelling

around Europe for business or pleasure. Their income is above the average; moreover, it can be considered a good one, especially during the economic crisis. They are very punctual with the rent, and their landlord is a real gentleman. This situation is not disturbing for them, because they have been saving money now to make bank deposits – the rent is absolutely ok, below the price of the market or the possible loan. But few years ago the situation was much worse. The flat was OK, situated near the city center, but the landlord was an eager businessman, always seeking for higher profit. No matter what, but at the end of every year (when the official contract expired) he wanted more and more money. In Euro, while the Ron/Euro currency worsened - for the tenants in general. Practically they had no choice, just to pay the demanded amount of money. “Accept is or move out” – that policy is very usual and common. (30, 35, male, and female, intellectuals, Cluj, Romania).

The Official Reinforcement of the Culture of Ownership - The First Home Project. The Romanian Government decided to support those families who want to buy their first house. In fact the project makes possible to take an apartment (a condo in block of flat) which is called home. This reveals another element of the culture of ownership: a “real” home is not the harmonic familial life, stable mental and social condition, jolly social interactions, but the owned place.

The project, officially announced in May and finalized in June (Government Decision nr. 717/2009, and Government Ordinance 60/2009) is entitled The First Home. Up to 60 000 Euros the Romanian state guaranties the credit; maximum 80 percent of the total amount of loan. The project has a national and social character, a special one Billion Euros Fund was created (FNGCIMM). Several commercial banks – 24 so far - adhered to the initiative, ready to finance the acquisitions. There are seven steps to follow for every pretender. The first step is to fill a questionnaire, practically to apply for the loan. The second step is taken by the bank: the petition is analyzed, and in case of approval, the file is transferred to the Guarantee Fund for further endorsement. If the fourth step is passed – taking the guarantee – the bank approves the loan. Finally, right the state mortgage is assured, the client should buy the house.

What about the conditions? These are the following: Proper income, no credit at all, no previous ownership and minimum five percent cash of the credit. The bought house cannot be sold a five years period. Who qualifies for The First House? Regarding the present estimates (made by National Bank of Romania in late June) there is few persons eligible, below ten percent of population. In the middle of economic crisis the buyers must have at least an income of 2200 Ron (in 2009, 1 Euro=4,25 Ron) per month (30 000 Euros credit) to pay back a 756 Ron debt.

The interesting thing here is the paradigm, again, in which The First Home project were designed, and the social norm behind. The idea is *to buy* a home, as the core of the culture of ownership represents. No social housing, no legal framework for the right of the tenants, no stimulations to establish a renting system. Practically the Government reproduces the inefficient cultural norm. Nevertheless, the project is not functioning yet...

Conclusion

More authors conceive the housing-privatization as a gift given from the part of the state as a “compensation” changing the status of the residents (renters during communism), giving them “free reside possibility” (Budisteanu, 2000, Remmert-Hegedüs-Tosics, 2001;). Meanwhile this conformed to the expectations after the change of regime, which conceived the market policy not only the most effective, but also the only appropriate and expectable way (Ferge 1997: 24).

In our opinion the causes and consequences of the mass housing privatization are more complex. At the time period right after the change of regime, the privatization was good not only for the “gifted” citizens, but also for the state. The state assigned to the residents the burden of administration of these blocks which otherwise would have taken significant part of the not really rich budget. I would say that the state transferred for low money the responsibility of administra-

tion of these low quality buildings. Along with this generated long-term structural problems, this supersedes the capacity of the owners.

The reasons for the unmanageability of the block of flats are several: it has physical, social, political and urban projection. First the badly designed and bad quality buildings have disused infrastructure, and high density of residents. The public spaces around them are neglected. Secondly the sense of community, which can gather the people for the resolution of common identity and goals, is missing. With the increasing level of social inequality the society has come to level of atomization, and the former neighborhoods laying on solidarity ceased to exist. (Troc, 2003). Meanwhile the housing issue is a latent social problem (Merton, 2002), for neither the society nor the politics discuss about it as a problem. This way the political actors are not interested in resolving this topic. There is not expressed a political or social need for such architectural and urban solutions which could make these buildings viable.

It is not easy to find a solution to this situation. It will not be sufficient, for example, to pass a law on blocks of flats, as it is almost certain that its regulations will – in order to enhance co-operation – fall into conflict with the general political and legal protection of the individual decision-making rights of owners. It is not even easy to find a proper system of state financial support for the maintenance of common parts of privatized multi-family buildings, as any subsidies are immediately criticized by those people who were unable to participate in housing privatizations, i.e. those who were – in other words – excluded from the huge ‘gift’ made by the state in the process of give-away privatizations (Remmert-Hegedüs-Tosics, 2001).

The cultural element of the equation is also important. The culture of ownership enforces the inequality between owners and renters, and constitutes serious challenges and troubles for the younger generation.

The main challenge in of Romania is to find solutions to housing problems in highly privatized housing systems with a high share of poor households. The main problem is not a shortage of housing *per se* but, on the one hand, deferred maintenance and the low infrastructure level of the existing stock, and, on the other hand, the lack of any social safety net measures to protect families living in owner-occupied multi-family housing or as renters.

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