

Favoured subjects. The myth of the Middle Class and the imaginary of Cluj IT

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ABSTRACT

Romanian IT professionals are marketized as young, highly skilled, and full of potential individuals. However, there is a contradiction in their image. In the discourse of international outsourcing, they are presented as cheap labour, while on the national and local level they are considered high earners. Under the privilege of income tax exemption, the IT sector is continuously growing and attracting labour, providing well-paying entry-level jobs and bringing in foreign capital. At the same time, on a symbolic level, it also developed a reputation as a facilitator of social ascension and of importer of European ideas. In this paper I aim to examine what drives people towards professional reorientation to IT. How is the idea of the middle class being used? What is the imaginary that makes people take on the risky and arduous road of re-professionalization and what are its consequences?

Keywords: IT sector, re-professionalization, Cluj-Napoca, middle class, neoliberalism, imaginary

Introduction¹

“The well-paying jobs are in this field [IT], we all know that through education we can have solutions to individual and societal problems – the way out of poverty, the way towards a better salary is through education.”

(Emil Boc, cited in Preda 2022).²

1 This article is an edited and supplemented version of Chapter 3 of my master's thesis, titled “*This job saved me*”: *The Subjectivity and Imaginary of Cluj IT*, defended at the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, at the Central European University.

2 Original in Romanian. All translations are mine.

The average wage of a person working in the information technology (IT) service sector³ in Romania is more than twice as much as the national average wage, making the industry rank the highest in the country (INS 2023, 1). Represented by 22 thousand workers (Petrovici–Mare 2020, 51), the IT sector of Cluj-Napoca (hereafter, Cluj) is especially large and dominant, both from an economic and a social point of view. As any post-socialist city transitioning from a post-industrial to a service-based economy, Cluj has been intensively privatising and repurposing its infrastructure, while its labour force is getting refashioned as well (Mateescu 2022). The IT sector became the strongest sector in the city, having gained momentum in the 2000s but continuously growing and attracting labour ever since (Ionescu-Heroiu et al. 2013). By providing good wages and developing its very own “informal” educational system,⁴ but also employing many unskilled workers, it has built a reputation as a facilitator of socio-economic ascension.

While the sector and the phenomenon of professional reconversion has already been examined from the point of view of political economy (Guga–Spatari 2021) and through the lens of ethnography (Mateescu 2022), it can also be analysed as an outcome of shaping social imaginary. As sociology must also deal with “a sociology of construction of visions of the world” (Bourdieu 1989, 18), I aim to uncover what is the imaginary that is driving people’s decision towards professional reconversion to this specific field. What kind of image is being created about the sector? What drives people towards professional reorientation to IT? How are ideas associated with the middle class being used? What is the imaginary that makes people take on the risky and arduous road of re-professionalization? To answer these questions, I will present my

3 For this paper, I am primarily taking Guga and Spatari’s (2021) definition of *IT* as an umbrella term for the categories “Information technology service activities” and “IT service activities”. In the classification of Romanian Nomenclature of Economic Activities these jobs fall under divisions 62 and 63. However, due to a lack of precise data, in some cases I reference statistics dealing with more broad definitions, too.

4 To deliver a constant flow of labour, a couple of IT schools have appeared in the city, offering courses that in the duration of a few months promise to teach the fundamentals for getting a job in various fields within IT. Paula Buta, in her thesis about one of the biggest IT schools present in the city, with programs running across Romania, provides an overview of the demographic data of students who enrolled in 2016. Out of the 2185 candidates that enrolled nation-wide, between 1st of May 2014 and 1st of May 2016, the biggest proportion was between 26–30 years old (850 persons), followed by the age group 31–35 (601 persons). 61,60% were males, 38,39% being female. At the moment of enrollment, 66,20% of students were employed, 11,20% were students in formal education, and 9,60% were self-employed, leaving the remaining 13,00% as unemployed. As of fields of origin, the most prominent (31,8%) group was coming from a technical field, followed by finance and banking (10,60%), and services, business/management, marketing/advertising/PR, construction, education and others, all being below 10% (Buta 2017, 19–22).

empirical findings and provide relevant concepts from the literature to build my argument.

In April of 2023, I interviewed 19 workers of the sector who all share the experience of professional reconversion, meaning either having gained higher education in an unrelated field, and/or having worked in non-IT jobs previously. At the time of interviewing, one interlocutor had a nontechnical job, while all the others were in technical positions, working either as software testers, software developers, web developers, DevOps engineers, or in tech support positions. By conducting semi-structured in-depth life-history interviews, I aimed to get an understanding of my interlocutors' professional and educational background, their class positionality and original aspirations, as well as their narrative of why they pursued professional reorientation, what trajectory they took within IT, and how they view their future. To protect their identity, I gave them pseudonyms, eliminated the names of the companies they work for, and all other information that might lead to identifying them. In addition to interviewing, to understand the broader discourses, I also engaged in limited semi-systematic browsing of LinkedIn and social media pages of IT companies and schools, as well as media statements of the municipality of Cluj.

In my master's thesis (Gondos 2023) I argue that the constituting elements of the imaginary of IT are threefold: the ideologies of technological solutionism (Morozov 2013), zombie socialism (Chelcea–Druță 2016) and the myth of the middle class (Weiss 2019) are synergically contributing to it. In this paper I elaborate on the aspect of middle-classness, building on the newer literature theorising the myth of the middle class, and expanding on the consumption patterns attached to working in the IT sector, together with the ambiguous flexible stability and its associated lifestyle that my interlocutors seek in their new profession. I explain how the promise of social mobility through re-professionalization is feeding into a myth of meritocracy. Finally, I argue that in addition to a locally established middle class position, my interlocutors also share a positionality that is assumed on a global scale, in accordance with their place in the global value chain of outsourced digital labour. This understanding of a global self-positioning is reinforcing the “catching up” ideology (Böröcz 2012), which in turn facilitates the appropriation of neoliberal subjectivities. Ultimately, I aim to show that it is a facet of neoliberal governance to overemphasise the importance of one sector in providing well-paying jobs, as a way to outsource social functions onto the market. Creating an illusion of social mobility reinforces the myth of meritocracy and individualises the struggle for a decent life, while reproducing social inequalities.

Neoliberalism, transnational migration and outsourcing

For my primary framework, I situate my argument in the literature tackling neoliberal capitalism as a political economic regime. From this approach, scholars have coined neoliberalism as a system of upward redistribution, a solidification of capitalist power against worker solidarity, with the state as an ally in safeguarding private property and fostering free market activity (Harvey 2007). While a common feature of neoliberalism is economic redistribution in favour of capital, actively intensifying uneven development (Brenner–Theodore 2002, 352), scholars have argued that post-socialist states are prone to a particularly radical form of this, due to their anti-communist stances (Kofti 2016), meaning a general suspicion towards social functions of the state (Chelcea–Druță 2016).

Cornel Ban (2016) shows that in the case of Romania, neoliberalism did not immediately bloom right after the fall of state socialism. However, once it started to nestle in, it quickly manifested in the state disembedding the economy, favouring market rationality while disregarding social cohesion. Amid a massive wave of deindustrialization throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the state engaged in aggressive privatisation and liberalisation processes, leading to a society-wide state of precarity. The result of this was the biggest migration wave of the period within the EU, involving more than one-third of the country's labour force. Working abroad became a safety valve for extreme social dislocations, and through the remittance flows, migration solidified and became part of the very structure of the Romanian welfare system (Ban 2016, 66–68). As sociologist Dana Domșodi puts it, the country started “exporting its social contradictions” (Mateescu 2022, 245). However, despite the uniqueness of scale in Romania's case, this tendency itself fits nicely into a global trend of international migration becoming an attempt in trying to even out inequalities and reduce poverty (Boatcă 2016; Milanovic 2011), while through the process of neoliberalization, the state is changing its role from the caretaker of people to the supporter of the market (Harvey 2007). This is an important idea for the purposes of this article, since re-professionalization to IT is commonly framed as possessing some of the same functions as migration.

Looking at professional reconversion to IT through the lens provided by the transnational migration literature can bring important insights, considering there are many similarities between the two phenomena. First and foremost, both promise wages set to a Western European standard to be spent in the local Romanian market, creating economic advantages for those implicated. Second, the phenomenon of “brain drain” can be observed in both cases, meaning a flow of highly educated populations to new contexts, leaving a shortage of skilled labour in their original environment. While in the classic sense “brain drain” refers to individuals physically emigrating in search of a better livelihood, changing careers to IT is often discussed within the same framework:

“Here in Transylvania, or in Romania, basically [...] it is for sure the case that whoever was good for something either emigrated or became an IT developer” (Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35).⁵ At the same time, neither migration nor career reorientation are merely economically driven. One specific socio-cultural element prevalent in the post-socialist semi-periphery, shared by both of these processes, is an ideology of “catching up” (Böröcz 2012). This manifests in imagining the goals of both individual self-improvement and state governance in acquiring the values and life conditions attributed to the “West.” The positive hero of this discourse becomes the character of the creative, ambitious, self-developing, self-disciplined subject (Zincă 2011; Petrovici 2012; Mihály 2015; Simionca 2016; Petrovici–Deneva–Faje 2020), who brings forward the ethical project of capitalism (Szabó 2016; Troc 2019).

It is in line with this ideology that there exists a tendency of post-socialist neoliberal states to favour the support of a few selected areas of development that are associated with “Europeanization” (Chelcea–Druță 2016). I argue that one, if not the most favoured such area in Romania is the IT sector, making IT workers “the favourite subjects” (Crăciun–Lipan 2020, 426) of the state and especially of the local government of Cluj.

IT in Romania and in Cluj

Cluj is really supporting the IT sector. The city itself supports it a lot.

/But how?/

I don’t know [...] this is the consensus, that they are propping IT. But maybe it’s just that everyone is telling themselves this, and that makes them feel better.

(Szabolcs, developer, former seasonal worker, 32)

Romanian IT professionals are marketized both in national media and on international outsourcing platforms as young, highly skilled, and full of potential individuals (Herman 2011). The difference between the two discourses, however, is that in the international discussion, they are presented as cheap workers, while on the national and local level they are considered high earners.

5 This remark on the other hand also highlights an important difference between transnational migration and the re-professionalization to IT, namely the socio-economic background of people turning to these alternatives. While migrant workers primarily provide blue collar labour (Ailincăi 2016), the masses that change careers to IT are mostly highly educated (Buta 2017). However, there is a significant overlap between the two groups. Just in my – limited-sized – subject group, four people out of twenty-one have had seasonal jobs abroad before starting their career in IT.

The average net salary of an employee working in IT in Romania reached 10478 RON in May of 2023 (INS 2023). In the context of the average monthly net wage for the same month being 4543 RON (INS 2023), these statistics do create wide public interest. At the same time, since most IT professionals in the country work in outsourcing, we also have to take a look at the other side of their labour relation and see their positionality in the global labour market. As addressed by companies offering outsourcing consultation services, Eastern European cities such as Cluj are a good choice for Western capital because they “provide a great opportunity to tap into a pool of highly qualified individuals, at lower costs, at a nearby location” (Andras 2017). Indeed, the average hourly cost of a Romanian IT&C⁶ employee in 2019 was 14.3 euro – providing the second-lowest figure in the European Union for the sector (Guga–Spatari 2021, 36). What enables and even facilitates this contradiction is an interplay of national and local policies – and imaginaries.

In 2001, a government ordinance came into force providing exemption from payment of income tax for individuals engaged in computer programming activities. Apart from minor alterations to the ordinance, it remained in force ever since and facilitated an almost continuous growth of salaries within the field (Guga–Spatari 2021, 32). While the public attitude towards the exemption slowly transformed from outrage to neutrality, employees of the sector started to perceive it as an “inalienable and vested right,” justified by the moral and economic argumentation stating IT as the leading sector of the country (Guga–Spatari 2021, 35). This understanding is still prominent, despite the losses the exemption creates in the country’s economy, as highlighted by a recent report of the World Bank (Roman 2023). In the case of Cluj, the nation-wide support of the IT sector also aligns with the municipality’s own focus on technology and innovation, as part of building its brand as a smart city. As the mayor of the city, Emil Boc emphasised in a recent conference of the American Chamber of Commerce in Cluj: “Romanian authorities should not »touch« the field of technology for 20 years” (Reştea 2022).

It should be pointed out however that the future withdrawal of the tax exemption would not necessarily affect labour cost as much as it would affect workers’ net salaries, so its preservation does not support the sector in a direct, economic sense. Rather, it provides an aura of exceptionality and makes IT work extraordinarily desirable for prospective workers. Guga and Spatari point out that one of the main arguments present in the public discourse in favour of the tax exemption is in fact the stimulation of the local consumption of IT workers. It is argued that if there is a high earning sector that spends its money locally, then other sectors will also benefit – indirectly – from perpetuating the tax exemption. Another popular framing criticised by the authors is that IT professionals should

6 IT&C refers to a wider category of economic activities under the NACE section “Information and Communications”, including non-related fields such as book publishing, film production, television, radio, and other telecommunication services.

be awarded with their exemption-fueled higher wages because of their outstanding productivity (Guga–Spatari 2021, 36). I would argue that such favouritism can be understood as a manifestation of the tendency of post-socialist neoliberal states to endorse a few selected areas of development as outlined by Chelcea and Druță previously.

A final reason why it is beneficial and profitable for the state to support a specific sector is that the idea of the IT sector providing enough jobs and wages for those motivated enough to learn creates an allegedly secure path for social mobility, seemingly solving social inequality. As the mayor of Cluj framed it, since well-paying jobs exist in the IT sector, it is merely a question of individual willingness and education to solve economic disadvantage (Preda 2022), hence it is no longer considered to be the responsibility of governance.

Although economists contend that Cluj “has succeeded in managing a transition from a predominantly manufacturing town to a city with a strong and balanced economic mix” (Ionescu-Heroiu et al. 2013, 122), the general conception of working possibilities discussed in everyday conversations in the city under examination – Cluj – is, in fact, a reduced view of either leaving the country for seasonal work in the West or re-professionalizing to IT. As an IT worker with a graduate degree in translation studies voiced it poignantly in Mateescu’s research, “I don’t know what I would have done after graduation, if not for the IT corporations. Probably picking strawberries in Spain.” (Mateescu 2022, 244). My interlocutors looking for jobs during the last 10 years have also experienced Cluj as a “mono-industrial” city for IT (Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy). “I didn’t feel like I had many options”, said Kinga, a tech support worker with an MA in Humanities.

“Bezzeg the IT-ists...” – What makes IT workers middle-class?

As a social media post of a Hungarian IT school based in Cluj states: “One of the best future-proof investments: learn how to code! Join our Cluj-based course held in Hungarian if you too seek knowledge and a profession that is marketable.”⁷ On the picture accompanying the text it says “Bezzeg the IT-ists...”⁸ *Bezzeg* is an expression mostly used in spoken Hungarian that conveys a feeling of envy combined with resentment and moral judgement. Voicing an opinion about the IT sector in an everyday conversation in Cluj so often starts with *bezzeg* that it became unnecessary to even end the sentence. It instantly evokes the high wages, the easy life, and the “pamperedness” (Mateescu 2022) of IT workers, as perceived by non-IT people.

7 Original in Hungarian: “Az egyik legjobb jövő-álló befektetés: tanulj programozni! Csatlakozz a kolozsvári, magyar nyelvű képzésünkhöz, ha te is piacképes tudásra és szakmára vágysz.”

8 Original in Hungarian: “Bezzeg az IT-sok...”.

IT schools, the institutions that feed off these exact emotions, instrumentalize this already existing discourse for their marketing purposes, while, at the same time, they also reproduce it. The message of this social media post is clear: if you re-professionalize – with our help – and start a career in IT, you can join the privileged group, the object of envy, and you will earn more than you do now. In addition, the caption of the post places this assumption in an investment language, emphasising not just the possibility of quick ascension, but a promised long-term profitability and stability provided by skills that will stay relevant in the labour market – an understanding that my interlocutors also share. “There was a time when – I think I also felt this when I was thinking about starting – that I felt envy towards these people, because it’s a very different sum, what they bring home every month” (Dániel, developer, MA in Music, 33).

In addition to monetary remuneration, working in IT also bears an attributed prestige, providing a second aspect of middle-class positionality. Passion, intellect, problem-solving skills and talent are topoi producing the high status of tech jobs. A manifestation of the institutionalisation of this idea is the fact that HR departments now have “Talent Recruiters” looking for and attracting possible applicants for open positions. Klára, former secretary, after completing a course in testing, was approached through LinkedIn by such a recruiter. Not having to look for a job, instead the job finding her, gave a sense of accomplishment and reassurance. Especially since her initial motive for changing her career was that her previous job as a secretary, while providing stability and financial safety, left her with a sense of “lacking... a lack of using my brain, I didn’t stimulate it.” (Klára, tester, BSc in food engineering, 43). For Ioana, former accountant, similarly, changing to IT “wasn’t a decision of financial nature. It was instead of intellectual nature.”

The third aspect that constitutes the middle-classness of IT work is the consumption imaginary that is built around it. The “IT worker” is produced as “a rare (if not the only) profile that aligns with the socio-economic desires” of the general public (Guga-Spatari 2021, 3). In the public’s eye, this turns IT into a bubble, that provides an alternative, detached, pampered way of living (Mateescu 2022).

Well, the elite of the IT is not living in the real world. They don’t know what kind of material difficulties a common Romanian citizen has. I saw this, I remember, when we were doing the catering business, that they receive a lot of free *shit*,⁹ you know, events, food, and so on and so on. And they are not aware, they don’t value the services they get, that no one else in other fields get.

9 Italics marks words that the interviewees themselves said in English, in the context of a discussion otherwise held either in Hungarian or Romanian.

(Viktor, tester, former chef, 31)

The final aspect of the modern middle-class lifestyle that IT supposedly allows one to lead is a combination of flexibility and stability. Scholars of the post-socialist block argue that after the fall of state socialism, with the arrival of corporate capitalism, workers had to start developing new personas, interiorizing the “doctrines of flexibility” (Dunn 2004, 7; Chelcea 2014, 38). Most of my interlocutors being in their late 20s or early 30s are socialised with this post-Fordist idea of work, an “insecurity culture” (Pugh 2015) normalising flexible working hours, project-based employment or external contracting, and a boundaryless perspective on their career (Greenhaus et al. 2008).

Like many platform workers (Vallas–Schor 2020), the digital workers I interviewed also seek freedom and flexibility in work. As Csanád, 33, a developer said, “I have always been looking for freedom, freedom on the level of time, or money-wise, or I don’t know, generally.” Flexibility is so central, that it changes the way Balázs, 30, a developer and musician, even thinks about work. Having experience as a call centre operator, he now resents the idea of a nine-to-five job, saying “I realised that the only way I can work is if I don’t work.” Márk, 29, developer and former actor, similarly framed the time-sheet at his previous workplace as a remnant of socialism, and welcomed the flexible working hours that his current employer provides: in IT he can work when feeling productive, and can go home or make use of the PlayStation available at the office when feeling tired.

On the other hand, unlike in the case of platform work, being employed by one of the big IT companies of Cluj also means stability, predictability and reliability for my interlocutors. However, under these circumstances, stability gets defined in relational terms. Compared to seasonal work abroad, working in IT means having a job throughout the year. Compared to taking translating gigs on a platform, it means social benefits and a reliable constant workload. Compared to a career in the entertainment industry, it means safety if a pandemic hits and communal gatherings are prohibited. Compared to being a lawyer, it means a clear career trajectory and an assurance of progress. Szabolcs, 32, developer, who has worked abroad on and off for the last 10 years even frames starting a career in IT as “the new beginning of his life”, providing the stability he never knew he needed. In contrast to Szabolcs, Kinga did feel a lack of stability in her life, feeling like a loser for not being able to sustain herself, even with her parents providing an apartment for her.

The stability, that really was missing before. From this point of view, especially back then, I felt like this *job* saved me, a bit, but at the same time probably any other *job* would have saved me, if it was stable.

(Kinga, tech support, MA in Humanities, 33)

The stability she is emphasising here can also be understood regarding social status reproduction. While her parents were able to afford granting her an apartment in the city, with her humanities degree she couldn't secure a job that would keep her in a middle-class position, economically speaking.

While my interlocutors mostly highlighted the stability aspect of their new profession, the literature emphasises its precarious nature. The “cybertariat” (Huws 2014) or cyber-proletariat (Dyer-Witheford 2015) is generally understood as the sufferer of the ultimate neoliberalization of labour conditions, its labour being “footloose”, its occupational identities being destroyed, forced to remain permanently flexible (Huws 2014). In accordance with this idea, my interlocutors reported having experienced unexpected layoffs, being pushed around between projects or forced to change positions as well as employers frequently.

And then the project became more and more stressful, it was running out of money, we had to be more productive, and then they saw that I'm only a junior, and that they need someone more experienced. And they were looking for another project for me, to be placed into. [...] Then the guy called me one day and said, took a deep breath, »The thing is, we have to fire you because there's no suitable project for you.«

(Balázs, developer, musician, 30)

And then they hired us [...] and we worked for 8 months in total, because the new project didn't please the first client, and they closed the whole Romanian branch. That was interesting. They called me before Christmas, saying, well, this didn't work out.

(Csanád, developer, BA in Mathematics, 33)

The workers I interviewed face unpredictability due to the tendency of tech companies to change locations, and thus workforce, habitually. While locally based companies have to compete with a global market that is now available to most IT professionals through the popularisation of the home-office, they are going to great lengths to provide a job environment that stays attractive to the workers. At the same time, they are also constantly pursuing lower labour costs and higher profit. Mechanisms of what scholars describe as capital's will to constantly relocate in search for cheap labour (e.g. Harvey 1975; Henderson 2004), or the “footlooseness” of labour in a digital age (Huws 2014) are known to some of my interlocutors. Csanád for example framed his observation and indirect worries about losing his job due to IT companies moving further away from Romania in a way that blames the flow of unskilled labourers joining the sector, “watering down” the prestige of Cluj IT.

There are places, where they hire people, cause there's money for it, but they don't put out quality work. And this is a problem, because sooner or later if the companies get saturated with people like these... if someone says, "an IT company from Cluj", that won't mean high quality anymore. And then they will move away. Cause, I don't know, in Bulgaria it's cheaper.

(Csanád, developer, BA in Mathematics, 33)

However, the professionals I interviewed ultimately consider working in IT a safe path. As Csaba traces back the roots of this understanding, "everyone's been told, right, in the late 80s, early 90s [...] that technology is the future, you should understand and process this, and choose your job or school according to this." (Csaba, software tester, MA in Philosophy, 35). In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the IT sector in Romania stayed relatively stable, buttressing the idea that tech jobs are reliable. Zalán, DJ and former project manager at a big regional company reconsidered his aspirations of becoming a full-time entrepreneur in entertainment services during the lockdown, and instead started learning to code. When asked if he sees IT as a firm field, he half-jokingly replied "Well, yes, for quite a few more years, until I retire for sure, yes. Then let's hope AI doesn't take over" (Zalán, developer, former project manager, 26).

This ambiguity between stability and precarity in IT work means an altered understanding of the middle-class positionality: an acceptance of its volatility in the context of a global labour market and continuous technological development. This vulnerability makes both scholars (Mateescu 2022; Guga-Spatari 2021) and IT bloggers (McGrath 2016; Vijoli 2018) contemplate whether Cluj IT will be able to upkeep its growth and solidify in the long run.

The "myth of the middle class"

In her book *We Have Never Been Middle Class*, Hadas Weiss argues that the adjective *middle-class* is constructed to mean "normal", a state supposedly attainable by anyone, devoid of any kind of group-antagonism (Weiss 2019, 22). In the anti-communist post-socialist context, while the concept of class has been eradicated from the public discourse, the "middle class" remains a popular notion, utilised in a normative way. The "myth of the middle class" has been mobilised in post-socialist countries as "a benign category, free of implications of exploitation and social struggle." (Ost 2015, 614) As Crăciun and Lipan argue, such a notion of a middle class captures political potentials and turns them into consumption patterns. Aspirations of the middle class are presented as inherently ethical, and the middle class itself takes on the role of "the favourite subject" (Crăciun-Lipan 2020, 426) of neoliberalism. The

implicit, or sometimes even explicit, conclusion of this discourse is that the state should support and reward those doing well in the market, while it should punish those not fit to be successful (Crăciun–Lipan 2020). This shows the same logic of upwards redistribution with an ideological touch that Chelcea and Druță point out to be a characteristic of post-socialist neoliberal states (Chelcea–Druță 2016).

Márk Áron Éber in his book about the class structure of the Hungarian society argues that the middle class is an illusion that is used to construct the myth that under capitalism, the ideal lifestyle can be achieved by anyone who is willing to work hard (Éber 2020). However, it is harder and harder to see how the social ascension that is promoted by this idea can be achieved. As discussed in recent literature on social mobility, education has lost its potential for facilitating it (Durst–Huszár 2022, 5). “If the credentials we get from school and university ever were entry tickets to gainful employment, they certainly no longer are.” (Weiss 2019, 102).

While the phenomenon of mass re-professionalization to IT itself shows the failure of formal educational institutions to bestow young people with professions that lead to stable, well providing jobs – to ascend or to stay in the so-called middle class – it is also reproducing the idea that achieving a decent livelihood is a matter of willingness to adapt, smartness to invest and thus, individual responsibility. While social mobility is generally considered desirable within a society, it is also a marker and solidifier of broader socio-economic inequalities. By suggesting that “whatever your social position at birth, society ought to offer enough opportunity and mobility for »talent«, when combined with »effort«, to »rise to the top«” (Durst–Huszár 2022, 1), the concept of social mobility is putting emphasis on individual effort. That in turn reinforces the myth of meritocracy, nurturing the acceptance of inequalities.

Representing the strata of society that can afford a “good life” (Crăciun–Lipan 2020), the middle class has been produced and is being produced through the convergence of personal aspirations and national and transnational capital interest, “as part of regional and global processes associated with neoliberal politics” (Troc 2019, 89). In his analysis of the suburbanized middle class of Cluj, Gabriel Troc argues that the global capital flow, in search of possibilities of profit maximisation, is creating “opportunities for certain strata of workers to live and define themselves as successful social groups” (Troc 2019, 90). Two main facets of this process on the level of urban development are the transformation of the housing market for the construction of American style suburbs (Troc 2019), and the gentrification of the inner city, making space for centres of consumption, ready to serve and generate the needs of the middle class (Petrovici–Faje 2019).

In this context, Gabriel Troc contends that homeownership is also a part of the middle-class imaginary. While it is rooted in legitimate desires for stability, it is also exploited and inflated by Western capitalist

investors in the city (Troc 2019). While increasing housing prices are a problem in most European cities, in the case of Cluj,¹⁰ this wider tendency is locally being framed as a consequence of the emerging IT sector and the relatively high wages it provides. Thus, both the source of and the solution to this inequality is identified to be the IT sector.

/And what do you think about Cluj focusing so much on IT?/

I think it's bad for the city, in the long run.

/How come?/

The prices skyrocketed because of it, especially talking about housing. Both for rent, and if you want to buy an apartment. There will be such a huge gap between, there already is, but it will get even bigger I think, between the IT and the non-IT world, that the non-IT world soon cannot afford to go out in the city.

(Viktor, tester, former chef, 31)

While Viktor contends that paying rent is in itself a struggle for those working in less profitable fields, his main motivation for joining the IT sector was the pursuit of homeownership. He voices a discrepancy between an expected life-trajectory and the reality of living in a present-day housing market, but frames it in an individualised way, a personal struggle, for which joining the sector was the solution, even if it means temporarily giving up on the pursuit of his passion of advancing as a chef.

In my case, there is a big conflict between, you know, when you're a kid, you imagine where you will be when you're thirty, and where you are in fact. And Cluj is quite an expensive city. And for you to progress, with your own little personal projects, I'm thinking about material things, to own a house and stuff...

(Viktor, tester, former chef, 31)

Multiple IT professionals highlighted however that, while they are aware of their privileged local positionality in terms of buying power, their wages acquired through outsourcing jobs will only enable them to either buy a house that is “not very beautiful” (Csaba, developer, BA in Mathematics, 33) or that is acquired through a mortgage, having to “keep paying the bank until I turn 70” (Balázs, developer, musician, 30). To avoid this, Balázs's aspirations are to find a job at a tech giant like Google or Facebook – get out of the indirectness of outsourcing and move one step further up on the virtual ladder. Since in order to do

10 The fact that the minimum wage does not allow inhabitants of Cluj to pay for rent in decent living conditions has been at the centre of the struggles of the city's housing movement for years now (Vincze–Liță 2021; Căși sociale ACUM! 2021).

that, he no longer has to physically move abroad, this shows that while in the public discourse it is considered to be homogeneous, the sector itself shows signs of inner stratification, intersecting and contrasting local class positions and global value chain positionalities.

Social and economic remittances

“I have to thank you for bringing innovation and modernity to Cluj [...] for the fact that you contributed to the creation of the unique *vibe* that this city has, based on innovation, based on a quality of life, based on a capacity to work and to be together and to construct a tolerant, European community.”

Emil Boc, Mayor of Cluj, addressing the representatives of a large IT company on the tenth anniversary of their arrival to the city (Preda 2022)

The mayor of Cluj thanking an IT company for importing European values and vibes is an epitome of the convergence of the myth of the middle class with the post-socialist discourse. In his framing, multinational tech companies directly contribute to a supposed heightened quality of life and a more tolerant, “European” attitude in the city.

Similarly, for Csaba, Philosophy graduate and tester, the lifestyle associated with working in a corporation is not simply a consequence of the material conditions provided by a high earning job, but a cultural coping mechanism learnt from the West to substitute having a meaningful job. While he was growing increasingly disenchanted by his tech job, he started picking up the hobbies he had previously associated with Westerners.

So, listen to me, while all this happened, I started swimming, I started reading, I started drinking, I started writing. Heavens! So, you know, in the late 90s we were watching TV and saw how many things Westerners do. They do jogging... Well, this is why! [...] Everyone is becoming marathonists, triathlonists now. Everyone is trying to do something that doesn't require thinking, but still validates that they are good for something.

(Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35)

Csaba understands lifestyle changes as a consequence of a combination of economic and cultural factors. He sees the changes in his own habits and leisure time activities as a consequence of acquiring what he sees as “Western culture”, which in turn was a consequence of having a job

that provides high remuneration but low levels of meaningfulness. To provide further insights into this argumentation, I again turn to the scholarship about transnational migration. Scholars who engaged with the notion of “social and economic remittances” (e.g. Kelly 2020; Levitt 1998) argue that by transferring money from the destination countries to their countries of origin, migrants are also sending home values and concepts, creating a flow of ideas with its direction opposite to the flow of labour. Krisztina Németh (2022) similarly makes the case that returning migrants come home with a changed habitus, resulting in altered values and thus ways of consumption. This process is not free of ideological implications. Polina Manolova characterises the socially mobile arriving to the middle class in Bulgaria as having acquired a feeling of entitlement for living a “good life” due to their educational background, entrepreneurial spirit, European values and overall “Western mentality”. However, she argues that many feel that to live a “good life” constructed this way, they must migrate to a “civilised” Western society (Manolova 2020). Relocation on the other hand comes with several detriments, among them is a loss of social capital accumulated in the original social context. But this is where working in outsourcing resolves a conflict that migration cannot. What it makes possible is to get the Western wages and ideas in the context of the work life, without actual physical mobility. Creating the IT sector’s image as a bubble (Mateescu 2022) serves the purpose of producing a place where “Western” ideas can flourish and get implemented, enabling people to live the “good life”, while staying at home.

A final aspect of contextualising consumption patterns and lifestyle choices in the framing of Western vs. non-Western countries is voiced both by Csaba and Dániel. They both expressed an understanding of Romania not being ready for such a socio-cultural leap that the IT sector is providing. Csaba contends that “Central-Eastern Europe is not ready for this”, “we are not culturally prepared” for an individualistic corporate lifestyle (Csaba, tester, MA in Philosophy, 35). On the other hand, Dániel, a developer, points to a discrepancy on the level of management of state funds. Compared to other countries where the economy is more balanced and embedded, and social spending is more defined, he sees the Romanian governance faulty for supporting the IT sector but letting the cultural field struggle.

What I feel like is that it’s quite outrageous how there is no other field – and again, I’m mostly thinking about art – that is this well supported. In a lot of other countries where IT is working, it is already sorted out, cause they know that they have to spend on it, and what is happening here is that theatres and theatrical companies are closing up.

(Dániel, developer, MA in Music, 33)

His remark shows a conflict between a classic meaning of middle classness and a neoliberal understanding of it. In the classical sense, the middle class would be the one to promote and support the artistic field, but what is happening in Cluj is the destruction of the cultural sphere in favour of technological development and capital accumulation. The situation that Dániel is referring to is exemplified by a symbolic event in the neoliberal transformation of the city. In March of 2022 the Paintbrush Factory, a well-established contemporary art space operating for 13 years, was shut down. This event was a culmination of a long process of degradation of the independent cultural scene of Cluj (Branîște 2022). What took over the space that became unaffordable to the cultural centre – is offices of IT companies. This brings us back to the other side of the sector's ambiguous status, being part of the creative destruction of the urban milieu both on an infrastructural and on a population level, as a facilitator of a “brain drain”. Having gone through these processes personally, despite the high status Dániel associates with working in tech and the benefits he draws from it, he also feels shame for being part of these transformations.

We have [an office], and, well, for someone who's very close to art, it is a pretty big... *shame*, to say it like that, that the [company's] Cluj headquarters is in the building of the former Paintbrush Factory. Pfff. And I have to work here? And not as an artist?

(Dániel, developer, MA in music, 33)

Besides a sense of injustice, Dániel also communicates a discrepancy between having a classic middle-class habitus that values art highly, and a neoliberal middle-class practice that is transforming the urban landscape, pushing non-profit fields out of the picture. As scholars have previously pointed out, neoliberal transformations have started guiding urban development. The inner city of Cluj already lost its function as a place for the reproduction of life, and instead became a place of consumption for the new middle class and of offices (Petrovici-Faje 2019). Starting in 2012, and increasingly after 2015 when the city won the title of European Youth Capital, the city's rebranding through “festivalization” began, meaning a refashioning of public spaces in order to host and attract more and more commercial festivals. Companies and politicians' interest in temporal outbursts of economic and social activities (i.e., festivals) were aligned with the local creatives – especially those working in IT (Țichindeleanu 2019). The city government became committed to creating an environment pleasing to the “creative classes” (Florida 2002). Growth and innovation-oriented buzzwords like “talent, technology, trust and tolerance” are the new focus of the discourse of the municipality, referring to no other than the IT sector (Boc 2019).

Conclusion

The post-socialist cities are great targets for digital services outsourcing, since they can provide cheap labour without great cultural and geographical distance from Western European companies. The municipality of Cluj has been tapping into this fact, building an image of a European and “smart” city, for the sake of being attractive to foreign direct investment. The IT sector is the poster child of both the country’s and the city’s government. On the one hand it is said to provide a supposedly sure way of social ascent or a way to remain within a decent socio-economic positionality for the individual, feeding the myth of the middle class. On the other hand, it symbolises technological progress and economic and cultural connections with the West.

In this paper I argued that the “myth of the middle class” is a constituting element of the “myth of IT”, adding a consumption imaginary and a normative lifestyle as a driving force to professional reconversion to IT. While being aware of their semi-peripheral positionality, the workers of the sector do reproduce the ideological discourse of having to “catch up” to the West by putting their own context in opposition to the countries where the products they develop are being sold. The myth of the middle class is contributing to this idea by setting up a normative view of the ideal lifestyle, associated with historically capitalist societies.

While the IT sector has some real impact on the local society, providing jobs and high wages, changing the urban landscape and driving up the cost of living, it is also discursively constructed as a means for social mobility. The “IT professional” stereotype fits into the broader image of the young, motivated, open minded emerging middle-class individual described by Chelcea and Druță, who is put in opposition to the post-socialist working classes (Chelcea–Druță 2016, 530).

Drawing a parallel between labour migration and professional reconversion helps us see how ideas and ideologies get transferred alongside the wages coming from the West, and how the consumption imaginary of the workers of the sector is being shaped by the benefits they get as well as the lifestyle their corporate job allows them to have. Unpacking the myth of the middle class makes it visible that, because of their advantageous socio-economic situation, IT professionals are seen as the protagonists of the local society, setting the terms and the prices of urban life.

It is in the interest of IT companies, the city and the state governance to create an image of IT that is associated with socio-economic ascension to have an answer for questions about inequality, while in fact catering to the interest of transnational capital. Just like how Romania has been exporting its social contradictions through facilitating labour emigration, now outsourcing is another way to do that. Outsourcing also reinforces a dependent development model and reproduces the semi-peripheric positionality, which in turn fosters a specific kind of

subjectivity that is always constituted in relation to the richer and more developed “West”. The IT sector being a selected field for state support is most prominently expressed by the tax exemption regarding income taxes of workers engaged in software creating activities. The arguments surrounding the tax exemption reinforce an idea of the sector that is legitimising a dependent development model, while effectively making IT workers “favoured subjects”, chosen engines of consumption.

The myth of the middle class on the one hand suggests an imaginary that sets standards for a “good life”: eating out, going on vacations, going to festivals, owning a home. On the other hand, it implies a promise, that anyone who’s working hard can achieve that. Both of these aspects are prevalent in the discourse surrounding IT, the professionals being one of the main targets of the city’s rebranding as a caterer for the “creative classes” and the myth of easy entry to the field and a straight trajectory to high earning jobs serves as a discursive tool for disregarding questions about social inequality. While the consumption imagery surrounding the middle class, such as house ownership, have a legitimate basis, they are also instrumentalized by investment capitalism. There are contradictory effects of the sector on the city that my interlocutors experience. Cluj is becoming an expensive city due to the very same logic that is promised to make it livable for the individual.

My interlocutors share an understanding of their value chain positionality, completing tasks that Westerners would not, for the same wage. They are able to lead comfortable lives on their salaries in the local context, however if they are fostering ideas about owning their housing, outsourcing is not enough for that, they have to consider changing to work for a tech giant, directly. Between stability and flexibility, working in IT means a possibility for moving into the city or moving out of it, of working whenever they feel the most productive but overworking when it is expected. They find stability in their employment contracts and a secured middle-class position. However, they fear their futures being hijacked by capital’s moving nature and the very same technological evolvments they help to create.

The case of Cluj is, in many regards, not special. Being an outsourcing heaven, a “smart city”, or even “the Silicon Valley” of something are not unique to it. However, the combination of neoliberal governance with anti-communist ideological undertones, and the glorification of the middle class, in the backdrop of a nation-wide migration issue makes it an interesting case of, and scale for, studying neoliberal transformations framed as technological innovation and development, forming neoliberal subjectivities and depoliticizing collective struggles. Understanding what makes a developing industry more than a provider of jobs and an attractor of foreign capital, and seeing how an imaginary is being created that has very materialistic consequences is, I think, useful for other contexts as well.

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