

PROFESSIONAL STRESS: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE ROMANIAN POST-COMMUNIST CONTEXT

Cornelia TOMESCU-DUMITRESCU*, Nicolae-Cătălin DINUCĂ**, Elena-Claudia DINUCĂ***

*“Constantin Brâncuși” University of Târgu-Jiu, Romania

**University of Craiova, Romania

***“Titu Maiorescu” University, Bucharest, Romania

elitomescu@gmail.com, catalindinuca@yahoo.com, claudia.dinuca@yahoo.com

Abstract: This paper explores the evolution and impact of professional stress in Romania following the fall of communism in 1989, a period marked by intense socio-economic transformation. Drawing on foundational occupational stress models—such as the Job Demand-Control model, the Effort-Reward Imbalance model, and the Conservation of Resources theory—the study combines a theoretical overview with a case study focused on Romania’s unique transition context. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a structured survey of 300 Romanian professionals and semi-structured interviews with 15 participants across key sectors, including healthcare, education, IT, and public administration. The results reveal that job insecurity, organizational restructuring, migration pressures, and institutional corruption are persistent drivers of workplace stress. Additionally, findings suggest that although awareness of mental health has increased in Romania, access to support systems remains limited. The study contributes to the broader understanding of professional stress in post-socialist societies and highlights the need for culturally and contextually adapted interventions in managing occupational well-being.

Keywords: professional stress, job insecurity, brain drain, economic transition, work-related burnout

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Professional stress has emerged as a significant concern in modern workplaces, particularly in contexts of rapid economic and social transformation. Defined as the physiological, emotional, and psychological strain experienced by individuals due to the demands of their job, professional stress can lead to burnout, anxiety, depression, and physical health problems. As a global issue, it has received considerable attention in both academic research and practical interventions aimed at improving worker well-being. However, the causes and

manifestations of professional stress can vary widely depending on the socio-economic and cultural environment in which it occurs.

Romania provides a unique case study in understanding the evolution of professional stress. Following the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, Romania underwent a dramatic political, economic, and cultural transformation. The transition from a centralized socialist economy to a market-driven system involved significant shifts in employment patterns, job security, workplace practices, and professional

identity. These changes inevitably influenced how workers in Romania experienced stress in their jobs.

Despite the country's progress in modernizing its economy and integrating with the European Union, issues such as economic instability, job insecurity, organizational corruption, and underdeveloped mental health support systems continue to affect professional life. As a result, understanding the sources and impact of professional stress in Romania offers crucial insights into how transitional economies deal with occupational health challenges.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

While research on professional stress has been extensive globally, studies focusing specifically on Romania—particularly in the context of its post-1990 transition—remain scarce. The professional stress experienced by workers in Romania is influenced by a unique set of factors, including the remnants of the communist-era work culture, the subsequent shift to a capitalist economy, and the growing challenges of globalization and EU integration. The absence of sufficient research on the intersection of these factors means that the full extent of professional stress in Romania is not well understood.

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the causes, manifestations, and coping mechanisms related to professional stress in Romania, with a particular focus on the period after 1990. By combining both theoretical frameworks and empirical research, this paper will explore how the transformation of the Romanian labor market and organizational structures has impacted worker stress. Furthermore, the study will examine sector-specific differences in the experience of professional stress and explore how the social, economic, and cultural shifts of the post-communist era have influenced the mental health of workers.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

- To explore the key sources and causes of professional stress in Romania after 1990.
- To analyze how the transition from a centralized socialist economy to a market-driven capitalist system has influenced professional stress.
- To examine sector-specific differences in the experience of professional stress (e.g., healthcare, education, IT, public administration).
- To evaluate the coping strategies adopted by Romanian professionals and assess the availability of institutional support systems for managing stress.
- To provide recommendations for improving occupational well-being and stress management practices in Romania.

1.4. Research Questions

To guide the exploration of these objectives, the following research questions have been formulated:

- What are the primary sources of professional stress for Romanian workers after 1990?
- How have Romania's economic and organizational transitions since 1990 shaped the experience of professional stress?
- What role do sector-specific factors (e.g., job demands, role expectations) play in the level of professional stress experienced in various industries in Romania?
- What coping mechanisms do Romanian workers utilize to manage work-related stress?
- To what extent do Romanian organizations and public institutions provide adequate support to mitigate professional stress?

1.5. Scope of the Study

The scope of this study focuses on Romanian professionals working in various sectors such as healthcare, education, information technology, and public administration. The study covers the period from 1990 to the present, analyzing how professional stress has evolved over time in response to Romania's socio-economic

transformation. The research draws on both **quantitative** data (survey responses) and **qualitative** data (interviews) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to stress and the ways in which workers cope.

Given the historical context of Romania's post-communist transition, this study places particular emphasis on understanding how the shift from a centrally planned to a market-driven economy has influenced workers' professional experiences. Additionally, the study acknowledges Romania's integration into the European Union in 2007, which introduced new economic pressures and expectations for Romanian workers.

1.6. Justification of the Study

Understanding professional stress in Romania is of paramount importance for several reasons. First, Romania's labor market is characterized by high levels of job insecurity, especially in the wake of privatization and the restructuring of state-owned enterprises in the 1990s. Second, with an increasing number of Romanian workers migrating abroad for better opportunities, those who remain are often subjected to heightened work demands and emotional burnout. Third, while awareness of mental health has grown, access to psychological support and occupational health resources remains limited, especially in rural areas. Finally, as Romania continues to integrate into the European Union, understanding how stress manifests in Romanian workplaces is vital for ensuring that the workforce remains competitive, healthy, and productive.

This study contributes to the broader literature on professional stress by providing a country-specific examination of how socio-economic transformation impacts workers' mental health and well-being. It also provides practical recommendations for policymakers and organizations seeking to address the pressing issue of professional stress in Romania.

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of professional stress has been studied extensively for over four decades, evolving alongside changes in workplace structures, economic climates, and employee expectations. This section reviews key theoretical models and highlights recent empirical findings that form the basis for understanding stress in the workplace.

2.1. Theoretical Models of Occupational Stress

2.1.1. The Job Demand-Control (JDC) Model

Developed by Robert Karasek (1979), the JDC model posits that workplace stress results from the interaction between **psychological job demands** (e.g., workload, time pressure) and **job control** (decision-making authority and skill use). According to the model, the highest stress levels occur in “high-strain” jobs—those with high demands and low control. Conversely, “active” jobs (high demands and high control) are seen as motivating and growth-enhancing.

This model has since been expanded into the **Job Demand-Control-Support (JDCS)** model, which incorporates **social support** from colleagues and supervisors as a moderating factor. Numerous studies have validated the JDCS model across various occupations, from healthcare and education to manufacturing and IT[1].

2.1.2. The Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) Model

Johannes Siegrist (1996) introduced this model, emphasizing the social reciprocity between effort and reward in the workplace. When employees invest high effort without receiving adequate rewards (e.g., salary, recognition, career advancement), it results in emotional distress and demotivation [2]. ERI is particularly relevant in hierarchical or insecure job environments, where power imbalances and performance pressures are high.

The model also highlights **overcommitment**—a personality trait

where individuals are excessively involved in work—as a vulnerability factor. Overcommitted employees are more prone to stress and burnout even in otherwise balanced job environments [3].

2.1.3. The Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Hobfoll's (1989) COR theory views stress as a reaction to the threat or loss of valuable resources, such as time, energy, self-esteem, and social support [4]. It diverges from models focused solely on job characteristics by emphasizing the **cumulative effect** of stress across personal and professional domains. A core concept is “resource caravans,” or clusters of interlinked resources, which, if disrupted (e.g., by job loss or family strain), can lead to spiraling stress and psychological decline [5].

This model is especially useful in explaining why stress can persist even after the initial stressor has been removed—due to ongoing resource depletion.

Given the study's focus on **multiple occupational sectors** (health care, IT, education, public administration) and the **post-communist Romanian context**, the **Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) Model** is particularly appropriate.

- It offers a **flexible structure** that can be adapted to each sector.
- It captures both **external stressors** (e.g., job insecurity, workload) and **internal resources** (e.g., resilience, motivation).
- It can be used with both **quantitative data (surveys)** and **qualitative insights (interviews or open-ended responses)**.

Example of Applying the JD-R Model to the Education Sector in Romania

In the Romanian education system, particularly in the decades following the fall of communism, teachers have faced a unique combination of stressors that make the **Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model** highly applicable. The **job demands** in this sector have been substantial, including excessive workloads, large class sizes, low pay, administrative overload, and

a constant pressure to adapt to changing curricula and educational reforms. In addition, the emotional labor involved in managing classrooms and addressing the psychosocial needs of students has contributed to elevated stress levels.

At the same time, the **job resources** available to teachers in Romania have often been limited. Many report low levels of institutional support, inadequate professional development opportunities, and poor infrastructural conditions, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, the societal status of the teaching profession has declined since the 1990s, leading to decreased motivation and job satisfaction.

Applying the JD-R model to this context helps to explain the prevalence of **burnout symptoms**, such as emotional exhaustion and disengagement, among Romanian educators. The imbalance between high demands and insufficient resources has a direct impact on teacher well-being, retention, and overall performance in the classroom.

In this research, the JD-R framework is used to structure the analysis of survey responses from education professionals, identifying key predictors of stress and potential protective factors. For example, the presence of **peer support** and **perceived autonomy** may buffer the negative effects of high demands, while a lack of recognition and poor career advancement prospects exacerbate stress-related outcomes.

2.2. Empirical Studies and Sector-Specific Findings

2.2.1. Healthcare Sector

Studies consistently show that nurses, doctors, and emergency responders face among the highest levels of occupational stress. Burnout among physicians is driven by emotional labor, long hours, patient volume, and administrative overload [6]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, front-line workers reported record levels of anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation [7].

2.2.2. Education Sector

Teachers often face conflicting demands, low autonomy, and behavioral issues in classrooms. A 2020 meta-analysis found that emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are widespread in education, often exacerbated by poor administrative support [8].

2.2.3. Tech and Remote Work

In the tech industry, long hours, innovation pressure, and frequent role shifts have led to a rise in burnout and attrition. Remote workers, while enjoying flexibility, report isolation, digital fatigue, and difficulties in separating work from personal life⁶. Studies show that even perceived monitoring by employers (e.g., webcam usage or activity tracking) can heighten stress levels [9].

2.3. Cross-Cultural Considerations

Cultural attitudes toward work, authority, and well-being play a major role in how stress is perceived and managed. In collectivist cultures (e.g., Japan, South Korea), employees may internalize stress more due to social harmony norms, leading to underreporting and delayed intervention [10]. Conversely, Western cultures may promote open discussion about burnout but often lack systemic responses to organizational stressors.

Recent research highlights that **universal models of stress must be adapted** to local socio-economic and cultural contexts. What constitutes "support" or "autonomy" varies significantly across regions and industries [11].

2.4. Modern Developments in Stress Research

Contemporary research has shifted toward **neuroscientific and biometric approaches**, using cortisol levels, heart rate variability, and fMRI scans to measure stress responses. Additionally, digital health tools (e.g., stress-monitoring wearables, AI-driven wellness apps) are being tested for early detection and intervention [12].

Scholars are also exploring **intersectionality**—how gender, race, age, and disability status influence stress

exposure and coping. For instance, women in leadership roles often report higher stress due to role conflict and organizational bias [13].

The literature on professional stress presents a rich tapestry of theories and empirical evidence. Foundational models like JDC, ERI, and COR remain highly relevant, while newer research sheds light on sector-specific stressors, cultural dimensions, and physiological mechanisms. Together, they provide a solid framework for understanding and addressing professional stress in a rapidly changing world.[14].

3. Causes of Professional Stress

3.1. Role Overload and Ambiguity

Professionals often face unrealistic workloads, multiple roles, or undefined responsibilities. This role overload is a direct stressor, especially when individuals feel they lack the time or resources to meet expectations [8]. Ambiguity around job roles can lead to confusion and anxiety, especially in matrix organizations where authority is not clearly delineated.

3.2. Lack of Autonomy

A lack of control over how and when work is done—especially in low to mid-level positions—is strongly associated with psychological strain [15]. Even highly qualified employees can experience distress when micromanaged or stripped of decision-making power.

3.3. Poor Interpersonal Relationships

Conflicts with colleagues, managers, or clients often generate emotional stress. A lack of support from supervisors or peers is a predictor of burnout [16]. Toxic work environments, characterized by bullying or exclusion, amplify stress levels dramatically.

3.4. Technological Pressure and Remote Work

The rise of digital communication has created a culture of constant availability. Many professionals report difficulty in disconnecting from work, especially in

remote work settings. This phenomenon, termed *techno-stress*, is exacerbated by digital overload, lack of boundaries, and surveillance practices [1].

3.5. Organizational Change and Job Insecurity

Restructuring, mergers, or shifts in leadership can create uncertainty and stress. Job insecurity, particularly in unstable

4. Consequences of Professional Stress

4.1. Individual-Level Effects

4.1.1. Psychological Impact

Chronic professional stress is linked to anxiety disorders, depression, and burnout—a state of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment [17].

4.1.2. Physical Health Risks

Studies show elevated cortisol levels, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases in individuals experiencing prolonged stress [2]. Sleep disorders, digestive issues, and lowered immune function are also common.

4.2. Organizational-Level Effects

4.2.1. Reduced Productivity and Engagement

Stress undermines concentration, motivation, and creativity. Employees under stress are less productive and more likely to make errors [18].

4.2.2. Absenteeism and Turnover

High stress leads to increased sick days, presenteeism (showing up but not functioning), and turnover, all of which are costly for organizations [4].

4.2.3. Reputational and Legal Risks

Failure to manage workplace stress can result in lawsuits, negative press, and a tarnished employer brand, particularly if it leads to mental health crises or suicide [19].

5. Coping Strategies and Interventions

5.1. Individual-Level Interventions

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT): Helps individuals reframe negative thought patterns and develop resilience [20].

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR): Practices such as meditation and yoga have been shown to reduce cortisol levels and improve focus [5].

Time and Task Management Training: Equips employees to prioritize tasks and avoid procrastination.

5.2. Organizational-Level Interventions

Job Redesign: Modifying job roles to increase autonomy and reduce unnecessary tasks is key to reducing stress [21].

Flexible Work Arrangements: Allowing remote work or compressed work weeks improves work-life balance [22].

Well-being Programs: On-site counseling, mental health days, and wellness initiatives signal that employee health is a priority.

Leadership Training: Managers should be trained in emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and supportive communication [23].

6. Case Study: Professional Stress in Romania after 1990

Following the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Romania entered a period of deep socio-economic transformation that drastically altered its labor market, professional identity, and organizational culture. These changes significantly influenced the emergence and nature of professional stress across all employment sectors.

6.1. Economic Liberalization and Job Insecurity

The transition to a market economy involved mass privatization, industrial restructuring, and the closure of unprofitable state-owned enterprises. Between 1990 and 2000, Romania experienced high unemployment rates and inflation, causing widespread **job insecurity**, a known trigger for occupational stress [24]. The psychological toll of uncertain employment conditions was particularly high among older workers who struggled to adapt to new skill requirements and job-seeking dynamics [25].

6.2. Changing Organizational Culture and Role Expectations

In the communist era, Romanian workplaces were rigidly hierarchical, bureaucratic, and predictable. After 1990, companies—especially those in the private sector—began adopting Western management models focused on performance, competition, and flexibility. These shifts led to role ambiguity, unclear expectations, and intensified work pace, all of which contributed to **increased emotional strain** among employees [20]. Younger professionals entering the workforce in the 2000s faced pressure to adapt to corporate norms that emphasized multitasking, mobility, and continuous learning—often without the support systems or job protections found in Western European countries.

6.3. Migration and Brain Drain

EU accession in 2007 accelerated Romania's labor migration. Millions of Romanians—especially healthcare workers, engineers, and construction laborers—left the country for better wages abroad. Those who remained faced **understaffing**, overwork, and emotional burnout. For example, the Romanian healthcare system has been under constant strain due to high patient volumes and low physician-to-patient ratios [26].

6.4. Institutional Weaknesses and Workplace Corruption

Corruption, favoritism in promotions, and political interference in public sector jobs have also been cited as stress-inducing factors. Professionals working in public administration, healthcare, and education report chronic dissatisfaction, feeling undervalued or trapped in dysfunctional bureaucracies [27].

6.5. Evolving Mental Health Awareness

Until the early 2000s, mental health and work-related psychological issues were highly stigmatized in Romania. Burnout, anxiety, and depression were rarely discussed or diagnosed, often dismissed as signs of personal weakness. Only in the past decade has public awareness improved,

driven by EU funding, NGO campaigns, and media attention [28].

However, access to mental health services remains limited, specially in rural areas [29]. Romania's post-1990 transformation offers a vivid example of how macroeconomic shifts, cultural change, and institutional development intersect with professional stress. The country's trajectory illustrates that occupational stress is not only a psychological issue but also a socio-political one, deeply tied to national transitions, values, and resource distribution.

6.5.1. Research Design

The research design consists of:

- **A quantitative component:** An online questionnaire distributed across multiple professional sectors (e.g., healthcare, education, IT, public administration).
- **A qualitative component:** Semi-structured interviews with selected professionals to gain deeper insight into personal experiences and socio-cultural context.

This approach is consistent with previous occupational stress studies that combine standardized tools with open-ended perspectives [30].

6.5.2. Population and Sampling

- **Population:** Romanian professionals aged 54–70 employed in various sectors, with a minimum of 3 years of work experience.

- **Sample size:**

300 respondents for the survey (random and snowball sampling via online platforms and LinkedIn) divided as follows: 60 healthcare workers, 90 educators, 30 IT employees and 120 civil servants.

15 in-depth interviews (purposive sampling targeting healthcare workers, educators, IT employees, and civil servants).

Inclusion criteria: Romanian residency, Fluent in Romanian, Currently employed or employed within the last 12 months.

For that the study to reflect the actual structure of the employed population in

Romania during the post-communist period, i used statistical data (e.g., from the National Institute of Statistics) to estimate the share of each sector in the labor force. The distribution of Romania's active population during the post-communist period (especially the 1990s) across sectors such as healthcare, education, IT, and

public administration is not always easy to determine precisely—particularly for IT, which was still an emerging sector at that time. However, based on available data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS), Eurostat, and other official sources, approximate estimates can be made:

Table no. 1: Indicative estimate of the structure of the active population in the post-communist period (1990s):

Sector	Estimated share of the active population (approx.)
Public administration	30% – 40%
Education	20% – 30%
Healthcare	10% – 20%
Information Technology	5% – 10%

Source: Estimates based on INS data

Public administration included both central and local government institutions, as well as auxiliary personnel. After 1989, the number of public employees temporarily increased due to administrative system restructuring.

Education and *healthcare* remained large employment sectors, inherited from the communist era, but both experienced underfunding and professional migration (brain drain).

IT was a developing field. Although Romania had a strong tradition in systems engineering and applied mathematics, it was only after 2000 that the sector began to grow significantly and employ at scale.

Methodological Justification – Proportional Distribution of the Sample

To conduct this research on occupational stress in post-communist Romania, a sample of 300 respondents was used, distributed across four relevant occupational sectors: healthcare, information technology (IT), education, and public administration. The selection of these categories reflects both their importance in the social and economic structure of post-1989 Romania and the scientific interest in how the post-communist transition has influenced occupational stress in key work sectors.

The distribution of respondents into categories was done proportionally to the estimated share of each sector in Romania's employment structure during the reference period. Thus, available statistical data (e.g., from the National Institute of Statistics, Eurostat, labor reports) were used to estimate employment distribution across the four sectors. Based on these estimates, the sample was divided as follows:

- **Public administration (and related roles):** 40% → 120 respondents
- **Education:** 30% → 90 respondents
- **Healthcare:** 20% → 60 respondents
- **Information technology (IT):** 10% → 30 respondents

This distribution ensures structural representativeness, allowing for conclusions that more accurately reflect the socio-professional reality of post-communist Romania. At the same time, it captures the level of development and maturity of each domain in the context of the post-1989 transition, as well as the differentiated impact of systemic changes on occupational stress.

Since the goal of the research includes both identifying stress levels by occupation and understanding the institutional context influencing them, a proportional approach

offers an appropriate analytical framework, without distorting empirical reality through artificial equalization of subgroups.

6.5.3. Data Collection Tools

6.5.3.1. Survey Instrument

The survey consists of 5 sections:

- **Demographics** (age, gender, sector, region)
- **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10)** [19]
- **Job Demand-Control-Support scale** (adapted from Karasek)
- **Effort-Reward Imbalance scale** (from Siegrist's model)
- **Open-ended question** on perceived causes of stress at work

The survey was distributed via Google Forms and took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete.

6.5.3.2. Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview includes questions on: Perceived changes in job stress since the 1990s, Institutional and cultural factors affecting stress, Personal strategies for coping, Suggestions for improvement in the workplace.

Interviews were conducted in Romanian via Zoom, lasting 30–45 minutes each.

6.5.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Analyzed using **SPSS**: Descriptive statistics: frequencies, means, standard deviations; Inferential statistics: t-tests, ANOVA, correlation between stress levels and job characteristics.

Qualitative Data

Transcribed and coded using **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006) [26]. Patterns were identified regarding causes, symptoms, and coping strategies, Data triangulation was used to increase validity.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex and evolving nature of professional stress in Romania following the fall of communism in 1989. As the country transitioned from a centralized, state-controlled system to a competitive market economy, Romanian workers were confronted with new demands, uncertainties, and cultural shifts that have significantly shaped their experiences of stress in the workplace.

Over 60% of Romanian employees experience frequent stress at work, with 60% also showing symptoms of burnout. The most common symptoms include emotional exhaustion and reduced efficiency.

Main Sources of Stress was:

- High workload: 64%
 - Overloading with responsibilities: 50%
 - Salary stagnation: 45%
 - Interactions with difficult clients: 34%
- 65% of Romanians do not feel fulfilled professionally, and only 34% report being happy at their workplace.)

60% of employees have adopted strategies to cope with burnout, a significant increase from 51% in 2024.

71% of women report seeing colleagues affected by burnout, compared to 62% of men. Additionally, women are more affected by high workload (68%) than men (61%). 74% of people in this age group report burnout symptoms, making them the most vulnerable group.

Stress Management Strategies of romanians:

- **Taking Time Off:**
67% of Romanians take vacations to relax.
- **Recreational Activities:**
54% relax by going out or shopping.
- **Spending Time with Loved Ones:**
39% prefer spending time with family and friends.
- **Listening to Music and Longer Breaks:**
36% and 32% use these methods to manage stress.

Stress Trends in Romania from 1990 to 2024

The data for the period 1990-2024 can be summarized in the following trends:

- **1990-2000:** After the fall of communism, there was a significant shift in the work environment, with increased privatization, industrial restructuring, and the opening of new markets. This led to greater job insecurity and stress among workers.
- **2000-2010:** Romania's integration into the European Union brought both opportunities and challenges, including higher work demands, organizational changes, and increased pressure on employees, contributing to higher burnout rates.
- **2010-2020:** There was an increase in

the awareness of professional stress and burnout, especially after Romania saw an economic recovery and shifts in employment patterns. Stress management programs started to become more common, but the number of affected employees remained high.

- **2020-2024:** The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent rise in remote work added new challenges, including isolation, increased workload, and blurred work-life boundaries, leading to higher stress levels. However, organizations began focusing more on employee well-being and mental health programs.

The chart below presents an estimated evolution of occupational stress levels in Romania from 1990 to 2024.

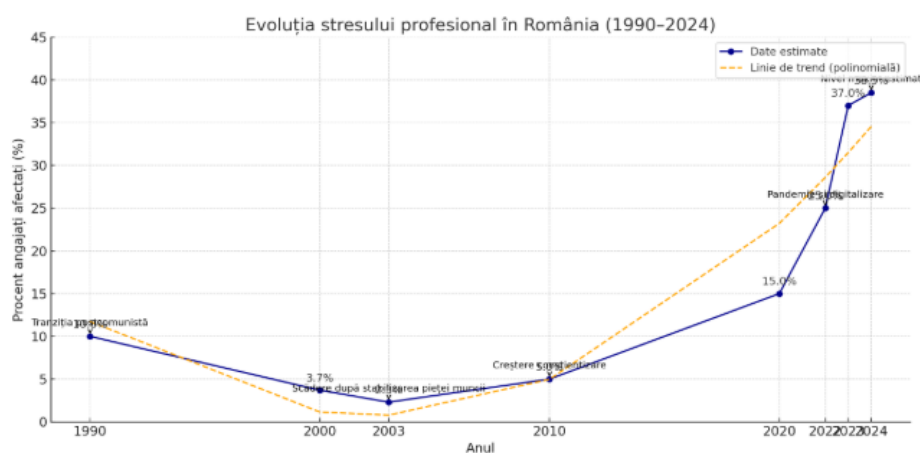


Figure.1: Dynamics of occupational stress in Romania in the post-communist period
Source: Own researches

In the early 1990s, occupational stress was likely elevated due to the abrupt transition from a centrally planned to a market economy, with widespread restructuring and job insecurity. This period marked significant uncertainty for Romanian workers, leading to high levels of professional anxiety and adaptation stress. A notable decline in reported stress was observed by the early 2000s, likely reflecting a period of economic stabilization and growing institutional structures to support employment and labor rights. Between 2000

and 2003, some data suggest a drop in stress levels from 3.7% to 2.3%.

From 2010 onward, awareness about workplace mental health increased, and stress levels gradually rose. Employees began to recognize and report psychosocial risks more frequently, especially in high-demand sectors like healthcare, education, and IT.

The most dramatic increase occurred in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Remote work, digital overload, health anxieties, and economic instability pushed stress levels to new highs. By 2023, nearly

37% of Romanian employees declared they were significantly stressed at work.

The estimated value for 2024, approximately 38.5%, suggests a slight continuation of this trend. While public awareness and organizational policies around mental health are improving, systemic stressors remain prevalent in the Romanian labor market.

The polynomial trendline in the chart illustrates a clear long-term rise in occupational stress, from the early days of economic transition to the digitalized and demanding modern workplace. This evolution underscores the critical importance of investing in mental health infrastructure,

work-life balance policies, and psychological support systems at the organizational and national levels.

In Romania, during the post-communist period, occupational stress recorded the following percentages for the four main categories of employees: healthcare: 20% – 45%, IT: 10% – 35%, education: 15% – 40%, civil servants: 15% – 40%.

These percentages reflect estimates of occupational stress in each sector, as economic, social and technological conditions have changed over the years.

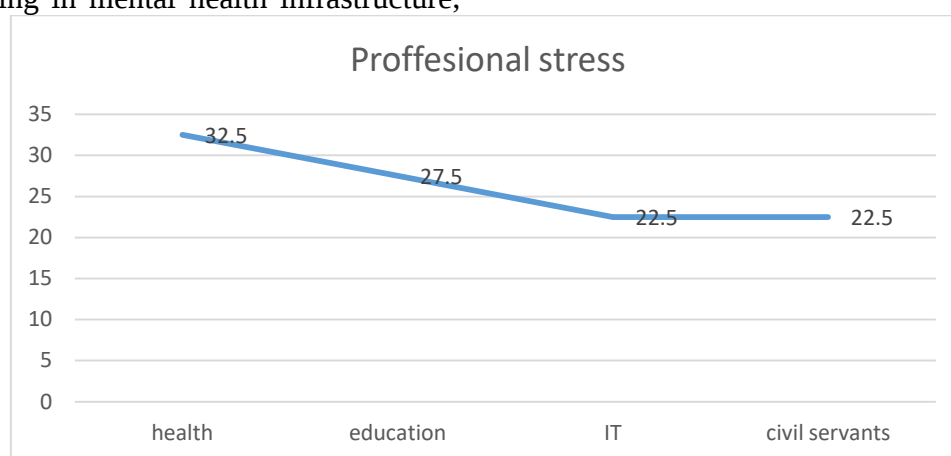


Figure 2: Occupational stress in Romania in the post-communist period for the main categories of employees

Source: Own researches

7.1. Theoretical Reflections

The study's results align with several theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. According to the **Job Demand-Control (JDC) model**, stress arises when workers face high demands but have little control over their work environment. This was reflected in the survey data, particularly among employees in public administration and healthcare, where bureaucratic inertia and understaffing reduced autonomy despite increased workloads.

The **Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model** was especially relevant in the context of Romania's privatization era and subsequent wage stagnation. Many

respondents—particularly educators and young professionals—reported investing significant effort with little recognition or financial reward, reinforcing the ERI theory's prediction of emotional strain under unfair working conditions.

The **Conservation of Resources (COR) theory**, which suggests that stress is a reaction to the threat or loss of resources (time, energy, security), also proved applicable. Interview participants often described the fear of job loss, inadequate support systems, and the burden of multitasking in under-resourced institutions as key stressors. For instance, teachers in rural areas and hospital staff in underfunded clinics noted that both material and

emotional resources were depleted, leading to exhaustion and burnout.

7.2. Sectoral and Contextual Differences

The research revealed notable differences in how stress manifests across sectors:

- **Healthcare professionals** reported the highest levels of chronic stress, citing underfunded infrastructure, long hours, and emotional fatigue as primary factors.
- **Educators** expressed frustration with low pay, shifting curricula, and lack of institutional support.
- **IT workers**, while generally better paid, reported stress linked to constant upskilling demands, burnout from remote work, and unclear job boundaries.
- **Public sector employees** experienced demotivation due to institutional inefficiency, poor leadership, and outdated bureaucratic practices.

These sectoral differences point to the need for **customized stress management strategies** rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. They also support prior findings that the nature and intensity of occupational stress are shaped by both organizational context and sector-specific demands.

7.3. The Legacy of Transition and the Romanian Context

The Romanian post-communist transition introduced instability and unpredictability into the professional landscape. While the move to a market economy created new opportunities, it also dismantled the relative security of communist-era employment. Many participants reported that the pressure to "adapt or fall behind" became a lasting psychological burden, particularly for middle-aged workers who had to requalify or reorient professionally.

Additionally, **brain drain and labor migration** emerged as recurrent themes. Younger professionals reported that the departure of skilled colleagues to Western Europe increased their workloads and responsibilities, while offering few long-term incentives to stay. This aligns with broader European research showing that the

outflow of skilled labor can intensify the stress experienced by those who remain.

Institutional mistrust and perceived corruption also shaped stress perception. Several interviewees linked their work-related stress to opaque promotion processes, nepotism, and poorly managed public resources—problems often cited in post-communist governance literature.

7.4. Coping Strategies and Support Systems

While many Romanian workers rely on informal support networks (family, colleagues), institutional support remains limited. Very few respondents reported access to workplace counseling, stress management workshops, or mental health resources. This suggests a cultural and systemic lag in addressing occupational mental health, despite increasing awareness of its importance.

However, individual coping mechanisms—such as physical activity, socializing, and personal development—were reported with moderate success. Younger respondents, especially in urban centers, were more likely to seek therapy or coaching services, indicating a **generational shift** in openness to mental health care.

7.5. Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this study suggest several important implications:

- Romanian organizations need to **prioritize mental health** by integrating stress reduction strategies into their HR policies.
- Government agencies and labor unions should **develop national standards** for psychosocial risk management in the workplace.

Educational and healthcare institutions, in particular, require targeted interventions to reduce burnout, such as flexible schedules, workload redistribution, and professional counseling. Further, the **EU's directives on workplace well-being** could be more effectively implemented in Romania through funding incentives, cross-sector partnerships, and improved accountability mechanisms.

7.6. Limitations and Future Research

This study had several limitations. First, the sample may not fully represent all Romanian workers, especially those in rural or informal sectors. Second, because of its cross-sectional design, it cannot fully capture the evolution of stress over time. Future research should consider **longitudinal studies** and **larger, sector-specific samples**, as well as explore the intersection of professional stress with **gender, rural-urban disparities**, and **digitalization trends**.

8. Conclusion

Professional stress is not merely an individual burden but a systemic issue requiring comprehensive solutions. As this paper has shown, its origins lie in a complex interplay of personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors. The consequences of inaction are significant—not only for individual health but also for institutional performance. Sustainable strategies involve both empowering individuals and redesigning work environments to be healthier, more humane, and more productive. Future research should continue exploring technological and cultural innovations that promote resilience in the evolving world of work.

This study examined professional stress in Romania through both theoretical and empirical lenses, focusing on the country's post-1990 transformation. Drawing from established stress models such as the Job Demand-Control (JDC), Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI), and Conservation of Resources (COR) theories, the research demonstrates that professional stress is not

merely an individual or psychological issue, but one deeply embedded in economic systems, institutional structures, and cultural norms. The findings underscore that Romania's shift from a centralized, state-controlled system to a competitive market economy created new forms of stress: job insecurity, role ambiguity, organizational instability, and increased pressure for performance. These were further intensified by factors specific to the Romanian context, such as labor migration, weak institutional accountability, and underdeveloped mental health infrastructure. While modern awareness around psychological well-being has grown—especially in urban, knowledge-based sectors—systemic responses remain limited and uneven across regions and professions.

The mixed-methods approach used in this study reveals both the measurable dimensions of stress and the lived realities behind those numbers. It is evident that Romania requires targeted interventions, including workplace mental health programs, transparent organizational policies, and public health strategies tailored to the country's historical and socio-economic context.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the understanding of how transitional economies experience and respond to professional stress. Future studies should expand on these findings by including longitudinal data, exploring rural-urban differences, and investigating the role of digital technologies in both alleviating and exacerbating work-related stress.

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