

**RESEARCH REPORT  
IREX STG**

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Grant Year: 2002**

**Final Research on Labor and the Body in Post-Socialist Romania**

My research concerns the relationship of social, cultural, and economic conditions of two groups of Romanian workers, and how these conditions affect the physical state of the lives of workers and worker families. I have been engaged in this project since 1999, and this summer's work was to encompass the final phase of data collection and discussion of preliminary results and conclusions with colleagues.

This research has implications for both policy development and for humanistic understanding of the state of post-socialist labor. For policy development, the research touches first on a range of political questions. It considers the extent of political restiveness among post-socialist workers, their degrees of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with current political leaders and movements (such as the renewed nationalism of the Greater Romania Party and its leader, Corneliu Vadim Tudor), their perception of the direction in which their country is heading, and their attitudes toward potential Romanian integration into the European Union and in NATO. The research also particularly has bearing on issues of post-socialist economic change and its implications for worker and worker family health. Health and demographic decline are critical questions in the post-socialist period and this research establishes some of the social parameters that affect these conditions for workers.

For humanistic understanding, the research offers an in-depth ethnographic examination of the lives and circumstances of post-socialist workers, considering their changing family and social lives, transformations in their understanding of work, their concepts of self and others, and their senses of the future for themselves, their families, and their society.

For this research project I have largely spent my time at two research sites: the Jiu Valley coal mining region in southwest Romania and the Fagaras region of south-central Romanian Transylvania, an area of (formerly) intensive chemical manufacture. I have worked in various communities in both regions. However, during this short-term research I concentrated my activities in the town of Vulcan in the Jiu Valley (as there had been a number of recent mine explosions and fatalities there) and in the city of Fagaras itself.

I carried out this research using a combination of traditional anthropological field techniques, such as participant observation, extensive video-taping of key events, and in-depth interviewing of key informants, combined with a range of more sociologically-oriented research based on the use of survey instruments, responses to which will be tabulated using the statistical analysis program, SPSS. The surveys were of two types. The first concerned a range of questions concerned with the demographic development of families and the health histories of family members. The second was a survey designed to assess the diet and nutrition of families by a detailed listing of types and sources of food for each meal over a week's period. Given the pressures of time for this last period of GIST supported research, I prepared the surveys in advance, e-mailed

them to research assistants in the two field areas in which I worked and had the surveys administered in advance of my arrival in Romania. A brief review of the surveys seems to suggest that this technique worked fairly well.

The condition of post-socialist Romanian workers, especially those employed in industries still controlled by the state, is not a happy one. Though the regions, industries, and workers in which the research was carried out differ extensively, there is a great commonality in worker conceptions and conditions. Though worker social and economic lives are arrayed along a continuum shaped by many factors, to a person, people continually refer to their lives being shaped by stress deriving from social and economic unpredictability and a persisting decline in standards of living, leavened by the corruption which they see all around them and which they rightly interpret as severely limiting their own possibilities for positive change.

Stress plays out in many ways in worker lives. In particular, it has great bearing on worker perceptions of and stances toward their larger society. In the main, with some exceptions, workers adopt polarized stances of anger and torpor. They are bitter and accusatory, but largely unwilling or incapable of taking action to transform their own immediate personal circumstances, let alone those of society. At a personal level stress plays out in both individual and family health. In both regions, there have been notable increases in incidences of alcoholism (among both men and women), domestic abuse, family abandonment, mental illness, and in other health conditions (e.g. cardio-vascular disease) associated with stressful lives with few outlets for relief.

Attempts at remediation of these conditions have also been largely unsuccessful. Job training programs, for example, focus on training for specific skills with little likelihood of marketability, rather than in training for general skills (e.g. entrepreneurialism, community organizing, understanding and accessing information about markets) and philosophical outlooks. Programs designed to move surplus workers out of particular regions are undertaken without concern for the new conditions in which they will enter.

There is much future research that could continue in this same vein, i.e. detailing the link between social conditions and physical ones. Comparative research with workers in different occupational categories and in different types of enterprises (small private; large private; joint ventures, etc) would also be a profitable approach.

US policy practices should pay more attention to the social and economic conditions of Romanian life as they do to ethnic issues or those related to qualifying Romania for entry into NATO. Measures to improve the effectiveness of state labor inspection, improvement of labor laws (e.g. those concerned with "black market" practices), and anti-corruption programs could be beefed up. Furthermore, Romanian public health services and informational programs are utterly ineffective and also could be assisted to become better integrated into workplace conditions and practices.