New Europe College Yearbook
Ştefan Odobleja Program
2020-2021

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This volume was supported by a grant of the Romanian National Authority for the Scientific Research and Innovation, CNCS/CCCDI – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.1-BSO-2016-003, within PNCD III

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ISSN 1584-0298

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AN ARRANGEMENT OF DISTRUST: THE BANKRUPTCY OF CARITAS AND MUTUAL-AID GAMES IN ROMANIA (1992-1995)

Abstract

This paper tells the empirical story of how the mutual-aid game (or pyramid or Ponzi scheme) Caritas, went bankrupt, after having acquired nationwide success. I reassemble this story through participants' testimonies and mass media accounts, focusing on the role of the written press in fabricating, that is, representing, predicting, and announcing its demise. Curiously enough, the written press announces the failure of the game at a point where it is most successful - that is, after Caritas relocates from Brașov to Cluj-Napoca, operates multiple branches, and animates millions of Romanians into pilgrimage to a city frequently compared to a financial Mecca, Maglavit or El Dorado. I explore the rhetoric strategies used in shaping mutual-aid bankruptcy, examining how something that has not (yet) happened is organized so as to appear impending. Bankruptcy is assembled by portraying Caritas as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966), an alien element that disturbs the peace and serenity of a city formerly known for its university campus and intellectual life. Furthermore, illegality is forged out of ambiguity. Since there are no provisions specifically outlawing mutual-aid games in general, journalists try to undermine them as particular cases. Lastly, the use of numbers completes the rhetoric of bankruptcy. Most accounts include numerical and non-numerical formulations of the size of the mutual-aid phenomenon, presenting very precise numbers of depositors, deposits, victims, or financial damage. I highlight the paradox of precision as being more rhetorical than informative.

Keywords: mutual-aid game; pyramid and Ponzi scheme; financial fraud; bankruptcy; numbers

Between the years 1992 and 1995, the mutual-aid game[1] (or pyramid or Ponzi scheme) Caritas was more than a topic a discussion. Caritas insinuated itself into the everyday life of people, their conversations, exchanges, and sociality. "Wherever you'd go," one of my interlocutors recalls, "you'd hear stories about Caritas, in the factory, everywhere really. People wouldn't greet you on the street and ask how you were. No way. Conversations went like this: *Good afternoon, which position are you on the list? Are you playing?*" (Lucia 2016). Caritas is recounted by eyewitnesses to the long queues in their neighborhoods or streets, their friends and acquaintances who allegedly shifted the wheels of fortune in their favor, and the endless rumors circulating at the workplace. Others remember working in factories and organizing among colleagues to wait in line to deposit money, or having the foreman collect and deposit for the entire work collective. Inasmuch as it was thought to be mysterious and unpredictable, Caritas was unavoidable.[2]

I do not mean to advocate that people were instantly seduced and convinced by the possibilities opened by rapid fluctuations of fortune. Quite the contrary. Mutual-aid games in Romania were highly controversial affairs. They were discussed, debated, advertised, mathematically debunked and economically exposed, their political endorsements revealed, described as a "social phenomenon" or a downright "psychosis". All unfolded publicly, under the watchful eye of the mass media. Many people recall not only the heated public debates, but also the fierce arguments in their families about traveling to Cluj-Napoca to deposit money at Caritas. When the side more prone to risk or willing to take a chance won, savings were mobilized under the hopeful phrase: "we can't be the first to lose!" Some sold livestock, apartments and goods; others borrowed money or pawned items and deposited in spite of the many critiques brought on by the mass media. To further complicate the story, more and more voices made their way to the public scene. As mutual-aid games began to collapse one after the other, newspapers not only announced the imminent collapse of Caritas, but also mobilized numbers and accounts coming from institutions such as the Inspectorate of Police and the Direction for Public Finance, sought decisions from Courts of Justice, and unveiled the hidden connections Caritas and Ioan Stoica, its owner, were thought to have. Caritas was no longer a business promising incredible returns (eightfold money multiplication within three months), but one associated with the political power in Cluj-Napoca, where former *Securitate* members and officials of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR)

were said to be on the shortlist of overnight money multiplication. Besides its seemingly surreal object of activity, Caritas was permeated with rumors, gossips, and conspiracies about its shady endorsements, as well as moral panics about the potentially harmful effects of its collapse.

This paper follows the chained bankruptcy of mutual-aid games around the country, focusing on the role of the written press in fabricating, that is, representing, predicting, and announcing their demise. I am interested in the rhetoric strategies at work in shaping mutual-aid bankruptcy. What are the symbols of collapse and how are they mobilized in order to convince others that collapse is imminent? How is knowledge about mutual-aid games produced and what are the procedures that make it appear factual? And lastly, how is something that has not happened (e.g., the collapse of Caritas) organized so as to appear impending?

Caritas is Matter out of Place

The story I tell starts from the confrontation between *Tribuna Ardealului* (TA), a periodical positioned against the local political establishment and *Mesagerul Transilvan* (MT), a newspaper close to Cluj-Napoca prefecture, which is the main advertisement and communication medium for Caritas. All accounts published by the TA indicate that Caritas is "matter out of place". Mary Douglas coins this phrase that comes to have a very long career in reference to purity and dirt. Dirt is, according to the anthropologist, matter out of place, and people's references to dirt imply the existence of "a set of ordered relations" and "a contravention to that order" (Douglas 1966: 36). As such, "dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (*idem*). There are two ways through which journalists describe Caritas as matter out of place, one metaphorical, alluding to the deleterious moral consequences, and another factual, which shows the actual dirt produced by Caritas and its depositors.

Caritas invites chaos. Black marketers, beggars, thieves, empty bottles and tons of litter, public urination, fights and brawls and overnight lines are the first signs of disorder. At the end of March 1993, Caritas moves its headquarters from the former Prefecture in Cluj-Napoca, where it functioned since its relocation from Brașov, to the Cluj-Napoca Sports Hall, a state-owned building which can host up to 3,000 people at once. This is when critics argue that generalized disorder ensues. An important

mention should be addressed: Caritas deposits are no longer restricted to residents of the city, as was the case up to that point. More and more people from all over the country travel to Cluj-Napoca, either by car or train, the written press circulating figures ranging between 7,000 and 10,000 visitors a day. Some claim that not only money enters the city, but also dirt:

> The hysteria caused by getting rich will produce an explosive exodus to Cluj, overcrowded trains, blocked roads, the Transylvanian city invaded by desperate people wanting to escape poverty (*Libertatea*, August 10-11, 1992).
>
> At every hour of the day or night, the space surrounding the Cluj-Napoca Sports Hall resembles a giant fair. The parking lot is packed to capacity with cars from all the counties of the country. On the Someș Riverbank, hundreds of people eat, drink or just sleep. Day and night, several vans serve sausages, beer, and juice, when, in fact, all that is transacted is money (Nițu 1993).
>
> The heart of Transylvania became a pesthole. Thousands of people, garbage and dirt took over, it smells of piss even though everybody knows money has no smell (Capital, September 17, 1993).

The long lines and the presence of money also occasion the proliferation of the new characters of postsocialism, entrepreneurs who "redefine the boundaries of exchange" (Carruthers and Espeland 1998: 1035) in relation to Caritas. Cluj abounds in entrepreneurial responses to Caritas in several ways. First, the city becomes a key destination for other mutual-aid games such as Rolex, Flash, Help, Replay, Kokte and Roba Co Roba. The TA relentlessly prints warnings for citizens: "[w]e remind you that to the present day, these types of firms are not allowed, probably because of the precedent set in the country, by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Cluj, which denies their registration. Until now, hundreds of similar firms were closed and many of their owners were arrested for fraud" (TA 31(263), February 16, 1993). Despite the insistence of local publications in reminding people that mutual-aid games are not legally authorized in Cluj-Napoca, they will continue to function and make profit during the following months.

Second, the city becomes host to a variety of informal economies and business initiatives, copiously referred to as "Caritas fauna". I give a few examples. The Messenger taxi[3] has the Caritas logo on its doors

and guarantees Caritas "lucky winners" safe travels (*România Liberă*, May 15-17, 1993). A pawnshop advertises as lending money for Caritas deposits (*Adevărul* de Cluj, September 18-20, 1993). The long lines for deposits, between 24 and 72 hours, make room for the emergence of "fast depositors", who, in exchange of a fee of up to 10% of the deposit will wait in line or use their connections to make fast Caritas enrollments (*Adevărul*, August 10, 1993). Monetizing the generosity of participants once they cashed in their winnings, beggars from other cities move to Cluj-Napoca, to the point of forcing the City Hall to issue regulations against begging (*România Liberă*, July 9, 1993; July 19, 1993). The city becomes a key destination for thieves, waiting, as well as others, for their big break. And lastly, there are a few cases of Caritas cashier impersonators, who forge signatures, receipt, and company seals, tricking prospective participants into depositing with them (TA, October 7, 1993).

The dirt and the "fauna" contradict the image people from Cluj have of their city. Time and time again, questions about what happened to "the heart of Transylvania" (*Libertatea*, August 10-11), the "capital of Transylvania", or "the university town and the cultural center" (TA, September 17, 1993) that used to be Cluj-Napoca before Caritas surface and are left unanswered. The juxtaposition has the character of a breaching experiment (Garfinkel 1967a), as it reveals a supposedly shared notion of social order before Caritas. One of my interviewees, a student in Cluj at the time, phrases it better, highlighting the toxic effects the game had on the city:

> The town was becoming very interesting. All of a sudden, there was constant commotion. It was crazy to be there at lunch… Cluj is an extremely beautiful town, with the university at its core, a lot of young people in the city center, the high schools, the schools, the university… Suddenly, people were ageing. […] Around the old town square there were these state-owned shops that still functioned: the supermarket, the central store. All were depleted. Everybody was racing around the shops that sold long-term products: carpets, television sets, fridges. It was crazy, everywhere people were carrying something. It was a period, a flux of merchandise, something I had never seen before… All the prices were through the roof, including the student cafeterias. As a student you no longer had access to this area of services, it was complicated because it was packed. And it was almost impossible to travel to and from Cluj, it was simply too crowded. […] All of a sudden, my feeling was of something intoxicating in the city, I couldn't recognize it any longer, I couldn't find it.

> Moreover, everybody talked about it, everybody. Think about it, it was an epoch when people won a great deal of money, a lot of young people won a lot of money, prices were through the roof, apartments were through the roof, cars became an extremely expensive matter, everything was oversized in the city (George 2013).

During all this time, Stoica travels constantly between Brașov and Cluj-Napoca, making himself seen also in Turda and Dej, where Caritas branches were operating, to issue payments. His decision to settle in Cluj comes when he realizes he needs to be seen in order to be trusted: "I realized people wanted to see me, that's when they trust Caritas. My absence from Cluj is not beneficial, and [*I say this*] because I heard people in line spreading all sorts of rumors about Caritas, but especially about me." Moreover, referencing a woman who allegedly warns him, Stoica mentions her saying that "people are crazy. They talk so many things about you; you don't know what to say any more. It seems to me that there are some people who want to demean you, they may even be paid by someone who has a shady interest" (Stoica 1996b: 197). Retrospectively, Stoica well understands that Caritas is getting out of his hands. As voices multiply, Stoica can no longer be in control of how the situation is defined. He spends the first few months of 1993 asking people to maintain order or reassuring them of the lack of contingency guaranteed by his business. During this period, Stoica does not generate messages on behalf of Caritas, but fends off attacks coming from rival publications, especially the TA and *România Liberă*, one of the national publications with a wide readership. At the same time, he spends time correcting spontaneous rumors circulating on Caritas premises, assuring his depositors that he will be moving his business neither back to Brașov, nor in Gherla, or that no one associated with Caritas will go on vacation.

Romania Outlaws Millennial Capitalism...

... but not mutual-aid games. TA's campaign against mutual-aid games is based on the claim that Caritas should not function in Cluj-Napoca. To prove their claim, the TA resorts to a juridical argument about the legality of the game in the city. Nevertheless, there is no law provision that directly prohibits the development of mutual-aid games. The Commercial Code drafted in 1990 specifically outlaws several activities but makes

no mention of mutual-aid games. Among the activities that cannot be organized through private initiative in small firms or familial enterprises I mention the production and marketing of explosives, poisons, narcotics, and secret remedies (witchcraft and fortunetelling), the establishment of brothels, gambling, and speculative commerce (see Annex 1 of the 54/1990 law decree).[4] Part of the lexicon of millennial capitalism, these activities are termed by Comaroff and Comaroff (1999; Comaroff 2000) as occult economies. At the turn of the millennium, Comaroff postulates, capitalism manifests itself messianically, positing consumption over production, placing gambling and speculation at "the fiscal heart of the nation state" (2000: 297), and the conjuring of wealth through techniques that "defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason" (2000: 310). With no law provision for or against mutual-aid games, debates about legality or lack thereof had to be rhetorically constructed by appealing to issues related to definition, framing or opinion from alleged experts.

One of my interlocutors, a Chief of Police in Eastern Romania at the time, resorts to the absence of legislation or, as he terms it, the legislative vacuum, to stand as an explanation for the proliferation of mutual-aid games. His account, however, is part of a vocabulary of motives (Mills 1940), a justification for the lack of police action in regulating the emergence and spread of similar activities. Law enforcement, he argues, was in the line of least resistance:

> There were not and there still aren't in our judicial system any provisions against [mutual-aid] games. If citizens participated willingly, there was nothing we could do. "It was my turn to get my money, and they skipped me, they didn't pay", [*he says imitating the protesting voices of the victims*] only then was it possible for us to demonstrate crimes incriminated by our criminal code, namely to treat them as fraud and embezzlement. But until then, mutual-aid games were not crimes per se (D.C., 2014).

Referencing Caritas, all newspapers mention that the game is registered in Brașov, therefore having no business being in Cluj. All accounts come from the TA (and later republished or referenced in all my sources). They rely on expert voices from the Registry of Commerce in Cluj-Napoca, Public Finance or invoke a Supreme Court ruling against one similar business to function in Cluj-Napoca. Nevertheless, a closer look at the statements of these "competent describers" (Potter 1996: 150) shows them denying their authority and competence in regulating and overseeing the establishment

and functioning of mutual-aid games. They deliver personal opinions which journalists later treat as facts. I show below all the instances when an expert voice is consulted regarding mutual-aid games:

> (1) The General Inspectorate of Police, Brașov: These games could be run based on a set of regulations where the sums, the firm's commission etc. should be clearly stated. The game Cronos[5] does not have the set of regulations registered January 1991, when it should have been, but in May 1991 (TA 190, October 28, 1992).
>
> (2) The Supreme Court of Justice, extracted from the Public Prosecutor's charge: The activity for financial mutual-aid cannot be done through acts of commerce, for it is not a bank, but it is neither an insurance activity. Thus, the Court erroneously allowed the firm The Society of Monetary Help Rodoet Cluj to function. Financial mutual-aid cannot be done through acts of commerce [The extract is followed by a commentary by the TA]: Considering these aspects, we can logically extrapolate: all similar firms function illegally. But still... (TA, April 14, 1993).
>
> The request to register the firm The Society of Monetary Help Rodoet Cluj was rejected by the decision No.31/1991 in the meeting of the Counsel Chamber, November 15, 1991, by the judge [full name enclosed]. The appeal was denied [full names of all the members present enclosed] (TA, October 30, 1992).
>
> (3) The National Office of the Registry of Commerce: By the decision 181/1992, gambling was regulated – its judicial nature, provisions for functioning and sanctions. Although these mutual-aid games presuppose the enrollment of people on a random basis, through their very name, I consider they are not to be included in the gambling category. Supporting this point of view, I highlight the numerous frauds and complaints coming from participants. Eventually, "collective mutual-aid games" might be enrolled as part of the activities, provided a set of regulations approved by the Commission established by the decision 181/1992 is elaborated, and participation is restricted to a limited number of people (TA, November 2, 1992).
>
> (4) The general director and the deputy general director of the Direction for Public Finance: We could not verify the legality of the firm being registered, because it is not within our competence. [...] There is also a big issue related to how the VAT is applied, which imposes a strict definition of activities. So, from our point of view, there are ambiguities relating to the activity of Caritas. It's not gambling, because there is no chancy element involved, it's not a crediting operation that would function as a bank, it is

> an activity that has not yet been defined. [...] From a legal point of view, Caritas is perfectly legal. We cannot find anything else (TA, June 3, 1993).
>
> (5) The Chief of Police, Cluj-Napoca: I personally consider this game [Caritas] to be immoral (TA, June 19, 1993).[6]

Several aspects of these accounts are worth analyzing. Although the TA posits these statements as factual evidence supporting the illegality of mutual-aid games and especially Caritas, none of them clearly state that they are illegal. Quite the contrary, statements 1, 3, and 4 support the legality of Caritas and mutual-aid games. They raise technical issues that need resolving (e.g. the existence of a set of regulations), or were found absent in games that went bankrupt, as was the case with Cronos. The only account clearly outlawing mutual-aid games is the one coming from the Supreme Court of Justice, which, nevertheless, only provides local coverage. The Court does not settle the mutual-aid game affairs throughout the country but refers to one particular game that cannot function in Cluj. Providing only local coverage, the decision of the Court opens avenues for contestation – how can mutual-aid games function in other cities, who is responsible for their registration, and if mutual-aid activities cannot carry on, how do they, in fact, do?

Furthermore, the absence of legislation is made evident by the efforts the invoked experts make to place mutual-aid games in a category (1, 2, 3, 4). Because they cannot find a reliable category for these businesses, they categorize by exclusion. While readers cannot know what mutual-aid games are, they can surely find out what these activities are not. Thus, mutual-aid games are not banks and are not insurance companies (2, 4), are not gambling, nor do they offer credit (4). The most reliable account states that Caritas is immoral, to be sure of yet another ambiguity. Despite the legal ambiguity, Caritas manages to function in many cities through branches, retaining its bookkeeping in Brașov. Because of this legal artifice, whenever financial control institutions would check the firm's accounting details, they would either deem its legality or their impossibility to control outside jurisdiction.

The last point I make is related to the devices of distance the experts use to renounce accountability. Except for the statement by the Supreme Court of Justice,[7] all other representatives of an institution use several strategies to minimize their competence and involvement. The statement by the General Inspectorate of the Police leaves room for interpretation,

as the representative expresses his position in conditional form: "games could be run," instead of a more definitive one. The National Office of the Registry of Commerce advances a similar point of view, which abounds in terms that denote opinion: "I consider [...]. Eventually, "collective mutual-aid games" [...] "might be enrolled". The last statement by the Direction for Public Finance clearly shows how their representatives renounce accountability. They "cannot verify" because it is not "within our competence", and close off by expressing a pertinent point of view, namely that "there are ambiguities". Despite the ambiguity, for the TA, the illegality of mutual-aid games is postulated as a fact. Factuality is assembled out of an abundance of personal opinions and various strategies of renouncing accountability, or in other words, different ways of saying "I don't know".

The Rhetorical Force of Numbers

I showed how personal opinion and definitions by exclusion are assembled into a rhetoric of facticity. This section analyzes the textual construction of scale. I am interested now in how practices of counting (games, victims, complaints, money) are mobilized into arguments about the dimensions of fraud despite the difficulty of counting and the absence of official records. No longer talking about particular cases of mutual-aid games, the press discusses "the mutual-aid games phenomenon", and, after Caritas, "the Caritas phenomenon". This signals a redefinition of the situation as a phenomenon, rather than a game or a business, which is more likely to invite usually deleterious consequences. In October 1993, Caritas interrupts payments for two days and, despite desperate attempts to relocate the business to Petroşani, Bucharest, Craiova, and Snagov, it never recovers. March through October 1993 newspapers build up the collapse of Caritas. Journalists report on the bankruptcy of mutual-aid games around the country as if predicting the imminent collapse of Caritas.

The first games to collapse are those from Braşov: Florio, Cronos, and Buzunarul Bunicii, all in October 1992. Writing about them triggers an avalanche of numbers: number of depositors, number of months the game functioned, number of victims, the total amount of capital gathered, the total amount of money defrauded, number of complaints filed, number of kilograms the file has, and the number by which money is multiplied. We find out that, in the case of Florio, its owner disappears with 6,5 million

that should have been paid to participants (TA, October 24, 1992). Cronos goes out with a bang of more than one billion lei cashed from 152,551 depositors, out of which only 42,631 winners were paid and the rest of 109,920 not (TA, October 29, 1992; *Libertatea*, January 30, 1993). For these two businesses, the files and complaints weigh 820 kilograms (TA, February 27, 1993). One of the most public collapses is that of a game from Ploiești. With 400,000 depositors and 340,000 victims, its bankruptcy leaves behind a 3,935,492,210 lei con and a 2,000-people protest (*Adevărul*, November 28-29, 1992; *Libertatea*, January 30, 1993). The 5,000 complaints sent through mail and the other 5,000 filed in person "suffocate" Police activity (TA, January 8, 1993). Another two mutual-aid games, Rolex and Flash, both based in Brașov but operating in Cluj-Napoca, crash, and the papers on which the complaints are written are said to be one meter tall (TA, May 8, 1993). In Brăila, Eastern Romania, the bankruptcy of a mutual-aid game named Adison causes a protest of 30,000 people who block the main road (*Adevărul*, January 12, 1993). *România Liberă*, a major player in the written press with a wide national readership publishes its first story about mutual-aid games on May 13, 1993. Under the title "Pirates of transition", the paper delivers a dry account, enumerating a long list of mutual-aid frauds, leaving numbers to speak for themselves. The article is an inventory of 17 mutual-aid games, the total amount of money defrauded and the number of victims. Another 107 mutual-aid games are said to be undergoing investigation (*România Liberă*, May 13, 1993).

On the other side of the interpretative spectrum, numbers are also mobilized not only for their descriptive purposes, but also for their rhetorical abilities. I show below a journalistic account more favorable to Stoica, as in this case, numbers denote the professionalism and expertise at play in his business. Besides the numbers released by Stoica, as many of them come from him, the journalist includes numbers of her own, which are used to describe the relative magnitude of the business. This article, which expresses a rather positive view of the game, goes unsigned, making it clearer that numbers speak for themselves. As such, readers find out that:

> Cluj-Napoca has a population of 455,000 inhabitants. Official sources confirm that the entire population participated to the financial circuit Caritas, from the tens of thousands of unemployed to local authorities. At this moment, a very high flux of people from the counties near Cluj, but also from other parts, is registered. They all come here with the hope of

> getting rich. Ioan Stoica created a special donation fund where winners donate money for the development of the city. Although it is speculated that he made secret deals with the City Hall and the Prefecture his relationship with authorities is very discrete. [...] Out of the 773 employees, over 400 are cashiers, very young girls aged 16 to 25 years old. All the employees, besides the fact that they have an income (an average of 50,000 lei), are involved in the game and certainly have won very high amounts of money. The work schedule is exhausting, they work 12 hours a day with one-hour lunch break. The cashiers use computers (46) for deposits and payments (there are over 300 rooms where deposits are being made). [...] Calculating the winnings is done in a calculus center [...], which uses 80 computers to centralize the data received from Caritas. Every day, 20,000 receipts are printed (154,000 lei each) and that number will increase shortly. Ioan Stoica prepares the introduction of networked computers. Caritas cashes daily 5,2 billion and pays 4,1 billion, amounts which will obviously increase. Ioan Stoica retrieves a 10% commission, retrieves the VAT from the winnings and pays fantastic taxes. In April, he paid 300,000 million lei, only to reach in 70 days at 4,841,073,000 lei in taxes. In August, he will pay over 6 billion. These sums mean that until this moment, Ioan Stoica has a gross profit of over 20 billion lei (he reached 8 billion a month). Ioan Stoica confirmed that his bank account balance (no. 750 at the Agricola Bank) on July 29 was 15,461,177,143,48 lei (*Libertatea*, 1092 August 10-11, 1993).

It is striking that the numbers presented are very precise. The readers find out that there were "42,631" Cronos winners, or that the game from Ploiești produced a fraud of "3,935,492,210" lei. They also find out the precise amount of money in Stoica's bank account, an impressive 15,461,177,143,48 lei. Why is it important for the reader to know the precise number, instead of, for instance "more than 42 thousand" "nearly four billion"? What are the roles of precision and quantification in delivering an argument or of presenting reality?

Jonathan Potter *et al*. (1991) deliver the now-classical argument on the quantification rhetoric. Analyzing the case of how cancer appears on television, the authors pay attention to the way in which numerical formulations are used in arguments of non-numerical nature, especially how this type of "factual discourse" is used as a rhetorical communication device aimed at "proposing and undermining argumentative cases" (1991: 336; 333). This framework is instructive for my analysis because it provides a counterargument to the aura of objectivity that numbers usually carry, showing, at the same time, that mathematical statements are "as much a legitimate target of sociological questioning as any other

item of knowledge" (Woolgar 1988: 43). We know of numbers that they are used to establish expertise, impose authority, show that knowledge is impersonal, and render certainty and universality to arguments (Porter 1996; Poovey 1998), firming them up through the stability of meaning (Carruthers and Cohen 2000). Quantification, in general, is regarded as an "impersonal, mechanical routine devoid of human emotion, desire, and bias" (Campbell 2000). In journalism, numbers contribute to an impression of nothing-but-the-facts journalism (Roeh and Feldman 1984). "Instead of thinking about quantitative accounts as accurate renditions of some putative reality", Potter *et al.* (1991: 337) argue, we should view them as designed for their "robustness in an argumentative arena".

Nevertheless, there is a disjuncture between what numbers do and what is counted and how. An entire line of work inspired by the ethnomethodological tradition shows the organizational processes involved in the production of records, statistics, and official data (see Potter 1996). By questioning official data, the ethnomethodological project questions the roots of sociology itself, particularly the taken-for-grantedness involved in Emile Durkheim's analysis of suicide. Discussing suicide statistics, Atkinson (1983) shows that the categorization of suicides in practice differs from that inscribed in official records. Coroners and their officers have different definitions of what counts as a suicide, assembled from "taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes a typical suicide" (141-142). Statistics, which are afterwards reproduced in a variety of settings, obscure members' methods in categorizing a death as a suicide. Aaron Cicourel (1974: 85) delivers a similar account showing how law enforcement agencies "make the system work despite many problems associated with classifying juveniles [...], offenses, family settings". The police, he argues, use a combination of tacit knowledge, personal observation and standardized questions mapped into "socially and legally relevant categories" (86). Similarly, the numbers surrounding mutual-aid games are terribly approximate and saturated with members' own methods of categorizations, as well as personal evaluations and judgment. To this date, there is a conspicuous lack of knowledge concerning the number of mutual-aid games in Romania, or at least those registered, number of Caritas participants or total financial damage.

When it comes to the total number of mutual-aid games operating in Romania, no one can give a number. The General Inspectorate of the Romanian Police declares in an interview after the fact:

> Officially in the country there were about six hundred [my emphasis, A.I.] mutual-aid circuits. Not all of them managed to function. The total effective damage produced by the crooks, the total number of those conned will never be known. Certainly, we're talking high numbers. The phenomenon is now known and... renowned for its maleficent consequences. Will it also determine the coming into force of a law as a shock treatment?

This statement reveals that even producers of classifications do not have a precise knowledge of the number of games functioning in Romania. The number remains unclear up to the present date; "about six hundred" is as clear as it gets. The pessimism that surfaces from this statement underscores the absence of official accountability, which marks not only mutual-aid games, but also the emergence of private initiative after socialism.[8]

The same goes for the number of Caritas participants, as observers circulate figures ranging from two to eight million depositors. Verdery (1995: 629) reports the same interval and is right to do since the number of depositors becomes subject to political rhetoric. These estimations mark an important turning point in the social career of Caritas, namely its qualification as a "social phenomenon". The Romanian Information Service (SRI) leaks a report that estimates the number of participants in 1993 around two million (Andronic 1993: 3). In this report, SRI refers to Caritas as a social phenomenon: "The massive participation of the population to the circuit (approximately 2 million depositors in 1993) denotes its transformation into a social phenomenon" (idem). The framing of Caritas as a phenomenon, realized through quantification rhetoric, brings the discussion towards the possible consequences of its collapse. The same reports states:

> Functioning with spectacular results for more than a year (despite the bankruptcy of similar firms), Caritas will mobilize through the temptation of winning a very large number of depositors from Transylvania, but also from other counties. Locally, because it facilitates obtaining very large amounts of money, it produces inflationist phenomena (the price of an apartment in Cluj-Napoca is already the highest in the country). In time, the inflationist phenomenon will be induced in the entire Transylvanian area and the entire country. The phenomenon of the absence of work, through the decrease of motivation in achieving honest earnings or displaying initiative in the case of private entrepreneurs, is accentuated. Stoica is rumored to transform his firm into a popular bank [...] and given the high amount of money circulated and professional incompetence or

> some hazardous or deceitful operations, the future bank could create real difficulties for the national banking system. The most relevant conclusion is that interrupting the circuit through administrative measures can produce profound discontent for a large segment of the population [...], which could degenerate in social movements and protest (idem, my emphasis, A.I.).

The report itself does not rise to its hype. Announced in *Evenimentul Zilei* days ahead, and printed under the title "secret SRI report", it does not deliver too much information. Imprecision and lack of knowledge are obscured using non-numerical quantity formations. The report abounds in terms that refer to size and magnitude without telling the order of size. As such, spectacular results for a very large number of depositors from the entire country lead to inflation, lead to the explosion of prices in Cluj-Napoca, lead to people stopping working, lead to entrepreneurs lacking initiative, and finally may lead to discontent and protests. In some ways, non-numerical quantity formations are more politically inclined than numerical ones because they do not need a signifier or a context from which to extract meaning. Returning to an earlier example, one million can mean something in 1992 and, two years later, when inflation more than doubled reaching 256,1, an entirely different thing. Non-numerical quantity formations are more stable in meaning and interpretation and have the potential to fascinate or scare, depending on how one reads the situation.

Another statement comes from Romanian sociologist Achim Mihu (1993; 1994) who calculates the number of depositors at four million. In the absence of official records, he turns to mathematical inference: "according to Stoica's statements, in June 1993 alone, 1,109,000 people were enrolled on 6,892,811 game positions. This means, first, that during the most intense months, that is July, August, and September, Caritas could have enrolled over 3 million people" (1994: 108). The conditions of possibility that enable this research are intimately tied to Caritas, showing, at the same time Mihu's own positionality regarding the game. In November 1993, Mihu (1993; 1994) launches a sociological research about Caritas. Stoica uses the occasion to invoke the scientific research in some of his interviews or public talks, as proof of the solidity of his business. Contacted by Mihu, Stoica pledges his unyielding support in financing, or at least sustaining the research, yet he ends up ghosting the sociologist. Mihu nevertheless continues with his research and seeks help

from Mesagerul Transilvan, who publishes his questionnaire and later disseminates a part of the results.

At the beginning of November 1993, Mihu issues on the first page of MT a lengthy argument in favor of the need for scientific research on the topic of Caritas. Answering to an interview ran by a British television, Mihu ventures in explaining the success of Caritas. "Caritas is founded", the sociologist argues, "on the needs of a crowd of people who hope that by depositing a sum of money today they will obtain in a few months enough money to satisfy their daily needs, needs always adjusted and amplified by transition" (1993: 1-3). To his mind, transition equates with inflation, unemployment, poverty, as well as with the unbridled desire for wealth. He cites the unpublished research by two (unnamed) students who imaginatively survey the people queuing to deposit or cash in their winnings. They discover that for approximately 30% of the respondents, the winnings would be spent on immediate necessities. This only confirms Mihu's intuition that people's investment is in direct relation with poverty.

Further on, Mihu falls into the trap of functionalist thinking, by articulating the potential social functions of Caritas. "Caritas", he suggests, "could be thought of as an institution of charity or of social assistance, aiding the state and comforting a part of the population who might otherwise become socially turbulent." This type of reasoning is not only sociologically flawed, but also uncritically reproduces some of Stoica's earliest arguments in promoting his business: Caritas is a mutual-aid game that targets vulnerable and marginal groups ("needy people, retirees, and the handicapped"). In a similar way with the social functions of witchcraft among the Azande that Evans-Pritchard (1937) enunciates, for Mihu Caritas functions as a safety valve, as it takes potential social conflicts and redirects them towards a state of equilibrium.[9]

The social universe that Caritas populates can wobble at the workings of the press, who acts as an "ill-fated oracle", and journalists, the "parasites who undermine by mistrust" (Mihu 1993: 3). Via Max Weber, Mihu posits sociological (axiological) neutrality yet alleviates some of the discomforts associated with Caritas. "So far", he argues, "none of the depositors from Cluj-Napoca lost any money [...] there is risk, but what business is not subjected to risk, even to the risk of bankruptcy?" The potential negative effects of Caritas are associated with a proliferation of speculation and corruption, a negative influence on work and all other profitable/useful activities, as well as an effortless accumulation of capital, as if effortless translates necessarily as bad (idem).

Nevertheless, it is important to balance the pros and cons that Mihu enunciates. A careful examination of the two arguments shows that Stoica is not the only one to artfully manage scale: so is Mihu. The Janus face of Caritas contrasts structure and agency. Caritas brings about institutional and systemic benefits, sets in motion social institutions, and can repair and compensate the workings of the state. Individuals or social actors cannot be identified in Mihu's sketch of the social functions of Caritas, but they can easily be glimpsed in the potential dysfunctions. Caritas can produce a negative conception of work, but who, if not the people, are the ones that actually do the work? Who, if not the people, are the ones to engage in speculation and corruption, and who, if not the people, are themselves corrupted by easily accumulated capital? And who, if not the people, can accelerate its demise? A few months later, in 1994, Mihu publishes the results, thus allowing him for a more grounded explanation of Caritas. He inadvertently posits Caritas as a type of social magic and deems its workings as unworthy of attention. The question of how Stoica manages to pay eightfold, its "black box" or "secret" (1994: 108) is kept unanswered, as the sociologist redirects his attention to how "the circuit managed to attract 4 million depositors".

Caritas proponents[10] are more likely to invoke higher numbers of participants, to put forward the number of deposits instead of depositors or invoke the number of pages of winners published in the MT. This artifice can give an unrealistic portrayal of participation. For instance, in July 1993, 1,109,000 people enroll in the game on 6,892,811 positions (Mihu 1994: 108), meaning that each person enrolled on an average of six positions, or made six maximum deposits of 160,000 lei. Caritas proponents are more likely to equate the number of deposits with the number of depositors. I give two examples. Zamfirescu and Cerna (1993) and Smeoreanu *et al.* (1993) publish books in response to a TV show broadcasted on October 7, 1993 on national television, titled "What is the Caritas phenomenon and what are its effects?". Their approach is clearly defensive, trying to correct the myopias of the producers of the show who clearly depict it as a destructive scourge. Zamfirescu and Cerna (1993) argue that there are eight million Caritas participants and 40,000 millionaires solely in Cluj-Napoca. Their deposition continues by quoting Stoica's account regarding the VAT Caritas paid July through October 1994. Caritas is said to have paid "33,768,739,000" lei, a number which appears in bold, standing out in the layout of the page. To further add content to the number, they introduce an order of equivalence:

> The taxes paid by Caritas during only a third of a year were enough to cover almost completely the government's most urgent social [emphasis in original] expenses in constructions, for the entire country. We could think that in these times of austerity and poverty, it is precisely Caritas's contribution that allowed the government to launch this grandiose campaign to finish constructions and to erase from the country's landscape the bleak scenery of the abandoned blocks of flat left stranded after the death of Ceaușescu (Zamfirescu and Cerna 1993: 13).

The story ends with the collapse of Caritas. October 1993, the business interrupts payments for two days, blaming it on technical difficulties. Stoica tries to relocate his business to Bucharest, Craiova and Snagov, and fails spectacularly. He reduces the number by which winnings are multiplied from eight to four to two and increases the payout period. His attempts are in vain; Caritas never recovers. The police and investigators are left with the gruesome task of analyzing 40 million receipts issued by Caritas. In June 1994, all Caritas assets are seized and, two months later, Stoica is arrested.

NOTES

[1] Different variants of Ponzi or pyramid schemes are documented all over the world, but sociological and anthropological studies remark their incidence in post-socialist, postcolonial or post-revolutionary contexts (see Verdery 1995; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Zuckoff 2005; Musaraj 2011; 2020; Frankel 2012; Krige 2012; Cox 2014). Their emergence and success have been interpreted as symptoms of the incapacity of the financial system to come up with viable crediting solution or to keep inflation within reasonable bounds; the impossibility of legislators to secure a feasible normative framework; a cultural deficiency rooted in the changing conception of money; or the result of political and governmental leniency.

[2] In Romania there were approximately six hundred mutual-aid games. Assimilated to Ponzi and pyramid schemes, the games functioned according to a redistributive principle: people invested or deposited an amount of money and received it three-, five-, eight-, or elevenfold multiplied in a short period of time, usually no longer than three months. Initially established in Brașov in 1992 but relocated to Cluj-Napoca shortly after, Caritas eclipsed all other mutual-aid games in Romania in terms of number of participants, sums of money, but most importantly, visibility. The name "Caritas" is still used today, either as a generic term for similar businesses ("Caritas-type games") or to designate particular cases of fraud and hoax. Caritas is for Romania what Ponzi is for the United States.

[3] In Romanian, "taxi Mesagerul", named after the newspaper *Mesagerul Transilvan*, a periodical intimately tied to Stoica and Caritas.

[4] Although specifically prohibited, many of these activities accompany postsocialist imaginary and newspapers make frequent references to occult economies. To mention just a few: bio-energeticians proliferate, a leading figure being Constantin Mudava who claims to cure incurable diseases through energy fields; witches and fortunetellers thrive during the first years of transition, claiming to solve every problem, from disease and marriage, to Romanian tourism; people report miraculous healings and the translation of divine power onto rocks or pieces of wood, which animates religious pilgrimage to those specific areas; or the emergence of different impersonators, one of which, claiming to be the Orthodox patriarch managed to sell a cemetery in Bucharest (Militaru and Popa 1993).

[5] Cronos is a mutual-aid game established in Brașov that will claim over 100,000 victims, see below.

[6] The article is published on the front page of the newspaper and is followed by the ironic commentary: "but who cares now about morality?".

[7] Unlike all other statements presented above, the one coming from the Supreme Court of Justice is not an account made to be shared with the public. In this case, the statement is made to appear as "recognizably coherent" and "professionally defensible" (Garfinkel 1974: 100).

[8] One of my interviewees recounts starting a business in 1991: "we'd go to Constanța where there were these buses to and from Istanbul, we'd buy blue jeans, entire containers of jeans. In our accounting we'd register these customs papers, but it was all fuzzy... Nobody knew anything, yet the [economic] police would come and control our business, they'd get their bribes, and we'd go on with our business" (Petru 2021).

[9] The central tenet of Evans-Pritchard's structural functionalism is that society is viewed as a somehow functionally integrated organism; in other words, society is made up of components with distinctive functions that, in order to perform, must work together. When something goes off the rail, society comes up with these mechanisms (such as witchcraft and oracles for the Azande and mutual-aid games for Romanians) aimed at amending the conflict and putting it into the larger framework of the system. Ultimately, it is belief that reinforces the existing social order.

[10] The two accounts I invoke are clearly in defense of Caritas. Zamfirescu and Cerna's book is titled *The Caritas Phenomenon or Romanians' Salvation through Themselves,* and the one by Smeoreanu *et al.* (1993) *Caritas, the Radiography of a Miracle.*

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