Chapter

Systems of Belonging – a Neo-Institutionalist Approach to Family, Work and Society – the Case of Romania

Cristian Pîrvulescu

Abstract

Belonging represents a central mechanism through which individuals relate to institutions, social order, and political authority. In post-communist societies, belonging cannot be adequately explained through identity, values, or incomplete transition narratives. Instead, it must be understood as the outcome of historically structured institutional arrangements that combine formal rules with informal practices. This chapter proposes a neo-institutionalist analysis of belonging in contemporary Romania, conceptualised as a stabilised hybrid institutional ecology. Drawing on historical neo-institutionalism, field theory, and the literature on informality, the chapter analyses family, work, and society as interdependent systems of belonging. It argues that Romania's development trajectory, characterised by dependent capitalism and a minimalist welfare state, has produced a durable configuration in which social risks are systematically externalised to households, informal networks, and transnational strategies. As a result, the family functions as a primary institution of social protection, work generates income but fails to ensure stable social integration, and societal belonging is fragmented across competing sources of legitimacy, including the state, religious institutions, communities, and the diaspora. Using comparative data and recent Romanian empirical research, the chapter demonstrates that institutional hybridity is not a transitional anomaly but a stable mode of social organisation. Belonging in Romania is produced through continuous navigation between institutional registers rather than through the internalisation of universal social rights. By introducing the concept of hybrid institutional ecology, the chapter contributes to comparative debates on post-communist welfare states, social integration, and the political consequences of institutional fragmentation.

Keywords: belonging, neo-institutionalism, hybrid institutional ecology, welfare state, dependent capitalism, informality, family, work, Romania

1. Introduction

Belonging constitutes one of the central dimensions through which individuals relate to the social order, to institutions, and to the political community. Family, work, and society are not just life settings or distinct functional domains but institutional spaces in which loyalties, obligations, recognition, and legitimacy are produced and negotiated. In this sense, belonging cannot be reduced to identity or to a psychological disposition; rather, it must be understood as an institutionally structured social relationship, dependent on rules, expectations, and practices stabilised over time.

In this chapter, belonging is understood neither as cultural identity nor as individual attachment, but as an institutionally structured social relationship. It refers to the patterned ways in which individuals gain access to resources, protection, recognition, and legitimacy through their positioning within formal and informal institutional arrangements. Belonging is produced through rules, practices, and expectations that define who is entitled to protection and under what conditions. From this perspective, belonging operates through systems of belonging, understood as relatively stabilised institutional configurations that organise access to protection, recognition, and social legitimacy.

In Romania, the question of belonging acquires particular analytical relevance. Successive historical transitions – from imperial orders to the modern nation-state, from state socialism to capitalism integrated into the European Union – have produced a stratified institutional configuration, characterised by the persistent overlap of formal rules and informal mechanisms. The accelerated modernisation that followed 1989 did not eliminate these overlaps; instead, it rearticulated them, generating a social environment in which state institutions are simultaneously indispensable and contested, while family and community networks operate as compensatory mechanisms.

This observation is supported by Romanian sociological and political science scholarship, which has consistently shown that the Romanian welfare state has developed in a minimalist and fragmented form. Research conducted within the Institute for Research on Quality of Life (Institutul de Cercetare a Calității Vieții – ICCV) has documented, since the 1990s, the transfer of social risks to the household and the family, as well as the structural dependence of individual well-being on informal resources [1], Stănescu 2004. Works coordinated by Cătălin Zamfir and Simona Maria Stănescu have highlighted that the family functions not only as an affective unit but also as a *de facto* social protection institution, in the context of public policies oriented more towards minimal compensation than towards social integration.

In parallel, Cornel Ban and his collaborators have shown that the development model adopted by Romania after 2000 – characterised by dependent economic growth and an underfunded welfare state – has produced a structural disjunction between employment and social security [2, 3]. Work has ceased to function as the primary mechanism of integration and recognition, while belonging through work has become unstable and conditional. This instability is further amplified by mass migration, analysed in depth by Dumitru [4], which operates not merely as an economic phenomenon but as an alternative institutional solution for accessing predictable rules and social protection.

In this context, Romania offers a relevant analytical case for a neo-institutionalist approach to belonging. Historical neo-institutionalism, as formulated by Douglass [5] and developed by [6], looks at informal institutional solutions through the concept of path dependence. Institutions do not disappear when they are formally reformed; rather, they alter their mode of operation through processes of layering, conversion, and adaptation.

In order to capture the relational dimension of belonging, this chapter blends this neo-institutionalist perspective with institutional field theory, developed by Pierre [7] and, more recently, by [8]. Belonging is analysed both as positioning within a field of power relations and resources, and as the capacity to navigate between different fields.

The objective of this chapter is to assert that belonging in contemporary Romania is the product of a hybrid institutional ecology stabilised over time, rather than the outcome of an incomplete transition. Family, work, and society are analysed as interdependent systems of belonging, each operating through distinct yet convergent institutional mechanisms. By integrating international and recent Romanian research and up-to-date empirical data, the chapter proposes a structured reading of how belonging is produced, negotiated, and contested in Romania.

By doing so, Romania is approached not as a case of incomplete transition but as a critical case for understanding how belonging is produced in post-communist welfare regimes characterised by dependent capitalism, institutional fragmentation, and the durable coexistence of formal and informal institutions.

2. Theoretical framework

Approaching belonging as a social phenomenon requires moving beyond explanations that reduce it to identity, values, or individual preferences. Belonging is the product of institutional arrangements that structure relations between individuals, resources, and authority, establishing who belongs, under what conditions, and with which rights and obligations. It is formed over time, transmitted through social practices, and dependent on how institutions are internalised, contested, or circumvented in everyday life. In post-communist societies, these processes are intensified by the overlap of different institutional legacies, which causes belonging to be negotiated between competing normative registers rather than derived from a stable framework of social rights [9].

The theoretical framework of this chapter is built on the articulation of three complementary perspectives. Historical neo-institutionalism provides the analytical tools necessary for understanding the persistence and gradual transformation of institutions. Field theory enables the analysis of belonging as relational positioning within a space of power and resources. The literature on informality explains why informal institutions are not just transitory deviations but stable components of the social order. Taken together, these perspectives allow for the conceptualisation of belonging as the outcome of hybrid institutional regimes characteristic of post-communist capitalisms in Central and Eastern Europe [10, 11].

Historical neo-institutionalism starts from the premise that institutions are not simply formal constraints imposed top-down, but structures stabilised over time, sedimented in practices, routines, and social expectations. According to Douglass [5], the effectiveness of formal institutions depends on their compatibility with

existing informal norms, and institutional change rarely involves rupture. The concept of path dependence explains why institutional solutions adopted at a given historical moment tend to reproduce themselves, even when the economic or political context changes significantly. In the literature on Central and Eastern Europe, this logic has been used to explain the persistence of welfare state architectures despite successive reforms and external pressures [12].

Streeck and Thelen [6] refined this perspective by showing that institutional transformation often occurs through gradual mechanisms rather than dramatic reforms. Layering allows new rules to be superimposed on existing arrangements without eliminating them. Conversion involves the use of existing institutions for purposes different from those for which they were created. Drift describes changes in institutional function brought about by non-intervention or by shifts in the environment in which institutions operate. Recent analyses of post-communist welfare states show that these mechanisms are more analytically appropriate than actor-centred explanations alone for understanding the hybrid character of social reforms [10, 12].

In Romanian scholarship, this logic has been extensively documented. Analyses conducted within ICCV have shown that social policies adopted after 1989 transferred economic and social risks to the household, consolidating the role of the family as a *de facto* protection institution [13]. This continuity cannot be explained by culture or mentality but by the persistence of institutional arrangements that have become functional in a context of an underfunded and selectively effective welfare state. From this perspective, the Romanian welfare state fits into a regional pattern of a minimalist welfare state, dependent on the market and on informal resources [11].

While neo-institutionalism explains institutional stability and gradual transformation, field theory introduces a relational perspective on belonging. For Pierre [7], society is organised into relatively autonomous fields, structured by the unequal distribution of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital. Belonging is not a static attribute but the outcome of positioning within a field and of the capacity to mobilise available resources. In post-communist societies, this positioning is profoundly shaped by unequal access to institutions, markets, and social protection, generating hierarchised forms of belonging.

Fligstein and Mc Adam [8] extended this approach by emphasising the dynamic character of fields and their interactions. Individuals and groups do not belong to a single field but navigate between different fields, adapting their strategies to constraints and opportunities. In the context of dependent capitalism in Eastern Europe, this navigation is not a freely chosen strategic option but a form of structural adaptation to a regime of accumulation that prioritises cost competitiveness and the externalisation of social risks. Cornel [14] shows that this type of capitalism produces a systematic separation between economic growth and social protection, which weakens belonging through work and displaces security functions towards the family and informal networks.

The literature on informality complements these perspectives by demonstrating that informal institutions are not residual elements of institutional underdevelopment but stable forms of social organisation. [15] differentiate between informal institutions that are complementary, substitutive, competing, or parallel to formal institutions. In post-communist welfare regimes, informality takes a substitutive role, compensating for the absence or inefficiency of public protection, particularly in areas such as care, employment, and access to resources [9].

The integration of these perspectives into a single framework, which can be termed a hybrid institutional ecology, describes a social environment in which formal and informal institutions coexist and mutually condition one another, without converging towards a single, coherent form of institutional order. In the case of Romania, this ecology is the result of the interaction between a minimalist welfare state, a regime of dependent capitalism, and informal protection mechanisms. Cornel's [14],analysis is essential in this regard, as it demonstrates that post-2000 economic policies consolidated a development model that tolerates social inequality as an acceptable side effect of growth. Within this framework, belonging is no longer created primarily by the state or the market, but is redistributed towards the family, community, and transnational strategies.

3. Romania as a hybrid institutional ecology

Within Romania's hybrid institutional ecology, systems of belonging do not function in isolation but operate as interconnected institutional arrangements through which individuals navigate protection, recognition, and authority.

Romanian social and political structures can be understood as a hybrid institutional ecology in which formal and informal institutions are not engaged in a transitional relationship of substitution but in a stabilised coexistence. This configuration is not the result of a punctual failure of post-communist reforms but the expression of a development trajectory in which the welfare state, the market, and informal mechanisms have been recalibrated simultaneously, without converging towards a coherent model of social integration. In this context, belonging is produced through navigation between different institutional registers rather than through the internalisation of a unified set of social rights.

Comparative scholarship on post-communist welfare states has emphasised the hybrid and non-unitary character of these regimes. [9] shows that the transformation of welfare states in Central and Eastern Europe did not lead to the emergence of a distinct and coherent regime, but rather to variable configurations of Bismarckian, universalistic, and market-based elements. Subsequent analyses confirm that these configurations are reinforced by unstable institutional arrangements, in which social policies are fragmented and often subordinated to macroeconomic objectives [10, 11]. Romania does fit this pattern, but with a significant feature related to the role of the family and informality.

The contribution of political economy is essential for understanding this ecology. Cornel [14] demonstrates that the development model adopted by Romania after 2000 is one of dependent capitalism, characterised by the attraction of foreign direct investment, wage competitiveness, and fiscal discipline, at the expense of consolidating a redistributive welfare state. In this model, economic growth is structurally decoupled from social protection, and inequality is tolerated as a secondary effect of development. This decoupling explains why labour market and social protection institutions fail to produce stable belonging and why security functions are externalised to the family and informal networks.

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, this situation can be interpreted as an effect of path dependence. Post-1989 reforms did not eliminate prior institutional legacies but rearticulated them within a new regime of accumulation. [12] shows that, in Central and Eastern Europe, welfare state change is better explained through

gradual mechanisms such as layering and conversion than through radical ruptures. In Romania, the formal institutions of the welfare state have been preserved at a discursive level, but their functioning has been converted in such a way that social risks are managed predominantly at the household level.

Analyses conducted by the ICCV show that social policies have been predominantly compensatory and fragmented, with a limited capacity to reduce poverty and structural inequalities [13, 16]. The welfare state operates selectively, and access to protection is conditioned by occupational status, family, and territory. In this context, the family becomes the primary provider of security, while informality acquires a stable substitutive role.

The hybrid institutional ecology also manifests itself at the territorial level. Differences between economically integrated urban centres and rural or peripheral regions not only reflect development gaps but also unequal access to functional institutions. In urban areas, belonging is more frequently mediated by the labour market and formal institutions, albeit in a precarious form. In rural and semi-peripheral areas, belonging is mediated almost exclusively by the family, self-consumption, and informal networks, reinforcing the hybrid character of the institutional ecology [16].

International migration represents a key element of this institutional ecology. Research by Dumitru Sandu has shown that Romanian migration is not only a response to income differentials but also an institutional strategy for accessing predictable rules, social protection, and professional recognition [4]. Migration functions as an alternative solution to internal dysfunctions but simultaneously produces profound reconfigurations of belonging. Transnational families become spaces for the coordination of resources and identities, connecting different institutional ecologies and consolidating the family's role as a cross-border institutional actor.

Another central element of this ecology is the competition for legitimacy. Under conditions of institutionally uneven and unpredictably perceived performance, public trust is redistributed towards non-state institutions, such as the Church or community networks. This redistribution is not a cultural reflex but a rational response to the state's inability to provide protection and meaning in a coherent manner [17]. Legitimacy becomes fragmented, and societal belonging is negotiated between multiple institutional poles.

Overall, Romania's hybrid institutional ecology is the result of the interaction between dependent capitalism, a minimalist welfare state, and informal protection mechanisms. As Cornel [14] suggests, this type of development produces growth without social integration and consolidates informal solutions as substitutes for public policies. In such a context, belonging is not institutionally guaranteed but becomes contingent, relational, and unequally distributed. This configuration explains both social resilience and vulnerability to polarisation and anti-institutional mobilisation.

3.1 The family as a system of institutional belonging

In contemporary Romania, the family constitutes the primary system of belonging through which individuals organise material security, care, and biographical continuity. This centrality cannot be explained by the persistence of traditional values but by the functioning of a minimalist and fragmented welfare

state that externalises a significant share of social risks to the household. In post-communist welfare regimes, comparative literature shows that the family tends to acquire a stable substitutive role when public policies are underfunded and selective [9, 11].

Analyses conducted by ICCV indicate that social policies have been predominantly compensatory, with a limited capacity to reduce poverty and structural inequalities, thereby consolidating the family as a *de facto* provider of security [13]. In this context, familial support, intergenerational co-residence, and informal transfers become routine mechanisms for managing social risk, particularly for children, older persons, and individuals with fragile labour market participation/insertion [16].

The functioning of the family as a system of belonging is structured by relations of obligation and asymmetric reciprocity. Unpaid care work, performed predominantly by women, compensates for deficits in public services and market provision, but generates persistent gender inequalities and constraints on individual autonomy. Existing research emphasises that this 'familialisation' of social protection is not socially neutral but redistributes risks within the household and across generations [13, 16].

Comparative data support this interpretation. Romania consistently ranks above the European Union average in terms of the risk of poverty and social exclusion, particularly for children, while public expenditure on family and children remains low. In post-communist regimes analysed comparatively, this gap between needs and state capacity is associated with the strengthening of the family's role as a social buffer [11]. As a result, familial belonging becomes a central criterion for access to protection, and the individual rarely appears as an autonomous unit of reference in public policy design.

International migration reconfigures, without diminishing, the role of the family as a system of belonging. Dumitru Sandu's research shows that Romanian migration is predominantly structured through familial and community networks, which reduce the costs of mobility and facilitate access to employment, housing, and services in destination societies [4]. Migration thus functions not only as an individual economic strategy but as a collective institutional solution to the limits of domestic social protection. In this sense, the family becomes a transnational institutional actor, capable of connecting different institutional ecologies and organising transfers of material and symbolic resources between them [10].

The social costs of this reconfiguration, particularly for children and older persons, continue to be borne largely by families under conditions in which public interventions remain fragmented and reactive. Existing research shows that these costs are unevenly distributed, concentrating in households with limited resources and in areas with restricted access to public services, thereby reinforcing the unequal character of familial belonging [16].

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, the persistence of the family as a central system of belonging can be explained through the path dependence of social policies. Successive reforms have maintained the formal institutions of protection but have converted their functioning in such a way that risk is managed predominantly through private arrangements. In post-communist welfare regimes, this conversion is associated with stabilised informal solutions rather than with incomplete transitions [9, 12].

Indicator	Romania	EU average
Risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) (2023–2024)	High	Moderate
Children at risk of poverty	Very high	High
Public expenditure on family and children (% of GDP)	Low	Significantly higher
Household dependence on informal family support	High	Low
State capacity to provide care services	Limited	Relatively high

Source: [19, 20], ICCV [1].

Table 1.
Family and social protection in Romania in a European context.

Within Romania's hybrid institutional ecology, the family generates social resilience in a context of institutional uncertainty, while simultaneously reproducing structural inequalities of gender, generation, and socio-economic status. Familial belonging functions both as a resource and as a constraint, delimiting access to protection and autonomy. This ambivalence explains why the family remains the central node of belonging, including for work as a system of fragile belonging.

Table 1 highlights the familialised character of social protection in Romania. Low levels of public expenditure on family and children are associated with a high reliance on informal support, confirming the path dependence of Romanian social policies described by [1] and [18].

3.2 Work as a system of fragile belonging

In post-communist Romania, work no longer functions as the primary mechanism of social integration and the production of belonging, but rather as a system of fragile, unstable, and highly differentiated belonging. Although employment has increased during certain periods and the economy has experienced episodes of expansion, the relationship between work, social security, and institutional recognition remains structurally disjointed. Belonging through work is conditioned by occupational position, territory, and access to complementary resources, and, for large segments of the population, it fails to produce long-term stability.

Comparative literature on post-communist welfare states shows that this disjunction is characteristic of welfare regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. [9] argues that labour market and social protection reforms were primarily oriented towards flexibilisation and cost control, rather than towards strengthening the social rights associated with work. Similarly, [11], shows that although the institutional architecture retains Bismarckian elements, the capacity for decommodification of labour remains limited, and the protection afforded to workers is fragmented and unevenly distributed.

In Romania's case, the fragility of belonging through work is inseparable from the model of economic development. Cornel [14] analyses how the dependent capitalism model adopted after 2000 prioritised the attraction of foreign investment and wage competitiveness, accepting labour precariousness and social inequality as collateral effects of growth. Within this model, work is treated predominantly as a cost factor, while social protection is subordinated to fiscal discipline and macroeconomic

objectives. [3] shows that this orientation explains the persistence of in-work poverty and the labor market's inability to generate durable social integration.

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, this situation can be understood through the mechanisms of institutional layering and conversion. [12] asserts that in Central and Eastern Europe, labour market institutions were formally reformed, but their functioning was converted in such a way that risks were transferred to the individual and the household. Employment contracts coexist with informal or semi-formal arrangements, and the rights associated with work are often weak or difficult to access. Work generates income but does not guarantee security or recognition, thereby weakening professional belonging.

Analyses conducted within ICCV indicate that a significant share of the employed population faces economic insecurity, low incomes, and limited access to social protection, even under conditions of formal employment [13]. In this context, the household and the family become central mechanisms for compensating for the risks generated by work, while professional belonging is often substituted by family belonging.

Territorial fragmentation amplifies these dynamics. In large urban centres, formal employment may offer a conditional form of belonging through relatively better access to institutions and services. In rural and semi-peripheral areas, employment is dominated by subsistence agriculture, informal work, and insecure activities, which severely limit the capacity of work to generate social integration. These differences do not reflect individual preferences but rather unequal access to institutional and economic opportunities [16].

Labour migration constitutes a structural element of this system of fragile belonging. As Dumitru [4] shows, Romanian migration functions as an alternative institutional strategy for accessing more predictable rules, higher wages, and more robust systems of social protection. For many workers, belonging through work is more stable outside national borders than within them. This externalisation of labour-based integration reduces pressure on the domestic labour market but weakens the state's capacity to construct a coherent system of professional belonging.

In the absence of strong collective mechanisms of representation, recognition through work becomes individualised and contingent. Trade unions, structurally marginalised after 1989, no longer function as mediators of collective belonging, while professional identity remains fragile and unstable. Under these conditions, work becomes part of a portfolio of survival strategies, combined with familial support, informality, and transnational mobility.

Within Romania's hybrid institutional ecology, work remains central as a source of income but loses its integrative function. As Cornel [14] suggests, economic growth without the consolidation of social protection produces fragile belonging and reinforces informal solutions as substitutes for public policies. This configuration explains why work, despite its centrality in political discourse, fails to generate social cohesion.

The data in **Table 2** confirm a structural disjunction between employment and social integration. Work generates income but does not ensure security and social recognition, supporting the analyses by [2, 3] regarding the dependent growth model and the role of labour as a cost factor.

Indicator	Romania	EU average
In-work poverty	Very high	Moderate
Share of employees in total employment	Low	High
Prevalence of informal and semi-formal work	High	Low
Stability of employment contracts	Low	Relatively high
Capacity of work to generate social security	Limited	Higher

Source: [19, 21]

Table 2.
Labour and social integration in Romania.

3.3 Society as a system of contested belonging

In post-communist Romania, society functions as a system of contested belonging, characterised by fragmented legitimacy and the coexistence of competing normative frames. Societal belonging is not generated primarily through state institutions and impersonal rights but is negotiated among the state, local communities, religious institutions, informal networks, the market, and the diaspora. This plural distribution of belonging does not indicate a conjunctural weakness but rather the stabilisation of an institutional ecology in which authority and recognition are conditioned by perceived institutional performance.

Analyses conducted within ICCV show that distrust does not express a normative rejection of the state as such, but rather the repeated experience of governance perceived as unpredictable and inequitable, with a limited capacity to provide public goods consistently [13, 16]. In this context, societal belonging is shaped more by practical experience and relational ties than by the internalisation of universal rules.

From a neo-institutionalist perspective, this situation can be understood as an effect of institutional conversion. Formal state institutions continue to function procedurally but are used in practice for purposes different from those officially stated. Local administration often becomes a space of relational mediation, while political parties frequently operate as networks for the distribution of opportunities rather than as mechanisms for representing the public interest. Comparative scholarship shows that, in post-communist regimes, this conversion is facilitated by macroeconomic pressures and by the prioritisation of fiscal stability over the consolidation of social legitimacy [10, 11].

A central actor within this institutional ecology is the Romanian Orthodox Church. Studies on social capital show that the Church enjoys significantly higher levels of trust than political institutions, functioning as a provider of symbolic continuity and moral norms in a context perceived as institutionally unstable [17]. This positioning should not be interpreted through a culturalist lens, but an institutional one. Under conditions of uneven institutional performance, the Church becomes a competitor to the state in the production of meaning and belonging.

Civil society, in turn, provides only a fragmented structure. In major urban centres, civic organisations are often connected to European networks and promote participatory and universalistic norms. In rural areas and semi-peripheral regions,

civic participation is less institutionalised and relies on informal networks and local leaders. Access to participation and representation is deeply territorially unequal, producing differentiated forms of societal belonging [16].

The political economy of development contributes decisively to this fragmentation. As Cornel [14] argues, dependent capitalism produces growth without social integration and tolerates inequality as a secondary effect of macroeconomic stability. Within this framework, the state struggles to translate economic growth into social legitimacy, and societal belonging is redistributed towards non-state actors. This dynamic explains why public trust does not automatically consolidate during periods of economic expansion.

From this perspective, populist mobilisation and anti-system voting can be interpreted as forms of negative belonging. They do not express an abstract rejection of democracy or European integration, but rather reactions to experiences of institutional exclusion and lack of recognition. Such mobilisations are more frequent in areas characterised by limited access to functional institutions and high dependence on informal mechanisms, confirming the link between institutional ecology and political behaviour [13].

The media and digital space amplify these processes. Online platforms facilitate the rapid formation of communities of symbolic belonging that bypass traditional institutions of mediation. These communities can generate solidarity and mobilisation, but also polarisation, substituting institutionalised deliberation with emotional forms of recognition and sanction. In a context of low institutional trust, these dynamics further intensify the contested character of societal belonging.

Within Romania's hybrid institutional ecology, society does not function as a unitary, integrative space but as an arena of competition for legitimacy. Societal belonging is produced through variable combinations of formal and informal institutions, and stability is maintained through adaptation rather than normative convergence. This configuration explains both social resilience and vulnerability to polarisation within the family-work-society triad.

The unequal distribution of trust indicates a conversion of legitimacy toward non-state institutions. **Table 3** the state co-exists with actors that provide meaning and symbolic stability, confirming the fragmentation of societal belonging described by [1 and 17].

Institution	**Level of public trust**
Parliament	Low
Government	Low
Local administration	Moderate
Romanian Orthodox Church	High
Armed forces	High
Source: [17, 22]	

Table 3.
Institutional trust and societal belonging in Romania.

4. Conclusions

The chapter puts forward a framework describing how Romania functions as a stabilised hybrid institutional ecology, in which formal and informal institutions coexist, overlap, and mutually condition one another. Belonging is not produced by a single type of institution, nor is it the outcome of an incomplete transition; rather, it is the effect of continuous navigation between different normative frames. Family, work, and society do not operate as separate domains but as interdependent systems through which individuals construct security, recognition, and social legitimacy.

From the perspective of the family, the analysis has highlighted the persistence of familial solidarities as a central mechanism of social protection. Approaching family, work, and society as systems of belonging makes it possible to move beyond transitional explanations and to capture the durable institutional arrangements through which social integration is produced in post-communist contexts. The family functions not only as an affective institution but as an institutional infrastructure that compensates for the limitations of the welfare state and the fragility of the labour market. This function is amplified by mass migration, which transforms the family into a transnational actor capable of connecting different institutional ecologies while redistributing social costs in an uneven manner.

In the realm of work, the chapter has shown that the Romanian labour market generates income but does not guarantee social integration. Structural fragmentation, hidden unemployment, and the externalisation of risks to the household indicate a model in which belonging through work is fragile and conditional. Within the logic of dependent capitalism, labour is treated predominantly as a cost factor, while social protection is subordinated to macroeconomic objectives, which explains the persistence of insecurity and dependence on informal mechanisms.

At the societal level, the overlap of registers of legitimacy – state, Church, community, market, and diaspora – produces a permanent competition for moral authority and recognition. In this context, public trust remains contingent, and societal belonging is negotiated primarily through concrete experiences rather than through the internalisation of universal norms. This structure explains both the resilience of Romanian society in the face of crises and its vulnerability to polarisation, populist mobilisation, and anti-institutional contestation.

The theoretical contribution of this chapter lies in the articulation of the concept of *hybrid institutional ecology* as an analytical tool for understanding belonging in post-communist societies. The Romanian case demonstrates that institutional hybridity is not a transitional stage but a durable form of social organisation, reinforced by historical legacies, divergent economic trajectories, and unevenly distributed institutional legitimacy. This perspective allows us to move beyond culturalist or transitional explanations and provides a framework for the comparative analysis of the relationships between family, work, and society in similar contexts.

Finally, Romania cannot be understood through the paradigm of linear modernisation but through its internal dynamics of institutional negotiation. This negotiation represents a resource for adaptation and a source of vulnerability simultaneously. Durable change cannot be achieved through institutional import or

abrupt reforms but through gradual processes of realignment between formal and informal institutions, between declared norms and effective social practices. In this sense, belonging remains a key analytical lens for understanding both cohesion and tension in contemporary Romanian society.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author details

Cristian Pîrvulescu
Political Science Faculty, National School of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania

*Address all correspondence to: cristian.pirvulescu@politice.ro

IntechOpen

© 2026 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. CC BY

References

[1] Zamfir C. Raportul Social Al ICCV. București: ICCV; 2017

[2] Ban C. Ruling Ideas: How Neoliberalism Goes Local. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2016

[3] Ban C, Adăscăliței D. The FDI-led Growth Regimes of the East-Central and South-Eastern European Periphery, CBDS Working Paper. 2020;**2**. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.15789.31200

[4] Sandu D. Lumile Sociale Ale Migrației Românești. Iași: Polirom; 2010

[5] North DC. Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1990

[6] Streeck W, Thelen K, editors. Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2005

[7] Bourdieu P. Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1977

[8] Fligstein N, McAdam D. A Theory of Fields. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2012

[9] Cerami A. Social Policy in Central and Eastern Europe: The Emergence of a New European Welfare Regime. Berlin: LIT Verlag; 2006

[10] Cerami A, Stubbs P Post-communist welfare capitalisms: Bringing institutions and political agency back in. EIZ Working Paper EIZ-WP-1103. Zagreb: Institute of Economics; 2011

[11] Kuitto K. Post-Communist Welfare States in European Context. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar; 2018

[12] Adăscăliței D. Welfare state development in Central and Eastern Europe: A state of the art literature review. Studies of Transition States and Societies. 2012;**4**(2):59–70

[13] Zamfir E. Politici Sociale În România După 30 de Ani: Așteptări Și Răspunsuri. București: Editura Academiei Române; 2020

[14] Ban C. Dependență Și Dezvoltare: Economia Politică a Capitalismului Românesc. Cluj-Napoca: Tact; 2014

[15] Helmke G, Levitsky S. Introduction. In: Helmke G, Levitsky S, editors. Informal Institutions and Democracy: Lessons from Latin America. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; 2006. pp. 1–32.

[16] Mărginean I, Precupețu I, editors. Enciclopedia Calității Vieții În România. București: Editura Academiei Române; 2019

[17] Voicu B. Capital Social În România. Iași: Expert Projects; 2010

[18] Stănescu SM. Challenges of social policy transformations in Romania. Internal Auditing & Risk Management. 2014;**IX**(34): pp. 219–228

[19] Eurostat. EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) [Internet]. Luxembourg: Eurostat. 2024.

Available from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions [Accessed: 2025-December-02]

[20] Institutul Național de Statistică. Statistica protecției sociale ESSPROS, anul 2023 [Internet]. București: INS. 2025. Available from: https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/statistica_protectiei_sociale_2023.pdf [Accessed: 2025-December-02]

[21] European Commission. Standard Eurobarometer 102 – Autumn 2024. Brussels: European Union ; 2024. Available from: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3270 [Accessed: 2025-December-02]

[22] Standard Eurobarometer 102-Autumn 2024. © European Union; 2024