

HOUSING CONDITIONS OF THE ROMANIAN POPULATION – A SOCIAL PROBLEM OF HIGH EMERGENCY¹

MARIANA STANCIU

This paper addresses the housing crisis in Romania in European context, providing an overview and a brief analysis of the most notable trends and concerns. The topic is of crucial importance for the Romanian society and authorities, as Romania clearly stands out in the European Union by the high rate of overcrowding, poor living conditions and lack of access of a large part of the population to decent housing. This alarm signal concludes with a call for social innovation, in order to increase the supply of widely accessible and sustainable housing.

Keywords: house overcrowding, persistent poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Mankind is presently confronted worldwide with **a crisis of housing, although the right to decent living conditions has been established as an universal right, back in 1958** (UN, 1948). Currently, the lack of access to decent dwelling conditions affects over 1.6 billion people. Decent dwelling conditions means more than just a mere roof over the head – they mean family stability and continuity, balance and physical health, safety and psychological security, better opportunities to education, to getting a job and, last but not least, to human dignity (Lemille, 2012). Despite these facts, such a situation is far from generating a UN Millennium Goal for solving housing matter. What kind of poverty reduction is speaking UN about, if the most of the poor people when are not already without any roof over the head, they are under the threat to loose their home for being unable to pay the rent? How to assure, on a steady base, education and health services access for children of this kind of people?

Many factors contribute to this situation. Some of them are that because worldwide (with some exceptions) the minimal wage, and even more, the social

Adresa de contact a autorului: Mariana Stanciu, Institutul de Cercetare a Calității Vieții al Academiei Române, Calea 13 Septembrie, nr. 13, sector 5, 050711, București, România, e-mail: mariana1stanciu@yahoo.com.

¹ Paper presented at the 2nd International Conference ‘Economic Scientific Research – Theoretical, Empirical and Practical Approaches’, ESPERA 2014, 13–14 November 2014, Bucharest, Romania.

assistance benefits are far from being enough to cope with the cost of living and with the necessities of decent dwelling conditions. Other factors regard the willing of the societies to solve the problem. For instance, there are 11 million empty houses in Europe and about 4.1 million people without a house (ziare.com, 2014). But, of course, Europe is still far from being able to say put those people in some of those houses. This matter seems not so simple.

UN developed two definitions which show the differences between distinct situations and degrees of homelessness:

- *Absolute homelessness* – when a person or family lacks any kind of dwelling and when it uses maybe some kind of temporary shelter (living in a park, in the field, in the street, in a social dwelling for emergency situations, living temporary with the relatives or friends, sleeping in a car etc.)

- *Relative homelessness* – when the dwelling that a person or family uses doesn't meet the basic parameters, i.e., it doesn't provide an adequate shelter against the elements of nature, it has no access to drinking water and decent sanitary conditions, to services of public education and health, when it presumes maintenance expenses that exceed by 50% the total incomes of that person or family (Homelessness Okanagan, 2014).

DWELLING CONDITIONS IN THE EU 28

The decent dwelling conditions, at an affordable price, in a secure environment, are a basic need and a social right within the European space. Meeting such needs contributes decisively to the decrease of poverty and social exclusion. However, this is still a desideratum for many inhabitants of the European states, Romania being one of them. Not even the EU (a better off area of social welfare within the global context) has specific responsibilities of the member states in the field of housing, although some governments have attributions of developing own policies in this field. The problem of the sustainable development, of urbanization and renewing the stock of dwellings, generates similar difficulties within the European space: urban overcrowding, speculations with the price of dwellings beyond their real economic values, dwelling difficulties of the young families, etc.

2010 was proclaimed the *European year of controlling poverty and social exclusion* (FEANTSA, 2010). Then the Lisbon Treaty set the bases of the process of cooperation and coordination within the EU in the field of improving social inclusion by providing decent housing conditions. The *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion* (European..., 2010), and *Europe 2020 Strategy* speak about the necessity that the member states develop integrated national strategies in order to alleviate the adverse impact of the homeless people and

families. The Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion (EC, 2010), states the existence of homeless people as “*one of the most extreme forms of poverty and deprivation, which expanded over the recent years*”.

PATTERNS OF DWELLING AND TYPES OF PROPERTY

In 2011, about 40.9% of the population living in EU 28 countries lived in apartments built in blocks of flats, 34.7% lived in detached houses and 23.6% in semi-detached houses. Large proportions of people living in block apartments were in Latvia (65.3%), Spain (64.9%) and Estonia (64.5%). Rather large proportions of people living in detached houses were recorded in Croatia (71.7%), Slovakia (66.8%), Hungary (64.7%) and *Romania (60.8%)*. The population living in semi-detached houses can be found particularly in Netherlands (61.2%), Ireland (59.9%) and the United Kingdom (58.9%) (Eurostat, 2014).

In 2011, more than a quarter of EU 28 population (27.4%) was living in a home bought by mortgage contract of bank loan, while two fifths (43.4%) of the population was living in a house free of such financial burdens. About 7 of 10 people from EU 28 (70.8%) were living in a home that they owned, 18% was living in dwellings rented at market level, and 11.2% were paying a rent below the market level. More than half of the population living in EU member states was living in privately owned homes, from 53.4% in Germany to 96.6% in Romania. In Sweden (65.9%), Norway (63.0%), Island (62.7%), Netherlands (59.6%) and Denmark (52.7%), more than half of the population was living in homes bought on loans. The proportion of people living in dwellings rented at market level was below 10% (in 2011) in 12 EU member states, while this rate exceeded 25% of the population in Germany, Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, Luxemburg and Austria. About 20% of the population was living on rents below the market level in all member states. The quality of dwelling can be affected, besides overcrowding, by the *lack of bathroom or toilet, a broken roof, poor natural light* etc. The *rate of severe housing deprivation* shows the proportion of people living in overcrowded homes, while being affected by at least one of the elements mentioned earlier. In EU 28, 5.5% of the population suffered from severe housing deprivation in 2011. Among the people affected by poverty (equivalent income per person below 60% of the average national income), the rate of overcrowding (in EU 28) was of 29.1% in 2011, 12% higher than the corresponding rate for the whole population. High overcrowding rates were recorded among the poor population from Hungary (71.0%), Romania (66.0%) and Poland (62.5%). The lowest overcrowding rates were recorded among the poor population from Netherlands (4.7%), Cyprus (5.7%), and Ireland (6.7%), where less than 1 of 10 poor people was living in conditions of overcrowding (Eurostat, 2014).

DWELLING PATTERN IN ROMANIA

The dwelling defines the standard of living of a family both by its architectural and functional characteristics, and in terms of the expenses with maintenance. Among the key indicators for the quality of dwelling, there is the inhabitable area, the crowding rate, the supplied facilities, location in relation with urban or community facilities.

Romania has the most austere average living conditions in Europe. Most households (97.9%) live in privately-owned homes. The proportion of rented homes is higher in the urban, most frequently being rented by employed or unemployed people. More than half of the households (57.2%) use single houses, the proportion being higher in the rural; the other population lives in buildings of several dwellings, or dwellings in blocks of flats (36.7%). 47.1% of the homes have 1–2 rooms, while 52.9% have 3 or more rooms. While more than half (56.0%) of the urban households have small dwellings, almost two thirds of the rural households have dwellings with 3 or more rooms (INS, 2010).

The living conditions in Romania reveal an extremely difficult social situation since more than 1 of 4 people (25.9% of the population) suffer from severe housing deprivation, while less than 1.0% of the population from Finland, Ireland or Netherlands is confronted with such problems.

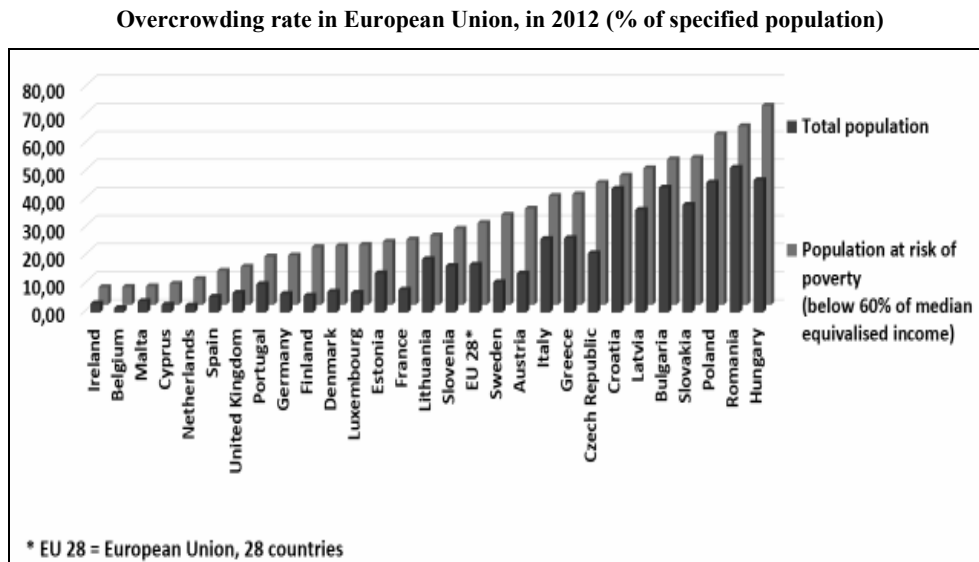
The overcrowding rate is given by the proportion of population living in overcrowded houses, as shown by the ratio of the number of available rooms in a household and the number of people living there. According to the definition of the European Commission, a household is considered overcrowded if it does not provide a minimum number of rooms equal to: one (living) room per household, one room per couple in the household, one room per each single person of at least 18 years of age, one room per pair of single people of the same gender between 12 and 17 years of age, one room per each single person between 12 and 17 years of age and not included in the previous category, one room per pair of children under 12 years of age (Eurostat, 2014).

While in 2011, 17.1% of the EU 28 population was living in overcrowded houses, the *overcrowding rate* in Romania was 54.2%. Lower overcrowding rates were recorded in Bulgaria (47.4%), Poland (47.2%) and Hungary (47.1%) (Eurostat, 2014).

Despite a slight improvement in the indicators, the situation of Romania in 2012 was still very poor, with an overcrowding rate related to the total population of 51.6%, while the population at risk of poverty rate had a rate of 63.7%.

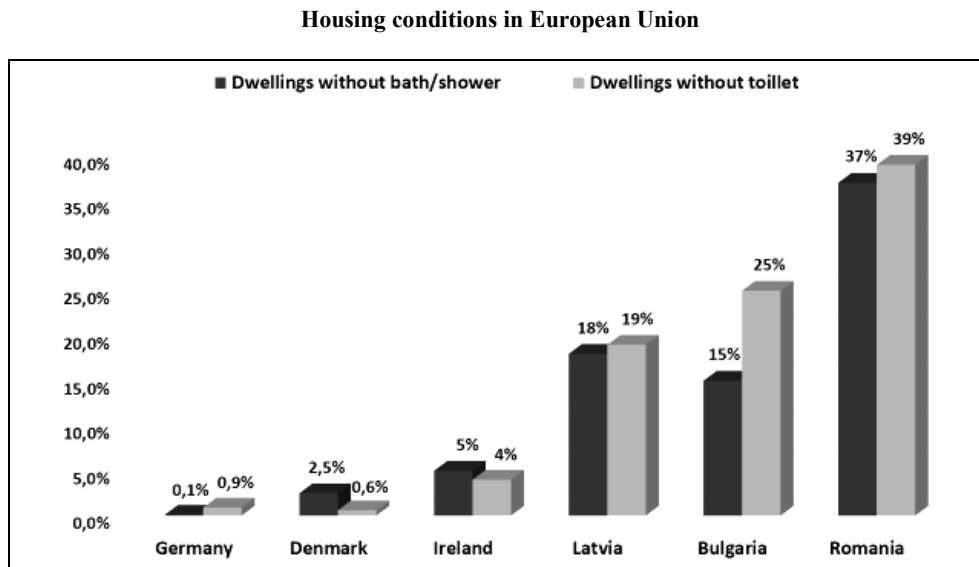
Moreover, Romania ranks first in terms of percentage of houses that have no bath of shower and of those without a flushing toilet, according to the European Statistical Office Eurostat.

Figure 1



Source: Eurostat, Living Conditions, Poverty, 2014, *Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – Total population (source: SILC)*, prin site-ul Knoema, http://knoema.com/ilc_lvho05a/overcrowding-rate-by-age-sex-and-poverty-status-total-population-source-silc?action=download.

Figure 2



Source: Amariei, R., 2014. Veceul din fundul curții și casele supra-aglomerate – brand național. Capital, 30 ianuarie 2014, citând date Eurostat 2011, <http://www.capital.ro/veceul-din-fundul-curti-si-casele-supra-aglomerate-brand-national.html>.

Along 22 years (1990–2011), the number of dwellings increased by 462,000 units, from 8,006,000 to 8,468,000, while the population decreased by more than 4.2 million people (18%). According to INS data, the estimated stable population of Romania was **19,697,103** inhabitants on **July 1st, 2013** (INS, 2013). At the 2011 Census, the total number of households from Romania was 7,086,394, the average number of people living in a household being 2.6 and the number of conventional dwellings being **8,450,942**.

Table 1

Number of dwellings in Romania between 1990 and 2011 (at the end of the year) (thousands)

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
8,006	7,659	7,683	7,710	7,749	7,782	7,811	7,837	7,860	7,885	7,908
2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
8,107	8,129	8,152	8,176	8,201	8,231	8,270	8,329	8,385	8,428	8,468

Source: Anuarul Statistic al României 1991–2012, INS, București.

Over the past 10 years, in Romania the ratio of the people to the number of available rooms reversed, the occupancy rate decreasing from 1.04 persons/room, to about 0.9 persons per room. The average number of rooms per dwelling increased from 2.8 to 3.1, while *the average area of the dwelling increased from 37.5 m² in 2002, to 39.6 m² in 2012* (from 14.6 to 15.1 m² per room).

Table 2

Dynamics of the number of inhabitable rooms in Romania between 1990 and 2011 (thousands)

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
17,998	18,848	18,923	19,009	19,125	19,230	19,328	19,420	19,510	19,603	19,689
2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
20,791	20,876	20,963	21,054	21,153	21,273	21,428	21,638	21,841	22,011	22,168

Source: Anuarul Statistic al României 1991–2012, INS, București.

In Romania housing conditions and costs are also present among social scientific research (Mihăilescu, 2014: 24–26), Romania is still far from the European standards of housing, including from the neighbouring countries. In countries such as Germany, France or Italy, the average area of a home is 90 m², while it is 60 m² in Bulgaria, 70 m² in Poland and 80 m² in Hungary and Czech Republic. The reason for lower home areas in Romania is the limited resources available to the population for building a home, as well as the more restrictive credit conditions.

For the young families from Romania, the limited housing area is one of the strongest determinants of the family size. The restrictions imposed by the limited

inhabitable area and its overcrowding, the poor economic situation and the continuous degradation of the public and social services had a large contribution to the decrease of the birth rate in Romania. Because of these causes, much of the Romanian population migrated after 1989 in search for better living conditions.

Table 3

Dynamics of the inhabitable area in Romania between 1990 and 2011 (thousands m²)

1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
246,847	258,518	259,854	261,377	263,271	265,036	266,731	268,860	270,514	272,231	273,923
2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
304,454	306,158	308,012	309,938	312,020	314,542	317,834	322,205	326,413	330,008	333,349

Source: Anuarul Statistic al României 1991–2012, INS, București.

Table 4

Dwelling patterns in Romania compared to other European countries

Country	Inhabitable area per person (m²)	Average number of rooms per person	Overcrowded dwellings in the total dwellings (%)
Denmark	53.0	1.9	7.8
Austria	50.4	1.7	13.2
Sweden	43.6	1.8	10.0
Germany	41.3	1.7	7.0
Netherlands	40.4	2.0	1.7
Spain	36.4	1.9	3.2
United Kingdom	35.0	1.8	7.2
France	34.9	1.8	9.6
Italy	34.6	1.2	23.3
Belgium	33.7	2.3	3.9
Ireland	33.7	2.1	3.7
Finland	32.7	1.9	5.9
Greece	32.0	1.2	25.0
Portugal	30.8	1.5	14.1
Slovenia	29.2	1.1	38.0
Estonia	24.0	1.2	41.2
Poland	22.9	1.0	49.1
Lithuania	21.0	1.1	49.0
Hungary	20.0	1.0	55.0
Czech Republic	19.0	1.3	26.6
Slovakia	17.6	1.1	39.7
Latvia	15.3	1.0	57.7
Bulgaria	14.6	1.0	47.0
Romania	14.4	1.0	55.3

Source: Eurostat, taken from riscograma.ro, Business Intelligence, 15.01.2011.

DEVIANCIES IN THE FIELD OF HOUSES TRADE

A particular problem of housing comes from the *extremely limited access of the families* to buy a house. After 1990, the price of houses increased continuously and peaked after the accession of Romania to the EU, when the prices increased by up to 500%.

Table 5

Evolution of the costs of a dwelling* in Bucharest, in 1989–2010
expressed in number of average wages

Type of dwelling	Year	Cost of a dwelling	Necessary average wages	Waiting period while saving <i>two</i> average wages monthly
Two-room apartment	1989	120,000 lei	40	1 year, 8 months
	2010	430,000 RON (100,000 euro)	292	12 years, 2 months
Three-room apartment	1989	180,000 lei	60	2 years, 6 months
	2010	516,000 RON (120,000 euro)	350	14 years, 6 months

Note: * Apartment in a block of flats, comfort 1, separate rooms, built after 1980, residential area of average level.

Sources: For 2010, calculation by the author; for 1989, calculation taken from Dan, 2006.

Under such conditions, an average family of young people earning two average wages, needs to wait for about **25 years** to buy a two-room apartment or **29 years** to buy a three-room apartment, on the basis of saving **one average wage monthly**. The calculations show the absurd economic relations from the Romanian housing market, with regard to the offer of dwellings addressed to a family where both partners receive the average wage per economy.

ONE DWELLING ACCESSIBLE TO EACH FAMILY

In 2012, about 11.2% of the EU 28 population lived in dwellings for which they were spending 40% or more from the available equivalent income of the family. In EU 28, the highest proportion of the population whose cost with dwelling exceeded 40% of the available family income, was noticed for the tenants with rental contracts concluded at the market price (26.2%), while the lowest proportion was for the owners of homes that were not overburdened with bank loans or mortgages (6.8%). Large differences can be noticed, though, between the EU 28 member states: on the one end there are the states where rather low proportions of the population live in houses for which they spend more than 40% of the available income, such as Cyprus (3.3%), Malta (2.6 %), Luxembourg (4.9%), Finland (4.5%), Slovenia and France (both with 5.2%); at the opposite end there are the states where high

proportions of the population live in houses for which they spend more than 40% of the available income, such as Greece (with 33.1% of the population), Denmark (with 18.2% of the population), Germany (16.6%), *Romania (16.5%)*. In Romania only 13.0% of the population lives in financially overburdened homes, because due to the very low average wage in economy (350 Euro monthly), very few people dare to contract a credit for buying a house.

Table 6

Population living in financially overburdened houses, depending on the type of property, in some European countries, in 2011 (%)

Country/Zone	Total population (%)	Inhabited by owner, with mortgage or bank loan	Inhabited by owner, no loan	Rented at market price	Rented on lower rent or for free
EU 28	11.4	9.0	6.5	26.1	14.0
Eurozone	10.9	9.0	5.1	23.8	10.6
Belgium	10.6	3.3	2.4	38.1	14.9
Bulgaria	9.0	23.1	7.4	32.8	15.4
Czech Republic	9.5	5.3	6.4	25.0	18.7
Germany	16.1	13.6	10.5	21.4	16.5
Estonia	7.4	12.7	4.9	28.1	9.3
Ireland	6.1	3.3	2.0	19.9	8.4
Greece	24.2	11.9	21.4	42.7	30.6
Spain	12.1	13.8	4.8	48.1	10.1
France	5.3	1.4	0.6	16.0	9.4
Croatia	7.8	13.3	6.9	33.0	12.8
Italy	8.4	6.3	2.9	33.3	9.3
Cyprus	2.7	3.5	0.5	17.0	1.1
Latvia	12.6	27.9	10.5	16.5	12.8
Lithuania	10.7	20.6	8.9	66.5	12.8
Luxembourg	4.2	0.6	0.5	13.7	1.6
Hungary	11.8	20.5	6.8	43.8	16.8
Malta	2.8	4.5	1.9	32.5	1.5
Netherlands	14.5	14.0	3.4	18.2	6.6
Austria	4.8	1.4	1.9	11.3	5.0
Poland	10.2	10.0	8.6	27.1	14.3
Portugal	7.2	8.5	2.0	25.5	3.1
Romania	9.9	13.5	9.2	65.3	11.4
Slovenia	4.7	10.5	2.8	18.3	5.6
Slovakia	8.4	23.6	6.4	12.9	8.9
Finland	4.4	2.3	2.8	12.5	8.3
Sweden ⁽¹⁾	7.9	3.1	10.9	17.5	46.5
United Kingdom	16.4	8.8	9.1	45.0	23.9
<i>Island</i>	<i>11.3</i>	<i>10.8</i>	<i>6.5</i>	<i>18.6</i>	<i>13.7</i>
<i>Norway</i>	<i>10.4</i>	<i>8.2</i>	<i>7.1</i>	<i>27.7</i>	<i>18.2</i>
<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>13.1</i>	<i>7.1</i>	<i>11.8</i>	<i>17.7</i>	<i>15.7</i>

Source: Statistics Explained, Eurostat, 2011.

THE NEED FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION TO INCREASE THE OFFER OF WIDELY AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The only possible way out from the current housing crisis can be generated by social innovation for building much cheaper and, why not, much more sustainable houses. Currently several such initiatives are noticed worldwide – initiatives that consider various solutions, starting with community mobilization to build cheap houses (particularly after calamities which destroyed a large number of dwellings) and ending with the use of nonconventional materials for building houses – which also draws general attention to the waste of materials (PET, other packaging etc.), or with the use of new materials, extremely durable and rather cheap – avant-garde architecture, whose solutions might be widely disseminated.

CONCLUSIONS

We cross a worldwide period of discovering new building materials and cheaper solutions for setting up dwellings addressed to low and medium income people. In these days, being UN or EU and speaking about poverty reduction, but ignoring the matter of housing conditions and costs, is pure rhetoric if not demagoguery. Romania has all the necessary data to start a new era in developing residential real estate despite the fact that it presents a critical social situation, regarding the limited access of the new generations at getting a house. For this reason the Romanian economists, engineers, architects and social policy makers should search new and more realistic ways of thinking the strategy for building, in a short while, cheaper and better houses. It is a very large need and space for new business in this field.

REFERENCES

1. Amariei, R., *Veceul din fundul curții și casele supra-aglomerate – brand național*, in „Capital”, January 30th, 2014, available online at <http://www.capital.ro/veceul-din-fundul-curtii-si-casele-supra-aglomerate-brand-national.html>.
2. Dan, A. N., *Politici de locuire: România încotro? O analiză comparativă a României în contextul ECE și UE*, București, Editura Universității din București, 2006.
3. Lemille, A., *The NEST Project*, in Huff Post, 2012, available online at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/alexandre-lemille/hult-global-case-challenge-nest-project_b_1417975.html.
4. Mihailescu, A., *Minimul de trai. Instrument în politicile sociale*, București, Editura Academiei Române, 2014
5. *** *Anuarul Statistic al României 1991–2012*, București, INS.
6. *** *Condițiile de viață ale populației din România în anul 2009*, INS, 2010, available online at http://www.adevarul.ro/life/viata/Studiu_INS_Conditii_de_trai_ADVFIL20101118_0001.pdf.
7. *** *European Consensus Conference on Homelessness*, 9–10 December 2010, EC, FEANTSA ș.a., Brussels, 2010.

8. *** *Glossary: Overcrowding rate. Statistics Explained*, European Commission, Eurostat, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Glossary:Overcrowding_rate. Accessed on January 20, 2014.

9. *** *Housing Conditions*, Eurostat, 2011, preluare din risco.ro, Business Intelligence.

10. *** *Housing statistics*, Eurostat, available online at http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Housing_statistics. Accessed on January 23, 2014.

11. *** *Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion*, EC, 2010, available online at aei.pitt.edu/42873/1/Joint_report_2010.pdf.

12. *** *Mișcarea naturală a populației în luna iunie 2013*, Comunicat de presă, nr. 196 din 9 august 2013, București, INS.

13. *** *Overcrowding rate by age, sex and poverty status – Total population* (source: SILC) Eurostat, Living Conditions, Poverty, 2014, Prin site-ul Knoema, available online at http://knoema.com/ilc_lvho05a/overcrowding-rate-by-age-sex-and-poverty-status-total-population-source-silc?action=download.

14. *** *Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion*, European Commission, 16th December, 2010.

15. *** *Scandalul celor 11 milioane de locuințe goale din Europa*, 2014, available online at <http://www.ziare.com/articole/europa+persoane+fara+adapost+locuinte>.

16. *** South Okanagan Homelessness Project 2005. *Definition of Homelessness. Homelessness Okanagan*, available online at <http://homelessnessokanagan.tripod.com/id11.html>. Accessed on January 20, 2014.

17. *** *Statistics Explained*, Eurostat, 2011, available online at [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Housing_cost_overburden_rate_by_tenure_status_2011_\(%25_of_population\)_YB14.png&filetimestamp=20131219075521](http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php?title=File:Housing_cost_overburden_rate_by_tenure_status_2011_(%25_of_population)_YB14.png&filetimestamp=20131219075521); http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Housing_statistics. Accessed on January 23, 2014.

18. *** *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, United Nations General Assembly, New York, (1948), 1996.

Lucrarea prezintă criza locuințelor din România în context european, oferind o imagine de ansamblu și o scurtă analiză asupra celor mai notabile trenduri și preocupări din domeniu. În prezent, problema condițiilor de locuit prezintă o importanță socială de prim ordin pentru comunitatea românească, de vreme ce, în UE, România are cei mai ridicați indicatori ai supraaglomerării spațiului de locuit, condiții de locuire precare și o lipsă a accesului populației majoritare la condiții decente de locuit. Lucrarea lansează un semnal și în sensul necesității de a crește preocupările specialiștilor pentru inovația socială în sfera construcției de locuințe mai larg accesibile pentru populația cu venituri mici și medii.

Cuvinte-cheie: suprapopulare a locuinței, sărăcie persistentă.

Primit: 14.11.2014

Redactor: Ioan Mărginean

Acceptat: 12.12.2014