



ORIGINAL PAPER

The impact of innovative methods in post-communist social assistance, for people with disabilities

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Abstract. This paper focuses on a comparative analysis of the development of social work services, starting from the communist era, when the profession was officially eradicated, and continuing along its path towards the use of modern techniques and methods, which are currently being successfully applied in developed European countries and other regions of the world. The implementation of these innovative methods in social work has become a priority in promoting the autonomy and integration of people with disabilities. During this period, social services were practically non-existent, unrecognized and focused on institutionalization, which limited the individual development of people with disabilities and deprived them of the opportunity to live in a manner consistent with fundamental human rights. Beginning around 1989-1990, the profession of social work was revived and, over time, new assistive technologies, online counseling, and art, music, and nature therapies were introduced to increase the active participation and autonomy of these individuals.

The study examines the perceptions of 58 social workers regarding the effectiveness of these methods, how often they are used, and their impact on beneficiaries. The purpose of the analysis is to highlight the role of new techniques and methods in developing social, cognitive, and emotional competencies. The results indicate that innovative approaches contribute significantly to increasing the autonomy and social integration of beneficiaries. The conclusions emphasize the need to expand and adapt these methods to increase the efficiency of social services, particularly in the context of neoliberal trends aimed at reducing state intervention, so that vulnerable individuals receive the support they need.

Keywords: *Social assistance, communism, social services, disabilities, social and integration effects.*

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1. Introduction

The general objective of this paper is to conduct an analysis, based on several specialised sources, of the development of social assistance services for people with disabilities from the communist era to their transition to modern techniques and methods currently in use. Another aim of the research is to analyse the perceptions of 58 social work specialists regarding the impact of the use of modern methods and techniques. This transition from an institutionalised approach to modern, beneficiary-centred methods is highlighted by studies whose data indicate high levels of individual autonomy.

Research in this area has emphasised the need for a personalised relationship between social workers and clients, a complex process that requires mutual involvement and continuous adaptation. Tailoring social services to specific needs has become an alternative to the traditional model, which has been criticised for creating dependency among beneficiaries and for lacking innovation. The model of personalised social services focuses on adapting to the needs of each individual, giving them the opportunity to actively participate in the management of their services and, most importantly, the ability to choose and maintain control.

The ultimate goal is for individuals to take control of their own lives and care, with the exception of people with intellectual disabilities, whose limited decision-making capacity leads to the delegation of these responsibilities and choices to relatives or care centres (Prandini, R., 2018:1-7).

The research explores social workers' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of modern intervention methods in enhancing the autonomy, personal development, and social integration of people with disabilities.

2. General perspective on the evolution of the social assistance system (1920-2025)

The social assistance system in Romania has undergone a significant evolution during the last century, adapting to the economic, social and, above all, political changes. The historical stages of the development of social assistance services can be divided as follows:

- 1920-1945 - diversification and stabilisation of social services.
- 1945-1989 - decline and deterioration of the system during the communist period.
- 1989-present - restructuring, modernisation and adaptation to European Union standards.

Between 1920 and 1945, the Romanian state became increasingly involved in the organisation and professionalisation of social assistance services. During the inter-war period, social welfare issues in Romania became more pressing due to poverty, the increasing number of beggars and vagrants, and children with special needs.

Between 1945 and 1989, Romania's social assistance system underwent a significant decline, mainly due to the ideological policies of the communist regime. In 1948, labour and social welfare issues were further reorganised under the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (Manoiu, F. & Epureanu, V., 1996:14).

The communist government rejected the concept of poverty and vulnerable groups and officially denied the need for social assistance, claiming that equality and communist welfare were the foundation of a strong nation. Between 1959 and 1970, the social assistance system functioned only by inertia, as the regime made a systematic effort to dismantle the principles underpinning social assistance institutions, severely undermining their effectiveness (Lambru, M., 1998, 61).

The impact of innovative methods in post-communist social assistance, for people with disabilities

The number of social workers was drastically reduced to less than 200 professionals, whose work was limited to ministerial and district level administration.

After 1989, the transition from communism to democracy led to significant changes in social assistance, ranging from the public recognition of social issues through various channels (administrative, journalistic, political, etc.) to the reconstruction of the social assistance system.

With the change of government, the social assistance system underwent a double reform:

- legislative reform, aimed at restructuring the legal framework and
- administrative reform, aimed at modernising standards, procedures and the training of professionals.

As a result, the public social assistance system was reorganised and the non-governmental organizations sector began to develop as a complementary support system (Drăghici, E., 2022: 19).

3. The Impact of social assistance services on people with disabilities

In Romania, the post-1989 socio-economic transition and the development of the legislative framework led to an expansion of social services at the national, regional, and local levels. Defined as interventions in employment, healthcare, education, and social security, these services are funded by public authorities or the private sector.

By 2005, Romania had 1,451 public social assistance units, of which 71.67% provided services for children, 11.65% for people with disabilities and 9.10% for the elderly.

The country experienced visible growth in both public and private social services, before and after joining the European Union (Andrioni, F., 2011: 2-6).

The entire transition period was marked by decentralization the reconstruction of territorial social assistance networks and the modernization of services (Lambriu, M., 1998: 61).

At the same time, non-profit organisations (NGOs), associations, foundations developed, public-private partnerships increased significantly. The transition period highlighted the need for an efficient social assistance system, with a clear strategy and well-defined competencies to manage the growing demand for social services and the high costs of reform (Drăghici, E., 2022:20-21).

Assessing the quality of life of a person with a disability involves considering physical, mental and spiritual aspects, as well as economic and social resources. The medical approach is closely linked to therapeutic interventions that support autonomy in daily activities (Domnariu, C., Pop, S., & Domnariu, P., 2014:1-3).

The relationship between social professionals and vulnerable individuals is circular, highlighting how these two dimensions influence each other. Variables such as attachment, defensive style and cooperation form the basis of effective therapeutic interventions (Lingiardi, V., Tanzilli, A., & Colli, A., 2008: 4-6).

4. Research design and methodology

The data collection process was carried out over an extended period, from November

2024 to March 2025, to ensure a representative sample.

The questionnaire used, entitled "*Questionnaire on innovative methods and techniques used by social workers: practical experiences and Impact on People with*

Disabilities", was primarily addressed to active social workers in the public and private sectors, and other professionals involved in supporting people with disabilities.

To develop the questionnaire, various validated studies and surveys were analysed and the EBPAS-15 (*Evidence-Based Practice Attitude Scale-15*) was selected for its relevance. Developed by Gregory A. Aarons in 2004, the EBPAS-15 assesses the attitudes of mental health service providers towards the adoption of evidence-based practices. This tool is widely used in the United States and internationally and has demonstrated high reliability. The validity of the full EBPAS-15 scale has been repeatedly confirmed, emphasising its multidimensional nature (Santesson et al., 2020:2-3). The questionnaire is divided into three parts, each with a specific role in exploring the use of innovative practices by social workers in supporting people with disabilities, with a total of 25 questions.

The first part collects socio-demographic data from the respondents, including information such as full name, location, background (urban/rural), age, gender, level of education, field of work, job position and professional experience in social care. These details are essential for characterising the sample and understanding the professional context of the participants.

Section I consists of 10 closed and open-ended questions that focus on assessing social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of modern intervention techniques and methods, analysing their impact on personal development and the autonomy of beneficiaries. The data analysed in this section were used and presented in a previous article entitled: "*Social Workers' perspectives on innovative methods and techniques in supporting people with disabilities: an empirical analysis*".

Section II explores social workers' perspectives on the role of innovative methods in facilitating social integration and increasing the involvement of people with disabilities in their own decision-making processes. This section includes questions about the challenges faced in using these methods, their effectiveness in improving the quality of life of beneficiaries, and possible improvements to optimise interventions.

The final sample of the study consists of 58 participants, all active professionals in the field of social work, directly involved in the provision of social services to people with disabilities.

Initially, the questionnaire was completed by a larger number of respondents, but some did not meet the established criteria and were excluded from the analysis to maintain the relevance and validity of the results. Participants come from both the public and private sectors, including NGOs and other organisations that support people with disabilities, ensuring a balanced representation of professionals in the field.

5. Data analysis

As part of the research, we chose the quantitative method, which proved to be the most appropriate to achieve the proposed objectives. The process involved an extended data collection period (November 2024 - March 2025) to ensure a representative sample, followed by statistical analysis and presentation of the results.

This approach allowed the identification of significant patterns and correlations, using tables and graphs for clear interpretation of the data. This proved to be the most appropriate method for achieving the research objectives. It also allowed us to highlight the perceptions of social work professionals regarding the impact of these methods on the autonomy and social integration of people with disabilities.

The impact of innovative methods in post-communist social assistance, for people with disabilities

Section II contains 10 questions (items 11-20) that explore the role of innovative methods and techniques in the social integration, autonomy and self-determination of people with disabilities.

The questionnaire contains a variety of question types:

- a trichotomous question with three different response options: 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know/no response', allowing respondents to choose between affirmation, negation or lack of information/opinion (item 11).

- items 12 and 16 allow for multiple responses by selecting multiple options regarding observed progress.

- items 14, 15, 17 and 18 are Likert scale questions with multiple levels, such as:

"Not at all / To a lesser extent / ... / To a very great extent", "Very effective" to "Ineffective", plus a fifth response option: "I don't know / No answer", which does not fit into the scale itself, but allows respondents not to rate effectiveness, with numerical classifications ranging from 0 to 5.

- open-ended questions requiring honest, text-based answers (items 13, 19 and 20).

The questionnaire therefore combines standardised response questions, which are useful for quantifying information, with open-ended questions, which allow for additional, personalised details about respondents' experiences and perceptions.

Section II has two specific aims:

- to explore social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of innovative methods in developing the skills of people with disabilities.

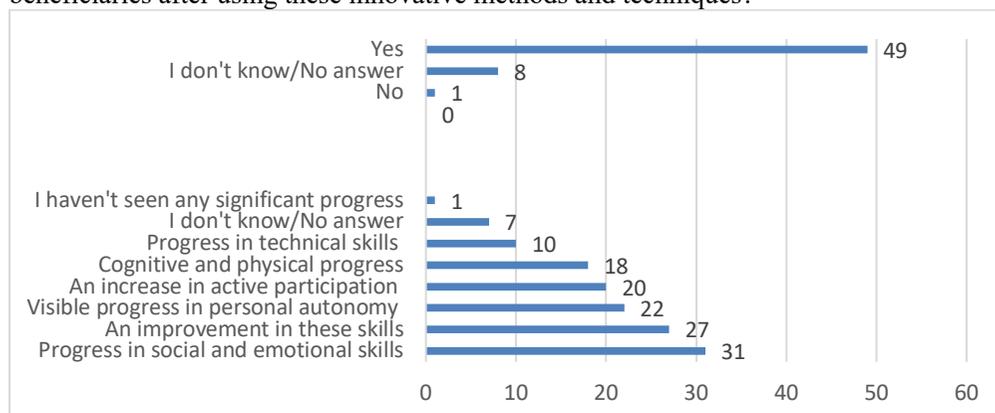
- to investigate the impact of these methods on the autonomy and social integration of the beneficiaries.

The administration of this questionnaire was designed to meet two specific and relevant research objectives:

- Items 11, 12, 18 and 19 correspond to research objective no. 1: to investigate social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of innovative methods in developing the skills of people with disabilities.

- Questions 11 and 12 analyse the impact of innovative methods on the personal development and autonomy of the beneficiaries:

Figure 1. Question 11. Have you seen improvements in the personal development of beneficiaries after using these innovative methods and techniques?

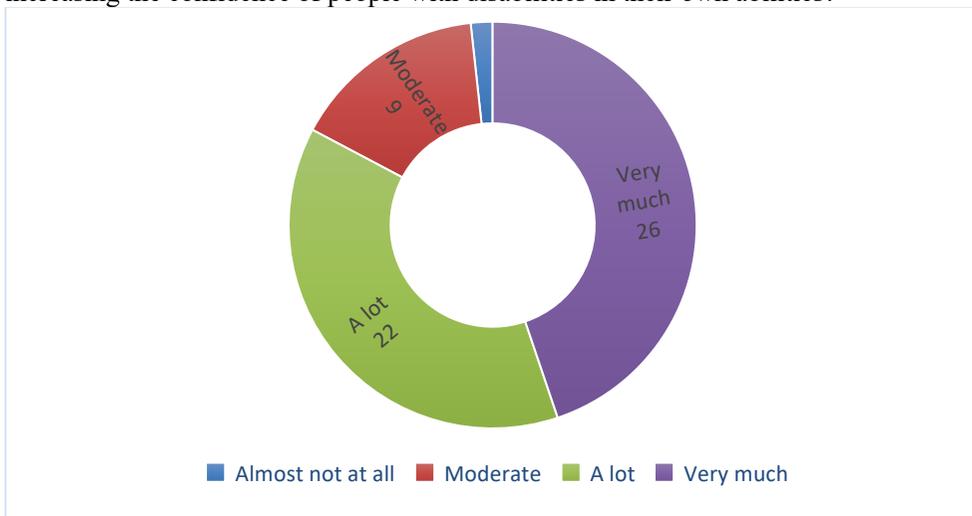


(Source: generated by the authors)

The graph shows the positive impact of the use of innovative methods and techniques on the personal development of the beneficiaries. Most respondents (49 people) observed improvements, with only 1 person not making any significant progress and 8 respondents not giving a clear answer. The most reported benefits include progress in social and emotional skills (31 responses), improvement in personal skills (27), increased autonomy (22) and active participation (20). In contrast, progress in technical skills (10 responses) and cognitive/physical progress (18) were less frequently observed. These data suggest that innovative methods contribute significantly to personal development, particularly in terms of social integration and beneficiary autonomy.

Question 18 assesses the contribution of these methods, to increasing confidence in one's own abilities:

Figure 2. Question 18. To what extent do you think innovative methods contribute to increasing the confidence of people with disabilities in their own abilities?



(Source: generated by the authors)

Most respondents feel that these methods have a significant positive impact, Most respondents feel that these methods have a significant positive impact, as shown below:

- 26 people (around 45%) believe that they make a great contribution
- 22 people (around 38%) consider the impact to be high
- a smaller number of 9 respondents (around 16%) consider the impact to be moderate
- while an insignificant percentage, less than 1%, believe they have minimal impact.

These results highlight the importance of implementing innovative strategies to increase the autonomy and self-confidence of people with disabilities and indicate a continuous need to develop and adapt these methods within social support and integration programmes.

Question 19 is an open-ended question asking which innovative methods are considered most effective for personal development. The identified results have been grouped by type of methods and techniques as follows:

The impact of innovative methods in post-communist social assistance, for people with disabilities

✓ assistive technologies and digitalisation, which includes the use of technology

to support the personal development of beneficiaries, especially those with disabilities. Assistive technologies and digital methods are seen as useful for communication, learning and autonomy. Examples of responses include: *"Video calls for the deaf, mobile applications designed for the deaf"* *"The use of devices that emit both sounds and signals"* *"Assistive technologies"* *"Online counselling, telemedicine"* *"Digitalisation"* *"At this historical stage, I believe that the use of technology can make a difference"*

✓ the use of modern technologies is one of the most frequently mentioned methods, demonstrating the positive impact of digitalisation on the development of beneficiaries. These solutions allow better communication, access to information and greater autonomy for these people.

✓ art therapy or creative therapies, which are often used to improve emotional

well-being, socialisation and personal development: *"Art therapy, basic skills training"*, *"Art therapy and nature therapy"*, *"Communication through art"*, *"Associative, cognitive, playful methods and art therapy"*, *"Dance therapy, music, workshops"*, *"Creative workshops, art therapy methods, music, dance, social activities, excursions, nature walks, etc."*.

"Music and dance therapy!"

✓ methods based on social interaction and counselling: many respondents emphasised the importance of counselling, group therapy and integrated interventions. Examples from the responses: *"Counselling, assistive devices, etc."*

"Counselling and animal-assisted therapy" *"Counselling, sensory-motor art therapy"* *"Group therapy and therapy with several specialists at the same time"* *"Integrated interventions by specialists"* *"Group therapy"*.

✓ the importance of accompanying methods that promote the beneficiaries'

independence and help them develop self-confidence: *"Learning independent living skills"* *"Those that provide greater autonomy"* *"Specifically for beneficiaries with severe intellectual disabilities, I believe dance therapy, music and workshops are effective"* *"Physical therapy activities through aquatic therapy, learning through virtual reality and augmented reality"*.

Items 13, 14, 15, 16 and 17 correspond to **research objective 2**, which is to analyse the impact of these methods on the autonomy and social integration of the beneficiaries.

One of the main difficulties that beneficiaries face in using innovative methods is the lack of access and the necessary knowledge to use them effectively. Many people with disabilities were not previously familiar with these methods and some, especially older people, "do not know how to use technology" or "are afraid of new technologies". The degree of disability plays a crucial role and affects the understanding and use of these methods, especially for people with "cognitive deficits, rigidity towards new experiences".

In addition, lack of confidence and fear of change are significant barriers as some beneficiaries find it difficult to accept alternative therapies. One specialist noted that "many beneficiaries lose concentration very easily and get bored quickly", making it difficult to maintain their engagement in new activities.

In addition, limited access to technology and physical limitations such as "*speech and mobility impairments*" make the adoption of new methods more difficult.

Another major challenge is the lack of material and human resources, both at the level of the beneficiaries and at the level of the organisations. Specialists pointed out that "*the difficulties lie with the organisations because there are no financial resources*" and that "*the lack of family support*" significantly affects the progress of the beneficiaries.

In addition, some beneficiaries show reluctance and refusal to cooperate as they struggle with "*fear of the new*" and do not immediately see the positive effects of these methods. One practitioner emphasised that "*they want an immediate result, they don't trust the process*", explaining that the lack of quick results can demotivate beneficiaries.

In fact, the social system, including institutional disinterest and the isolation of people with disabilities, further complicates the application of these methods.

Table 1. Perception of the effectiveness of innovative methods in social integration and improving the quality of life of people with disabilities

Category	Item 14 What is the effectiveness of these innovative methods in terms of the level of social integration of beneficiaries with disabilities?	Item 15 Item 15 What is the effectiveness of these innovative methods in improving the quality of life of people with disabilities?
Very effective	7 responses (12,07%)	12 responses (20,69%)
Effective	44 responses (75,86%)	37 responses (63,79%)
Slightly effective	4 responses (6,90%)	5 responses (8,62%)
Ineffective	-	1 responses (1,72%)
Don't know/No answer	3 responses (5,17%)	3 responses (5,17%)

(Source: generated by the authors)

The data analysis for question 16 shows that innovative methods are generally perceived as effective both in terms of social integration of beneficiaries with disabilities and in terms of improving their quality of life. The analysis of the responses shows that the most common suggestions for improving the methods and techniques used to support people with disabilities are: increasing the financial and human resources allocated, adapting the methods to the individual needs of the beneficiaries, continuing professional training for professionals and integrating the latest assistive technologies.

The perception of professionals who have used innovative methods with people with disabilities (question 20) is predominantly *positive*, with reports of positive feedback from beneficiaries, despite initial reservations in some cases. Many professionals observed that people with disabilities expressed gratitude and satisfaction, stating that

The impact of innovative methods in post-communist social assistance, for people with disabilities

these methods had improved their physical and psychological comfort, increased their self-confidence, facilitated their social and professional integration.

A frequently cited example is the positive reaction of deaf people who were "*delighted that these methods allow them to always have access to a sign language interpreter*", this has significantly improved their communication and autonomy.

Specialists also found that many beneficiaries needed time to understand the impact of innovative methods. However, as they began to see the results, they became more engaged and motivated. Movement and art therapy were among the most appreciated methods, with professionals noting that beneficiaries felt more active, relaxed and happy. Some even mentioned that these methods helped them to reduce depression and become more mentally resilient. At the same time, some professionals reported that if these methods had been used earlier, the beneficiaries' recovery process would have been more effective.

However, there were also cases where professionals observed initial resistance from beneficiaries, some of whom were sceptical or found these methods difficult to use. However, once involved in the activities, most recognised their usefulness and became more open to participation: "*These methods are appreciated and followed with great interest! Personally, I received only positive feedback, but the results were not noticed from the very first sessions!*"; "*The beneficiaries are initially curious and later, in most cases, satisfied with the new approach*".

6. Conclusions

To reduce poverty, prevent social exclusion and ensure better living conditions for children, young people, the elderly and people with disabilities, close cooperation between government, local authorities, non-governmental organisations and civil society is essential. At the same time, citizens must also be actively involved for these measures to have a real and lasting impact (Bolborici, A., 2018:5-6).

The results obtained confirm the two main research objectives. Firstly, the analysis of social professionals' perceptions of the effectiveness of modern techniques and methods shows a significant impact in promoting the autonomy and personal development of people with disabilities. Many respondents felt that innovative methods contributed 'a lot' or 'very much' to increasing beneficiaries' confidence in their abilities, highlighting the need to integrate these techniques into social care.

These findings are supported by professional literature, which highlights the importance of personalising social services to effectively meet individual needs and encourage beneficiaries' active participation in the recovery and social integration process (Prandini, 2018).

Secondly, the research analysed the role of innovative methods in facilitating social integration and increasing the involvement of beneficiaries in their own decision-making processes. The data show that methods based on assistive technologies, creative therapies and individualised counselling contribute significantly to improving quality of life and reducing dependence on the traditional social assistance system. This shift from an institutionalised to a beneficiary-centred approach reflects a wider trend in the development of social assistance, which has also been highlighted in post-communist reforms in Romania. Thus, the implementation of flexible social policies, tailored to the specific needs of people with disabilities, becomes essential to strengthen an efficient and sustainable social assistance system.

In conclusion, professionals perceive innovative methods as having a significant positive impact on the development of beneficiaries, helping them to feel more useful, engaged and confident in their own abilities. Professionals believe that these methods should be implemented and expanded as they contribute to better social integration and quality of life for people with disabilities.

The significant gap between social rules and everyday reality highlights the urgent need for more effective solutions to improve the situation. It is important that authorities continuously assess people's needs, ensure that social services meet quality standards and evaluate their impact so that they can be continuously improved.

These conclusions are supported by the research of Domnariu, Pop & Domnariu (2014), which emphasises that the use of modern technologies and interventions in social assistance can have a significant impact on the autonomy of beneficiaries. In this context, the transition from an institutionalised to a beneficiary-centred approach, which is also evident in Romania's post-communist reforms, reflects a larger movement in the development of social services. Therefore, the implementation of flexible social policies tailored to the specific needs of people with disabilities becomes essential for building an efficient and sustainable social assistance system (Drăghici, 2022).

Authors' Contributions:

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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The impact of innovative methods in post-communist social assistance, for people with disabilities

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