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THE GENDER PARADOX IN ROMANIA: PAY EQUALITY, WORKFORCE DISPARITY

Andreea-Denisa TRĂȘCAN*

Abstract

Romania's situation regarding gender equality is quite paradoxical: it has one of the lowest unadjusted genders' pay gap in Europe, yet it holds a low position overall in gender equality among EU countries. This contradiction highlights serious inequalities in areas like labour force participation, political representation, education, and leadership roles. Despite minimal differences in gender pay, societal norms, occupational segregation, and discriminatory practices intensify gender gaps in employment and leadership. This article explores various aspects of gender inequality in the workplace, including payment disparities, workforce participation, and educational attainment. In addition, it will examine how Romania's legal framework and government policies, such as maternal leave regulations, address these inequalities and aim to support gender equality, particularly in helping women balance work and family responsibilities. Challenging traditional gender norms, expanding access to education, and strengthening social protections are essential in addressing Romania's gender disparities. Redistributing care responsibilities and promoting flexible work arrangements are vital steps in this process. By tackling these inequalities, policymakers can simultaneously advance gender equality and align with the broader objectives of sustainable development, ensuring both immediate and lasting societal benefits.

Keywords: gender pay gap, gender employment gap, women's career trajectories, labour market disparities, gender equality in the EU.

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Introduction

A widely debated issue in contemporary society is the disparity between men and women regarding their respective quality of life. Gender inequality, and its manifestation across different sectors of daily life, is one of the themes of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UN, 2023). The “gender paradox” in Romania highlights that formal equality (in pay) does not automatically lead to substantive equality (in opportunities, career paths, leadership, economic security, etc). This article will focus specifically on the labour market disparities, highlighting the persistent inequalities that women face, including lower employment rates and underrepresentation in leadership positions. Furthermore, it will provide an overview of relevant literature, outline research methods and hypotheses, and present conclusions that explore potential solutions to address these disparities.

Romania’s communist period tried to promote gender equality, women being incorporated into the ranks of socialist workers, but at the same time it placed heavy pressure on them to have large families, and take full responsibility for childcare. Policies such as the Decree 770, passed in 1966, banned abortion and access to birth control, forcing women to carry pregnancies to term regardless of their personal circumstances. As sociologist Gail Kligman (1998) explains, this created a “double burden” for women, who were expected to work full-time while also raising children with little support. In the post-communist context, such cultural legacies contribute to enduring occupational segregation, the marginalization of mothers in the labour market, and limited access to decision-making positions.

Romania recorded in 2024 one of the highest gender gaps in labour force participation within the European Union, with 18.1 percentage point, only surpassed by Greece (18.8) and Italy (19.4) according to Eurostat¹. Employment disparities between men and women remain substantial, particularly among individuals with low levels of education, those of childbearing age, and residents of towns in-between suburban areas (Robayo-Abril *et al.*, 2023). This observation leads to critical questions about the underlying causes of such disparities. Are these inequalities a reflection of the deeply ingrained traditional views that still prevail in Romanian society? Cultural norms may continue to reinforce the perception that a woman’s primary role is in the home-taking care of children, managing household responsibilities, and performing domestic work. This expectation may place additional pressures on women and can contribute to a lack of professional support, limiting their opportunities for career development and financial independence.

Moreover, women in Romania may face systemic disadvantages in the workplace due to an insufficient support structure, especially when it comes to balance work and family responsibilities. For instance, the absence of accessible childcare facilities or flexible work arrangements can make it difficult for mothers to re-enter the workforce after maternity leave, further exacerbating gender disparities in career development. These structural challenges raise broader questions: Are

women in Romania facing active discrimination in the labour market, or are they simply lacking the institutional support necessary to pursue careers on equal footing with men?

The challenges women may face in the workforce underscore a need for comprehensive policy measures aimed to create a more inclusive labour market. Addressing these barriers requires examining the root causes of gender inequality, from cultural expectations to structural limitations within workplaces. Only by tackling these issues society can work towards creating an environment in which women have equal opportunities to succeed professionally. Such changes would not only support women's individual aspirations but also foster economic growth and social equity, benefiting the broader society.

This article examines gender inequalities in the labour market, focusing on women's lower employment rates and underrepresentation in leadership. It reviews relevant literature, presents research methods and key assumptions, and proposes recommendations to address these disparities.

Literature review

The current gender norms and expectations in Romania were cultivated since the communist era, when women in the Soviet bloc were often assumed to lack exposure to Western feminist movements, missing out on these liberating experiences (Petrescu, 2014). Women were expected to fulfil multiple roles: as workers, mothers, and caregivers, but the state support such as nurseries and canteens was limited and unevenly implemented in all the countries under the regime, with East German women benefitting more than others (Christian, 2020). Since domestic responsibilities remained largely unequal, women were more affected by the everyday challenges caused by the inefficiencies of planned economies.

Cultural norms regarding gender roles were deeply rooted and persisted across different political systems: before, during and after communism. As Jarska (2021) shows in a study on Poland, even a decade after the fall of the communist regime, most men still believed that they should be the main financial providers.

The transition to market economies reduced the support for women's employment, and reinforced the male breadwinner model, where men were seen as the primary earners and women responsible for care and domestic work (Lebid, 2021). In this new economic context, women tended to be more cautious, which led to men gaining an advantage, becoming more dominant in higher-paying roles like management and politics (Andrén, & Andrén, 2015).

This male privilege is sustained by cultural loyalty, traditions, and the reinforcement of gender roles through social norms. Women are underrepresented in leadership roles, even in fields dominated by female employees, but the gender

pay is narrower in traditionally “masculine” roles (Caragea, & Hrehorciuc-Caragea, 2016). For instance, women earn on average 21% more than men in administrative and support services within construction, despite being seven times fewer in number. They also earn more in public administration (7%), the extractive industry (6%) and transport and storage (3%) (Toma, 2025).

Men tend to prioritize their career advancement, often working longer hours or starting businesses, while women continue to balance both work and home responsibilities, performing a “double shift”. Drawing on a qualitative, longitudinal research design in England, Garcia and Tomlinson (2020) find that despite couples expressing egalitarian views, women in dual-earner households continue to perform most of the unpaid domestic work, even when men experience job loss. Similarly, in Romania, women are significantly more likely than men to perceive an unfair division of household labour, according to the qualitative research conducted by Sănduleasca, Matei, Ghența, and Bădoi (2015). Furthermore, Simionescu (2023) highlights that in times of family crisis, women are more likely than men to suspend or limit their professional lives to solve the problems.

Several factors contribute to gender-based discrimination in the workplace, even in traditionally feminised fields such as accounting based on the study of Faragalla, Tiron-Tudor, Stanca, and Deliu (2023), where women still encounter exclusion from male-dominated professional networks, and informal cultures that can restrict their opportunities for advancement. Similarly, in sectors like social work, where women are the majority and the work aligns with traditional gender roles, men still dominate leadership and high-status positions (Jones *et al.*, 2019). Conversely, in nursing, existing gender stereotypes negatively affect male practitioners, who sometimes are not prepared to interact with female patients, thereby hindering their career development (Kouta, & Kaite, 2011).

These patterns highlight that institutional presence alone does not guarantee gender equality. As recent European research shows, genuine progress depends not only on structural reforms, but also on workplace practices like flexible working arrangements, which positively influence attitudes toward gender roles and promote more inclusive environments (Lomazzi, Israel, & Crespi, 2019).

Formal gender equality exists in areas such as education. According to Eurostat² and OECD³ data, more women than men graduate from universities, and girls consistently outperform boys in many subjects. Despite this, women in Romania continue to face greater economic vulnerability due to persistent income disparities, underrepresentation in leadership positions, occupational segregation into lower-paid sectors, reduced access to entrepreneurship, and a higher prevalence of unpaid family work (Caragea, & Hrehorciuc-Caragea, 2016). Even with higher levels of education attainment, women are more likely to be channelled into lower-paid jobs or roles with limited opportunities for advancement.

Moreover, important is that these inequalities are rooted not only in structural labour market conditions, but also in entrenched cultural norms. Although the

communist regime encouraged women's participation in paid work, this form of "emancipation" was instrumentalised to serve state interests rather than to genuinely challenge patriarchal structures (Marinescu, 2018). The transition to a market economy brought economic uncertainty, which further reinforced conservative gender roles. Data show that young men in post-communist countries, including Romania, become less supportive of women's employment, as a response to increased competition and perceived threats to the male breadwinner status (Voicu, & Voicu, 2002). Thus, gender norms in post-communist Romania are shaped by both the legacy of state socialism and the pressures of neoliberal restructuring.

Regarding women's role in politics, survey data suggest that the population is increasingly open to vote for women in various political functions. As of 2021, women held approximately 19% of parliamentary seats in Romania, a figure significantly below the EU average, highlighting the ongoing issues of gender underrepresentation in politics (Gabor, 2021). Research indicates that anti-egalitarian attitudes, such as the belief in traditional breadwinner models, continue to hinder women's and especially mothers' political participation (Grimshaw, & Rubery, 2015). However, the results of an INSCOP poll reveal that 80% of Romanians would support a woman president, showing a shift in public opinion and a potential gradual erosion of gender-based barriers (Gudin, 2023).

While civil society representatives should monitor political actors for superficial commitments to gender equality, structural barriers persist due to male-dominated party cultures, opaque candidate selection processes, limited access to resources for women, and the lack of enforcement of formal gender equality commitments (Brechenmacher, & Hubbard, 2020). Additionally, persistent anti-feminist attitudes and anti-gender campaigns in post-communist Romania may contribute to the decline in women's political representation (Băluță, & Tufiș, 2021). Political participation is influenced by gendered electoral dynamics, shaped by language and societal roles, which hinder women's broader engagement. Resistance to legislative gender quotas by political parties further exacerbates these inequalities (Băluță, 2013).

Methods

This study adopts a quantitative, descriptive, and comparative approach to explore the structural effects of gender inequalities, and labour market segmentation in Romania. The analysis is based on a series of longitudinal and cross-sectional indicators selected to help capture the persistent disparities between men and women. These indicators are derived from reliable sources such as the OECD Employment Database, TEMPO Online (National Institute of Statistics), ILOSTAT and Eurostat, and were chosen to identify enduring gender gaps in employment, occupational structure, earnings, and decision-making roles.

Based on the data sources and indicators outlined in the methodology, this study formulates a set of hypotheses aimed at uncovering the structural mechanisms that reproduce gender disparities in Romania's labour market:

1. Gender disparities persist in labour market participation;
2. Women are underrepresented in higher-status and better-paid occupations;
3. Educational attainment does not eliminate gender pay disparities;
4. Gender inequalities are reflected in both economic and political representation.

The use of official statistical data ensures comparability and supports the examination of trends over time and by occupational structure. The combination of indicators from various dimensions (employment, education, earnings, representation) serve to empirically validate the theoretical assumptions discussed in the literature, offering a structured way to test how persistent gender inequalities show across labour market dimensions.

Comparing Romania's share of women in managerial roles to the OECD36 provides a helpful insight regarding the country's progress in gender equality within a global context. Unlike other indicators that will be analysed (e.g. sectoral wage data, employment by education), managerial employment can be more influenced by national policies, corporate practices and affirmative measures (e.g. family-friendly work policies).

Results & discussions



Data source: OECD Employment Database. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/onlineoecdemploymentdatabase.html>.

Figure 1. Gender gaps in employment rate in Romania 2000-2021

The data reveal a persistent gender gap in employment rates in Romania over the 21-year period. Male employment rates fluctuate around 70%, while female employment rates remain significantly lower, generally ranging between 45% and 57%. The gap has shown a gradual widening, particularly between 2010 and 2020. This period corresponds with the aftermath of the 2008-2010 financial crisis, which

disproportionately affected women's participation in the labour market, deepening the levels of gender inequality (UNAIDS, 2012). In 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has another effect on the employment rates, with a decrease for both genders, but more severe on women.

Table 1. Occupational groups by gender in Romania, 2021

Occupational Groups	Men	Women
Members of the legislative body, the executive, senior officials of public administration, directors, and senior officers	120000	111152
Specialists in various fields of activity	529057	808031
Technicians and other specialists in the technical field	271717	275283
Administrative clerks	145978	238880
Service workers	485365	861867
Skilled workers in agriculture, forestry, and fishing	374186	211140
Skilled workers and related occupations	974504	426966
Other occupational categories	1251906	603139
of which: Unskilled workers	456590	311705

Data source: TEMPO Online. Available at <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>.

The data illustrate a clear gender-based occupational segregation within the labour market in Romania. Men dominate the majority groups with women being prominent in the following occupations: specialists in various fields of activity, technicians and other specialists in the technical field, administrative clerks and service workers. Regarding the data about executive, senior officials and directors, the distribution is relatively even, with a slight predominance of men. This fact shows that although women are represented in management positions, there is still a slight gender gap in this category.

The graph suggests an occupational segregation by sex, where women tend to be present in softer and service occupations, likely influenced by both educational pathways and societal norms regarding 'appropriate' jobs for each gender. These differences in occupational distribution may contribute to gender pay gaps and limit women's representation in high-level decision-making positions, and in accessing leadership positions. Public policies should aim to balance the presence of women in technical and skilled fields, through training programs and promoting access to STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) education for women.

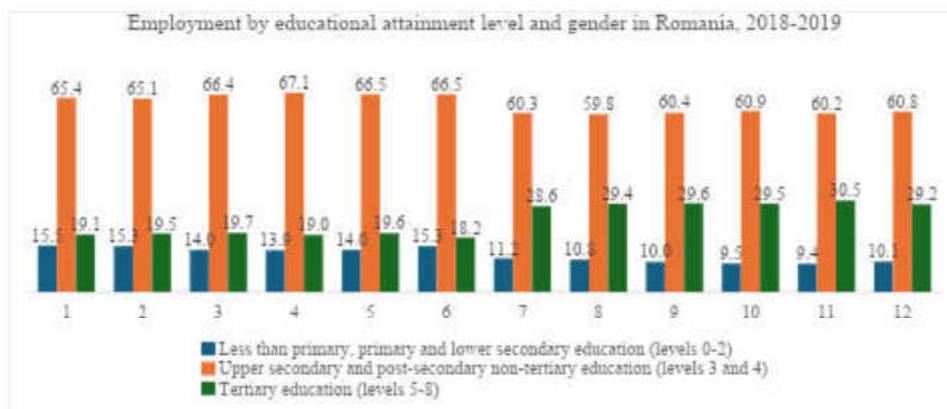
Table 2. Professional status by gender in Romania, 2021

PROFESSIONAL STATUS	MEN	WOMEN
Employee	3415400	3129855
Employer	63762	37950
Self-employed worker (including member of an agricultural society or cooperative)	539427	271364
Family worker (unpaid)	134124	97289

Data source: TEMPO Online. Available at <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>

The data indicate that men outnumber women across all categories of professional status, particularly as employers and self-employed workers. This disparity highlights the gender-based barriers to entrepreneurship and advancement into leadership roles. While women are well represented as employees, the gender gap is persistent and suggests that there may be structural challenges that limit women participation in these forms of employment.

These differences in professional status are closely linked to broader patterns of labour market segmentation and contribute to economic disparities between men and women. Addressing them requires policies that enhance women’s access to entrepreneurial resources, promote leadership development and support more inclusive economic participation.

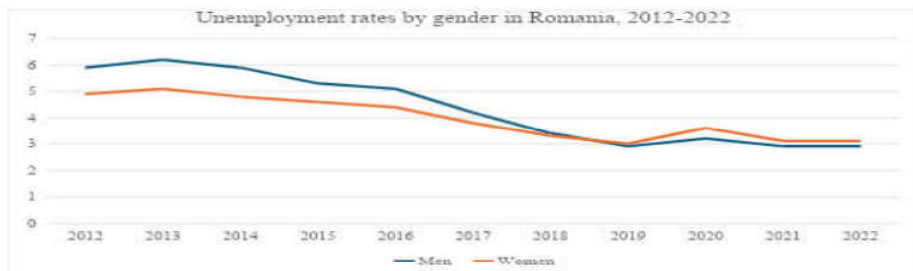


Data source: TEMPO Online. Available at <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table>.

Figure 2. Employment by educational attainment level and gender in Romania, 2018-2019

The data show that men are more likely than women to be employed at lower levels of education attainment, while women tend to be overrepresented in employment requiring higher education. This pattern may suggest that men more frequently access manual or lower-skilled jobs, and women pursue employment that demands higher qualifications.

While higher educational attainment among women may indicate progress toward gender equality in education, this situation does not necessarily translate into equitable labour market outcomes. By contrast, the concentration of men in low-education jobs may reflect easier access to informal or traditionally male-dominated sectors. These trends suggest both vertical and horizontal gender segregation in employment and poses a risk of economic vulnerability, with implications for job quality and income instability. Furthermore, an analysis of sectors requiring less education, such as agriculture, reveals a clear form of gender discrimination in terms of access to paid employment (Popescu *et al.*, 2022).



Data source: OECD Employment Database. Available at <http://www.oecd.org/employment/emp/onlineoecdemploymentdatabase.html>.

Figure 3. Unemployment rates by gender in Romania, 2012-2022

The gender gap in unemployment rates was significant in earlier years but has steadily decreased over time, indicating decreases in labour market inequality. In the earlier part of the period (2012-2017), the unemployment rate was consistently higher for men than for women, suggesting initial gender asymmetries. However, from 2018 to 2020, the rates for both genders converged, remaining nearly identical for two years before increasing by 4%.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, a slight divergence re-emerged: the unemployment rate for women rising while the rate for men continued to decline slightly. By 2022, the rates were nearly equal, though still marginally higher for women. This trend suggests that although gender disparities in unemployment have decreased overall, women remain more vulnerable to economic shocks and job insecurity.

The data for 2023 underpin that gender-based wage disparities persist across most sectors of the Romanian economy. The sectors where women have a slightly higher salary than men are: Extractive Industry, Production and Supply of Electricity and Thermal Energy, Gas, Hot Water, and Air Conditioning, Construction, Administrative and Support Service Activities, Public Administration and Defence, Compulsory Social Security. These are exceptions rather than the norm, and may reflect specific occupational structures or reporting anomalies.

The most pronounced gender wage gap between men and women is observed in the Information and Communication sector: men earn an average gross monthly of 14,662 Lei (2,948.47 Euro⁴), compared to 12,197 Lei (2,448.46 Euro) for women, which shows a difference of 2,465 Lei (495.01 Euro).



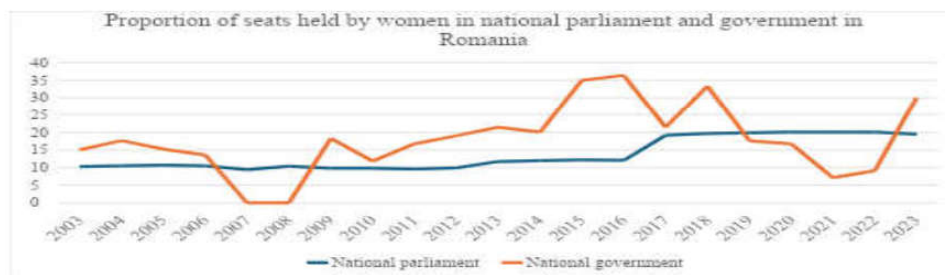
Data source: ILO (2021), "ILOSTAT Database", SDG indicator 5.5.2 - Female share of employment in managerial positions (%). Available at <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data>.

Figure 6. Women's share of managerial employment in Romania, 2010-2021

Between 2010 and 2015, Romania and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries followed a similar trajectory in terms of women's representation in managerial roles. From 2015 onward, the proportion of Romanian women in managerial roles surpassed the proportion in OECD. In 2016, Romania had one of the biggest economic growths in the European Union (Gheorghe, 2016), which could have had a positive impact on women's employment. However, 2017 marked a decline in women's share in managerial positions, coinciding with a period of political instability due to controversial measures and corruption allegations against some officials (Gillet, 2017). Research suggests that during periods of economic instability, women are often the first to be impacted, experiencing job losses or wage reductions in times of crisis (UNAIDS, 2012). This could explain the abrupt decrease in women's managerial employment.

Despite this setback, Romania has succeeded to reach the women's share of managerial employment in OECD countries in 2019, and even exceeded it from 2020 onwards. This upward trend may indicate improving conditions for women's career in leadership positions, but the sustainability of this progress should be assessed further.

This article aims to emphasize simultaneous progress and inequality (the ‘paradox’). This figure exemplifies that paradox: while Romania matches and eventually surpasses OECD averages in women’s managerial representation (equality), other figures in this study show persistent occupational segregation and pay gaps (disparity).



Data source: European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Eurostat online data code: *sdg_05_50*.

Figure 7: Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament and government in Romania

The blue line shows a slow, steady increase in the proportion of women holding seats in the national parliament, over the 20-year period, indicating ongoing efforts to promote gender equality in political participation. However, the growth is far from substantial and highlights some significant barriers that can continue to impede women’s access to parliamentary roles.

In contrast, the orange line, depicting the proportion of women in the national government, exhibits a far more dynamic pattern. This erratic pattern suggests that women’s inclusion in government positions may depend heavily on short-term political priorities, or the presence of individual leaders committed to gender inclusivity. These fluctuations indicate that lasting structural changes to sustain gender balance in government have not been fully institutionalized.

Parliament, being a more stable institution with defined election cycles, may provide a more predictable environment for gender representation, while government composition often shifts with cabinet reshuffles and political changes, making it more susceptible to fluctuations in gender balance.

Conclusions

This study confirms the persistence of gender disparities in Romania’s labour market. The results support the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier, particularly the breadwinner model, and gendered division of labour, which help explain women’s underrepresentation in high-paying and managerial roles despite their educational achievements. Men continue to dominate higher-paying and

senior roles, benefiting from uninterrupted career trajectories, while women, shaped by cultural expectations and institutional gaps, often experience fragmented employment due to maternal leave. This dynamic pushes women to lower-paying sectors and fewer leadership opportunities, maintaining a gender wage gap that, though previously narrowing, has recently widened.

These findings reinforce the Gender Paradox: women are overqualified yet underutilized. Romanian women are overrepresented in roles requiring higher education, but remain underrepresented in leadership and entrepreneurial roles, facing barriers to financial independence. Economic crises such as the 2008 financial downturn, and the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected their employment, highlighting their vulnerability to labour market instability.

Although women's representation in parliament has grown steadily, their presence in government remains volatile, suggesting the need for sustained policy interventions, such as gender quotas, leadership development programs for women, and cultural shifts to challenge gender stereotypes. Achieving gender parity in political representation is crucial for strengthening democratic governance and ensuring diverse perspectives in decision-making.

The main beneficiaries of this study are policymakers, labour market analysts and gender equality advocates who want to understand how gender gaps in work, and leadership roles have changed over time and how structural factors perpetuate inequality. By identifying these patterns, in employment, wages, political representations, this research can provide a foundation for making smarter decisions: targeted gender quotas, inclusive leadership programs and sector-specific equity measures.

However, the study has limitations. Future research should delve deeper into how family responsibilities shape women's career paths, with a focus on designing targeted interventions to support balance. This study lacks a detailed analysis of how effective various policies are across different economic sectors, so further exploration into policy impact by sector could provide valuable insights for addressing gender disparities in the workforce more comprehensively.

Addressing these gaps is essential to help shape more effective policies to reach a more equitable and inclusive labour market in Romania.

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Notes

¹ Eurostat database, *Gender employment gap, by type of employment* (online data code: sdg_05_30). Available at doi: https://doi.org/10.2908/SDG_05_30.

² Eurostat (2023). *Tertiary education attainment continues to increase*. European Commission. Available at <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20230530-3>.

³ OECD (2024). *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD indicators – Romania country note*. OECD Publishing. Available at https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2024/09/education-at-a-glance-2024-country-notes_532eb29d/romania_5b983fb1/50189b64-en.pdf.

⁴ Exchange rate used for conversion: 1 EUR = 4.9773 RON (BNR, May 2, 2025).

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