PAST-PRESENT-FUTURE PARADOX
OF BELONGING IN A TRANSITION SOCIETY

A STRUGGLE FOR BELONGING THROUGHOUT TIME
AMONG YOUTH IN BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

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THE PICTURES OF BUCHAREST SHOW A CITY OF CONTRASTS,

A PLACE WHICH IS CONSTANTLY MOVING BETWEEN THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.

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'Trust the timing', a dear friend told me again and again. At first, I did not agree with her, but at a certain moment I started to better understand the meaning of these words, and ultimately I accepted and embraced them. Time indeed has been an important aspect throughout the research process, but also along my personal path. Therefore, I wish to express my gratitude to a couple of persons who participated in this dynamic journey.

First and foremost, to the persons I have met (again) in Romania, for sharing their stories with me. You have opened your books step by step: about yourself, your family, friends, fears, frustrations, (in-)capacities, choices, and dreams. You showed me new places in the city or around, you have spent and shared hours, drinks, food, and many walks with me. This thesis is built upon that fruitful collaboration. *Mă bucur că noi ne avem întâlnit (din nou), şi mulţumesc foarte mult pentru tot, prieteni dragi!*

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Furthermore, to my friends and roommates, for your endless support and confidence in me. For giving your ears, shoulders, hands, and hearts, and for helping me through tough times.

Finally, to my father, my mother, brothers, and sisters, who gave me their love and from whom I have learnt so much.

Many people in Romania and The Netherlands were curious what the results of this research would be, and so did I. Thus, I am glad and grateful to present this thesis to you as a reader now, and I hope you will enjoy it as much as I enjoyed this interesting and intriguing adventure.

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1. Introduction

This thesis is the result of a qualitative, ethnographic research in which a case study among youth in Bucharest, Romania has been conducted. The case study presents a youth's struggle for belonging throughout time. It is argued that the case study shows a past-present-future paradox of belonging in a transition society. It means that on the one hand youth experience an absence of belonging in the present, which is explained by past influences, and that on the other hand they refuse to let the past also influence their future, and therefore they would like to regain their belonging by changing their current situation. Thus, this research sheds light on the construction of youth's belonging in a transition society.

This research relates to phenomena currently taking place in Eastern Europe. Examples of these phenomena are the right-wing approaches of the Hungarian prime minister Orbán (Tegenlicht 2018), the actions towards undermining an independent judicial system in Poland (NOS 2018; Nieuwsuur 2018), or the implementation of laws in an opposite democratic direction (NOS 2017; Romania-Insider 2017). It leads to West-East clashes within the European Union, discussing different interpretations of democratic values, which in turn often leads to misunderstandings and misjudgements on both sides.

These phenomena and its consequences are rooted in a historical path which is often overlooked or underexposed. Eastern Europe is namely largely characterized by transition societies, countries in which major economic, political, and socio-cultural changes have taken place in a relatively short period of time after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 (Allaste & Cairns 2016; Ciobanu 2010). In other words, countries moved from one system to another one, which involved dynamic processes at various levels in society. It is argued that these post-communist transitions are not yet part of the past (Kokushkin 2011). Therefore, transition societies are interesting and important sites of investigation, to better understand the past, present, and future, and to understand how people are living in and relating to these societies.

However, understanding processes of transition societies on an institutional level is not enough to fully grasp what is currently going on and why. It is argued that 'societies in transition shape citizens in transition' (Bellino 2018: 380). This means that major changes are also felt more on-the-ground in daily life acts and attitudes of people. Studies of people living in transition societies have been conducted and focused on for example economic and political progress (Cernat 2010; Profiroiu et al. 2011), socio-political participation (Tatăr 2016; Dumitraşcu 2015), well-being (Lenzi & Perucca 2016), trust (Bădescu et al. 2004), memory (Haukanes & Trnka 2013; Tismaneanu 2008; Watson 2018; Zombory 2017) or migration (Marcu 2014; Roman & Vasilescu 2016). Moreover, similar studies have been conducted among youth, because it is argued that although they have been born and grown up after the fall of communism, they are nevertheless influenced by it (Petre 2012). This past influence in their present lives effects for example their economic choices (Marginean 2014), political preferences (Pilkington & Pollock 2015), and other socio-cultural attitudes (Roberts 2003). These studies succeeded in providing local factors and smaller stories of people living in transition societies, which is important to understand their life-worlds better (Kokushkin 2011).

Nevertheless, these studies merely focus on a specific subject. I argue that a broader concept is needed to better grasp the current life-worlds of these people. Belonging is generally understood as a socially constructed feeling and perception of longing for something, to feel safe and inclusive. Moreover, it helps to understand a person's connection with oneself, others, and one's surroundings throughout time and at various levels, especially when this surrounding is subject to change (Allen & Kern 2017; Antonsich 2010; Christensen 2009; Deák 2015; Haukanes & Trnka 2013; Probyn 1996 in Lähdesmäki et al. 2016; Yuval-Davis 2006). Thus, in this context, belonging tells something about the way people relate to themselves, other citizens, and their country daily.

The case study among youth in Bucharest, Romania gives insight in these processes of constructing belonging in a transition society, when considering its unique characteristics.

Firstly, Romania is seen as a transition society, developing as a democracy after the collapse of the country's forty-years of communist regime in 1989. Romania created its own form of communism, which took an authoritarian and totalitarian shape (Kaplan 2016; Roper 2000; Tătar 2016). Before the Romanian Revolution in 1989, the country was labelled as 'one of the most repressive regimes in Europe' (Tătar 2016: 88). More insight in Romania as a transition society will be given in a contextual chapter.

Secondly, the capital city of Romania, Bucharest, perfectly reflects this society in transition on a small scale. It is the country's most typical historical centre. It is also known as a city of contrasts, because it is constantly moving between the past, present, and the future. More insight in Bucharest as a city of contrasts will be given in another contextual chapter, by a walk through the city.

Thirdly, the youth under study (between 18-30 years old) are the so-called post-revolution generation, sharing similar past, present, and future experiences. They were born and grown up after the fall of the country's communist regime, but they are nevertheless influenced by the country's past in their present and future lives (Petre 2012), which in turn effects their connection with the country and other citizens. These perspectives are central throughout the results chapters.

1.1. Problem statement

Current phenomena throughout Eastern Europe often lead to clashes within the European Union, discussing different interpretations of democratic values. I argue that it is essential to put these phenomena in a broader light of on-going processes after the fall of the Soviet Union, to better understand what is going and why, to prevent misunderstandings and misjudgements from taking place. To do so, it is important to study contextual changes on an institutional level as well as on-the-ground practices and perspectives of people, thus to focus on processes in transition societies. Moreover, belonging is helpful to understand a socially constructed process of longing for, taking place at various levels and throughout time. Hereby, it is possible to better understand person's life-worlds of being, living, working, and moving in a transition society.

By studying youth's belonging in a transition society, this research aims to shed new light on how a past influence is felt and acted upon in the present by a younger generation, and to broaden the scope of understanding youth's attachment with their country and other citizens throughout time. Thus, this research aims to contribute to discussions of belonging in transition societies from yet another angle.

This leads to the main research question: *'How does youth's belonging at a micro and meso level influence youth's belonging at a macro level throughout time?'* In this research, youth's belonging is understood as a co-construction of longing for connection with themselves, others, and their surroundings at various levels and throughout time. The distinction between belonging at a micro, meso, and macro level is chosen to focus on specific manners and time frames in which belonging is constructed. Thus, a combination is made between the contribution of Christensen (2009) to analytically distinguish levels at which belonging takes place, and the contributions of Haukanes & Trnka (2013) and Deák (2015) to analyse time frames in which belonging is constructed. Hereby, the existence of a past-present-future paradox of belonging in a transition society will become clear.

The following sub-questions are formulated to answer the main research question in the end:

1. *How do youth construct their belonging in the present?*

   The construction of belonging in the present takes place at a micro level. It focuses on relationships and interactions in everyday life (Christensen 2009). It is described how youth try to gain connection by carrying out daily life practices and perspectives.

2. *How does the past influence youth's absence of belonging in the present?*

   The crux lies in influences of the past which are felt in the present. These past influences are located at a meso level, within systems, institutions, and organizations (Christensen 2009), but also in mentalities of people as forthcoming of these systems. It specifically focuses on school belonging, because a school institution is an important place to create or break belonging (Allen & Kern 2017).

3. *How do youth reconstruct their belonging towards the future?*

   Youth's absence of belonging in the present, which is influenced by the past, in turn influences youth's belonging towards the future, because they refuse to let the past also influence their future, and therefore they would like to regain their belonging by changing their current situation. A twofold process of searching for and regaining belonging is described. It takes place at a macro level, because it focuses on the connection with 'larger' imagined communities (Christensen 2009), and because it focuses on a construction of personal and political belonging throughout time (Deák 2015; Haukanes & Trnka 2013; Yuval-Davis 2006).

The distinction between the micro, meso, and macro levels is helpful for analytical purposes, but it is important to note that these levels are highly intertwined in real life.

1.1. Guide to the reader

The following methodology chapter explains and justifies how this research has been conducted. Then, the theoretical concepts 'transition society' and 'belonging' and their interrelatedness are further explained and discussed, in the theoretical framework chapter. Thereafter, a context chapter provides more insight into Romania as a transition society, and another context chapter brings you to Bucharest as a city of contrasts. Then, three results chapters each explain and discuss youth's construction of belonging at various levels and throughout time. Lastly, the main points are summarized and an answer on the main research question is provided in the conclusion.

2. Methodology

This chapter explains and justifies how this research has been conducted. Firstly, the reasons to choose for a qualitative, ethnographic research are explained. Then, by describing the research process in the second section, the implementation of this type of research becomes clear. The last section consists of a reflection on the researcher's position.

2.1. Type of research

It is chosen to conduct a qualitative, ethnographic research, because the distinctive features of this type of research were helpful to make sense of youth's life-worlds, in which I later discovered their construction of belonging in a transition society at different levels and throughout time.

Firstly, qualitative research enabled me to focus on people, their perspectives, and the broader context in which people construct their perspectives. To do so, I have followed some basic principles of qualitative research (Flick 2002). Firstly, I have focused on a variety of respondents' perspectives by making use of different kinds of interviews, participant observation, and document-analysis. Secondly, during the data collection and analysis I have focused on smaller stories and the broader context in which these stories were created, shaped, and shared. This art of storytelling became more and more important in qualitative research over the years, to gain a more complete picture of personal stories and the context in which they were constructed (Flick 2002; Jackson 2002; Kokushkin 2011). Thirdly and lastly, I included a reflexivity section to describe and discuss my positionality as a researcher.

Secondly, ethnographic research enabled me to engage with people in their daily lives and to make sense of their thoughts and actions. To do so, I have followed certain criteria within ethnography (Madden 2010; O'Reilly 2009). First of all, it is highly important to build rapport with and respect the respondents as human beings, which I did before, during, and after interacting with them. Secondly, I have used an iterative-inductive approach throughout the research process. It means that a continuous cycle of data collection and interpretation is at stake, moving back and forth iteratively between observations, theory, and analysis. Both induction as deduction are used for the sake of finding interesting insights while continuously incorporating useful theories (O'Reilly 2009). Thirdly and lastly, since ethnography is 'both a practice as well as the textual product of that practice' (Madden 2010: 16), I have combined the empirical results with theoretical discussions in this thesis to create a 'richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience' (O'Reilly 2009: 3).

Thus, it is chosen to conduct a qualitative, ethnographic research, because it enabled me as a researcher to focus on people, their perspectives, the broader context in which people construct their perspectives, to engage with people in their daily lives, and to make sense of their thoughts and actions.

In the following section the implementation of this type of research becomes clear.

2.2.   Research process

This section describes the research process. From the start of being interested in Romania and Romania, to formulating an initial research plan, then doing field work in Bucharest for 4,5 months, and lastly to deciding to change the focus to another related, but more relevant topic.

2.2.1.   First and further interests

My interest in Romania and Romanians started with one year of volunteering as a project member in a Romanian youth organisation between October 2014 and August 2015. After finishing the Bachelor and having started the Master International Development Studies at Wageningen University, I decided to quit studying and gain a valuable working experience abroad first. Via a European Union volunteering programme, I applied for different projects in Eastern Europe. Ultimately, I was employed in the middle of Romania, in Braşov.

The country and its citizens were completely unknown to me, and with an open attitude and a lot of positivity I took the adventure. This experience abroad, together with international volunteers, local colleagues, and Romanian youth, has been very interesting, insightful, and intriguing to me. I learned a lot about myself, others, and our surroundings due to various aspects: the way societies are structured and being structured, how people think and talk, and the way people act and interact with each other. I noticed many differences between being in The Netherlands and Romania, both with its strengths and shortcomings. Most of all, the variety of contradictions – concerning both people and places – within Romania grasped most of my attention. Thus, when I came back to The Netherlands, I knew that I wanted to discover more about Romania and Romanians, to better understand their backgrounds and life-worlds.

2.2.2.   Initial research plan

Originally, the research was focused on the political positioning of youth in Bucharest, Romania in the light of the '2017 protests'.

The idea of this topic came up after mass anti-corruption protests against the government took place throughout the country in January and February 2017. It was argued that more people were out on the streets than during the Romanian Revolution in 1989 (NOS 2017; Romania-Insider 2017; The Guardian 2017). Diverse groups of society participated in these protests, and one of them were the youth. It was interesting to gain more insight in the current political positioning of these young people, because of two reasons: Firstly, because youth did not experience the country's communist regime like their parents and grandparents did, so how do relate to the country's political situation? Secondly, because it is argued that the political participation of young people did not decline, but has rather changed (Benedicto 2013; Burean & Bădescu 2014; Ekman & Amnå 2012; Norris 2004; Pilkington & Pollock 2015; Soler-i-Martí 2015), so what is the current political state among these youth?

The research was focused on three main aspects: youth's political perspective, their political participation, and their experiences with these recent protests. This initial research plan has been carried out in the first part of the field work.

2.2.3. Exploring the field & gaining access

In May 2017 I travelled to Romania again to do field work. Before diving deeper into the research field, I needed a place to stay, which I found in one of the typical kilometres-long flat buildings in the northern part of the city. Together with two Romanian girls, I was living on the sixth floor, with a view on the country's biggest traditional fresh market next to one of the city's modern shopping malls, including Carrefour, Starbucks, and H&M. Literally step by step, I started to discover Bucharest, its multiple contrasts between communism and capitalism, its chaos and beauty, poor parts, surprising side streets, and most of all its diversity of people. For me, it showed a city of contrasts, as Bucharest is labelled by locals. To give more insight in it, Chapter 5 takes you on a walk through the city.

The first group of people I encountered, were the ones who were still protesting every evening on one of the squares of Bucharest, namely on Victory Square (*piața Victoriei*). The scene was far from the mass protests in January and February 2017 with at its peak half a million people throughout the country (NOS 2017; Romania-Insider 2017; The Guardian 2017). When I arrived a few months after this turbulent start of the year, only 20-30 persons on average were present daily, and this number only increased on Sunday evenings. It seemed that many people lost their interest, focus, energy or time to still protest on the square every evening (see picture 1).

Nevertheless, this 'hard-core' protest group was interesting to start with. Soon I got to know these people better, just by going to the square regularly and starting the conversation with them. I got in touch with mainly the English-speaking persons, who were telling me about their view on Romania, the political system, problems within the country, and their own backgrounds. Most of them did not know each other before the protests but became friends on the way. After a while, I also felt connected with this hospitable bunch of people. However, I was aware that this was just a specific group and almost all of them were above 30 years old and therefore beyond the research range. Thus, I decided to broaden up to other persons as well.

January & February 2017

May 2017

Figure 1: Difference in attendance on the protest square in January & February and May 2017

Beforehand I had many ideas in mind about contacting youth organizations, volunteering associations, universities, and going to events and social meetings. However, I noticed a fear of stepping out of my comfort zone at first. Not only personal, but also family problems at home, took a lot of energy from me. Simultaneously, I was aware I was the only person to fulfil this research, and that I was fully responsible to let it succeed. Amid these struggles, I decided to contact some friends and acquaintances again to have an interview with them, either in real life or via e-mail, and to ask them for new contacts. Moreover, I continued going to the square to keep the bond with my new friends alive and to still gain information via them.

This new strategy worked out partly. On the one hand I got in touch with a professor of the University of Bucharest, who brought me in contact with some of his students. Besides, I met with persons via friends, acquaintances, and roommates. Moreover, I was meeting people randomly on the streets, in the pubs, or via events. On the other hand, the snowball effect did not work out as efficiently and effectively as I hoped for. Often people did not reply my messages or too late, they forgot to respond, or they brought up another excuse. This happened for example with contacting the youth departments of the main political parties[1] or with persons who were actively involved in the mass protests. I tried to contact them several times, but after no responses at all I had to give up on these people. Therefore, I decided to focus on the ones I got access to, to explore their acts and attitudes.

2.2.4. Building rapport & ethics

Two essential elements of ethnography are the building of trust or rapport between the researcher and the respondent (O'Reilly 2009), and ethics. According to Madden (2010: 34) 'ethnography does not have an ethical element – ethnography is an ethical commitment from the very outset, and through all phases of ethnographic research and writing'. Thus, I made sure to include these elements throughout my interaction with the respondents, by being genuinely interested in them, respecting them as persons – not just as respondents –, and by creating a comfortable atmosphere. Moreover, for the sake of anonymity, I have disguised the names of the respondents in this thesis, as well as omitted their specific studies and jobs. In the following, the building of rapport and ethics will become clear by describing the research tools used.

2.2.4.1. Interviews

Firstly, I made use of different kinds of interviews. In total I met around 50 persons. The core group of 13 persons is formed by youth between 18-30 years old, living in Bucharest. They were students, or they just finished their studies. With them I have had interviews of various kinds, which form the most important source of data. The others are around 15 persons of the protest square, and around 20 persons via via, either having met in Bucharest or somewhere else in Romania. The conversations I have had with these persons – some younger, some older than 30 – have been informative and insightful but were not as elaborative as the interviews with youth.

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[1] The two leading political parties PSD (*Partidul Social Democrat* = Social Democratic Party) and ALDE (*Alianţa Liberalilor şi Democraţilor* = Alliance of Liberals and Democrats), and a new opposition party USR (*Uniunea Salvaţi România* = Save Romania Union), which is seen by many young people as a promising party.

Therefore, the information gained via these persons is not used as a main source, but rather complementary for my own knowledge.

The interviews with the youth were of various kinds. Firstly, I conducted semi-structured interviews (Madden 2010; O'Reilly 2009; Russel Bernard 2011), focusing on some main themes and topics while simultaneously having space for the researcher's and respondent's own additional information and insights. These themes were focused on youth's political perspectives, their political participation, and their experiences with the recent protests, but also on their broader view on Romania and Romanians. Moreover, to gain a better understanding of them as persons, I also asked about their past, present, and future by the following questions for example: 'Which part of the country are you from?; 'With whom did you grow up?'; 'How did you decide to come to Bucharest?'; 'How is it to live in Bucharest?'; Are you satisfied with your current situation?'; 'What would you like to do after your study or work?'; Do you see yourself living in Romania, or abroad?' I made sure to write down all field notes after each interview, to highlight the most important and interesting themes and topics, and thus to continuously develop my preparation before each new interview. Secondly, after a while I noticed that it would be even more interesting to meet some persons more times, to get to know them and their perspectives even better. These interviews were in-depth interviews or life narratives (Madden 2010; O'Reilly 2009; Palmberger 2013; Russel Bernard 2011), which I conducted with five persons in the end.

All interviews were characterized by some similarities. We were meeting in a bar, on a terrace, park, or another location which was preferred by the respondent. We were either staying at one spot, changing locations, or having a walk. In hindsight, these meetings were not so much interviews, but rather human-to-human conversations, discussions, or dialogues. Except for one interview, all these meetings have been a 1-to-1 encounter (one interview was with two persons simultaneously). I made sure that my respondents felt comfortable in a variety of ways. Firstly, I clearly explained my background, research, and goal of the meeting. Then I started with some basic questions while proceeding with other themes and topics I had in mind. I was openly listening to them, aiming to not judge their perspectives. Lastly, I thanked them for their time and trust, either immediately after the meeting or via a text message later. Above all, I never used recordings, a laptop or notebook during these meetings, to create an as natural as possible surrounding. I always carried a small notebook and my mobile phone with me, for quick notes shortly after each meeting. I made sure to write down everything on my laptop as soon as possible. Moreover, I took time for every person; meetings were on average taking 2-4 hours.

Lastly, all interviews have been held in English. Whereas I have a basic competence in understanding and speaking Romanian, it was not enough to conduct complete interviews in Romanian. I have chosen to not work with a translator, because I felt that it would negatively affect the informal setting in which open and honest conversations were possible. Nevertheless, I told my respondents that whenever they did not know a word or sentence in English, or they preferred to explain something in Romanian, that it was possible to do so. It regularly happened that respondents referred to Romanian words, sentences or explanations, which I was mostly able to understand.

2.2.4.2.   Participant observation & document-analysis

Besides these interviews, I made use of participant observation and document-analysis to put the interviews in a broader context. It helped me to better understand and shape the interviews with youth and others.

Firstly, participant observation is a method to simultaneously participate in and observe the field and its research objects in all its facets, by seeing, hearing, and feeling what is going on and why (Madden 2010; O'Reilly 2009; Russell Bernard 2011). Already from day one the research was 'on', or better said: me as a researcher was 'on'. It did not matter where I was with whom and why, but always and everywhere I felt that insightful information could be gained; in the hostels, at home, in the park, in shops, on the street or at events, whether with or without my respondents. Therefore, each day I wrote down my actions and observations. Moreover, I joined two city tours, one general tour at the beginning of my stay and a specific communist tour at the end of my stay. Furthermore, I visited several museums in the city. Lastly, I participated and partly assisted as a guide in a one-week trip through Romania for a travel organization.

Secondly, document-analysis is a method to collect and analyse relevant and insightful documents (O'Reilly 2009; Russell Bernard 2011). I was reading books and reports, I was following the Romanian news and several relevant Facebook-pages, and I was watching Romanian historical documentaries. Examples of these are the following: a book of David Daniel (2015) – *Psihologia Poporului Român* (Psychology of the Romanian people), a book of Francis Fukuyama (2012) The origins of political order, a book of Robert D. Kaplan (2016) – Duister Europa, a report about the protests by Adi & Lilleker (2017), and a report about statistical information of Romania via Freedom House. Moreover, I followed the Romanian news via Romania-Insider (www.romania-insider.com) and Digi24 (www.digi24.ro). Lastly, I watched Romanian historical documentaries via CinePub (www.cinepub.ro) and YouTube.

The field notes collected with participant observation and document-analysis were important to better understand and shape the interviews with youth and others, and to remember the field work setting afterwards.

2.2.5. Thematic analysis

As has been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I have used an iterative-inductive approach throughout the research process. Thus, I have aimed to be continuously alert and adaptive to new insights and inspiration, moving back and forth between observations, theory, and analysis (Madden 2010; O'Reilly 2009). To do so, I have thematically analysed the data throughout the research process. It is a method to step-by-step organize and re-organize data in search for patterns, by creating codes, memos, mind maps, and colour sections for example (Braun & Clarke 2006; Madden 2010; O'Reilly 2009). This led to changing the initial research plan to another related, but more relevant topic.

Figure 2 presents a visualization of this thematic analysis throughout the research process.

At first, the themes and topics in the interviews were focused on youth's political perspectives, their political participation, and their experiences with the recent protests. I gained valuable information, but due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, we talked about many other subjects as well. This led to a broader scope of youth's view on Romania and Romanians. I noticed their reference to experiencing a multiplicity of problems within the country. Thereafter, I discovered that youth mainly referred to the country's communist past as a reason for these problems. This made me decide to focus on their meaning of, experience with, and action to deal with this communist influence. Hereafter followed many more minor themes and topics, related to this communist influence. In the end, I managed to bring it back to the notion of belonging within a time frame.
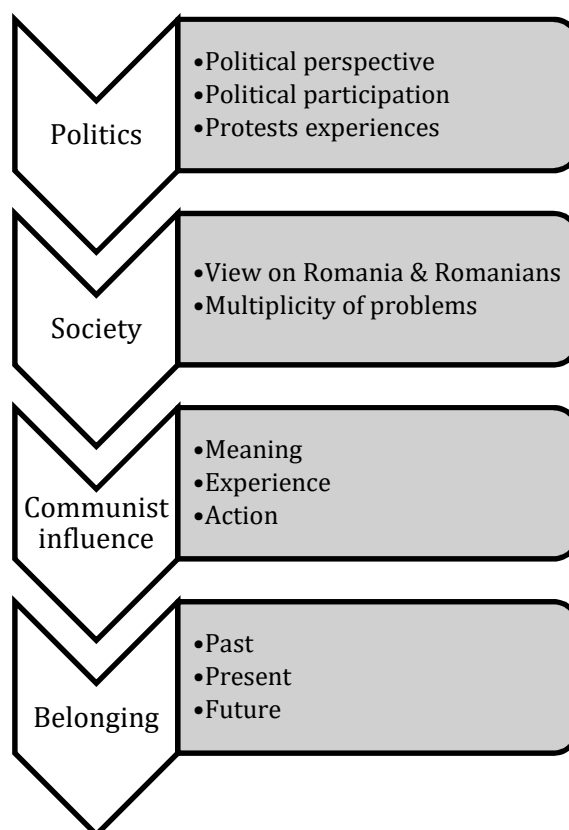
Politics
- Political perspective
- Political participation
- Protests experiences

Society
- View on Romania & Romanians
- Multiplicity of problems

Communist influence
- Meaning
- Experience
- Action

Belonging
- Past
- Present
- Future

Figure 2: Visualization of thematic analysis

Thus, because of thematic analysis I changed my previous research topic to another related, but more relevant one, to better grasp the life-worlds of the youth under study: namely their construction of belonging in a transition society at different levels and throughout time.

2.3.   Reflection on researcher's position

The core of ethnography is to grasp an insiders' perspective while simultaneously being aware of the researcher's outsider perspective (Madden 2010). It differs upon many factors whether a researcher is an insider or outsider and often it is seen as an ongoing process. It is even argued that this process not necessarily leads to one of the two sides, but that the researcher often balances on a 'between-and-betwixt position', having a 'fluid status' (Ergun & Erdemir 2010: 34). To deal with a balance between an insider and outsider perspective, it is highly important to reflect on the researcher's position (Madden 2010; O'Reilly 2009).

I believe that the following aspects played a role in my insider-outsider balance, and thus influenced the access to the field and the building of rapport with respondents: 1) my previous experience and interest in Romania and with Romania, 2) my age and profession, and 3) gender and nationality.

Firstly, my year-long experience in Romania with Romanians, combined with my eagerness to learn more about the country and its citizens, were the starting point of this thesis. This starting point has proven to be helpful, not only for my own knowledge about and experience of living in Romania, but merely towards the people I met (again). Many persons appreciated it

that I was back in their country and interested in their stories. Moreover, although all interviews have been held in English, I felt that the language was not a big barrier, because I could rely on my basic competence in understanding and speaking Romanian, when the respondents preferred so.

Secondly, being young and a student, I felt a close connection with the youth under study. They were either a few years younger or older than I was, which made me mostly understand their life-worlds, issues and ideals. Moreover, being a student myself and almost graduated, I was also often able to link to the youth's professions. It led to a variety of very interesting and insightful encounters. However, I also believe that my profession might have created a distance and difficulties in meeting other youth, for example the ones who are not higher educated, being unemployed, or hesitative to speak or understand English. In turn, meeting many students and former students might have steered the results of this research in a certain direction.

Thirdly, I felt that being female and Dutch were extra 'exotic' factors in meeting new people. Sometimes I even felt that I was a research object myself, when people were just as interested in me as I was in them. Moreover, respondents often referred themselves to The Netherlands, asking how things were regulated and going on here. I felt that it was a manner for them to compare their situation with other systems abroad, which led to interesting discussions.

Thus, my previous experience and interest in Romania with Romanians, being young, a student, female, and Dutch influenced the insider-outsider balance. Most of the time I have had positive encounters as a researcher, which has led to deep discussions and intriguing insights.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter explains, discusses, and combines the theoretical concepts 'transition society' and 'belonging', which are central in this research. Firstly, the academic debates and developments of these concepts are described, as well as their relevance for this research. Then follows the interrelatedness between the concepts, as an analytical fundament for this research.

3.1. Transition society

Transition society is an important theoretical concept for this research, because the youth under study were born and grown up in a country which is seen as a transition society. The following context chapter provides more insight in Romania as a transition society, and the chapter thereafter gives insight in the capital city Bucharest as a city of contrasts, which reflects a transition society on a small scale. Here, the academic debate and development of the concept is described.

Discussions of transition societies have taken place in a variety of ways, although always focused on moving from one system to another within a country, region or continent. Nowadays the concept is mostly used to describe processes of moving towards a sustainable society, focusing on ecological improvements (Hölscher et al. 2018). However, this research rather focuses on the usage of transition society as a concept to describe processes of moving from communism to other socio-political systems and its consequences (e.g. Allaste & Cairns 2016; Ciobanu 2010; Haukanes & Trnka 2013; Kokushkin 2011; Palmberger 2013; Pilkington & Pollock 2015 Roberts 2003; Vihalemm & Kalmus 2008).

A central and recurring element in defining transition societies is the occurrence of major economic, political, and socio-cultural changes within a relatively short period. Allaste and Cairns (2016: 3) for example, describe it as follows: 'The term refers to a situation in which the political structure changes from a single-party rule to a parliamentary system, with administrative institutions reorganized, central planning converted to a capitalist free market economy and a society of shortages replaced by consumerism'. Thus, a country is moving from one system to another, often quite different, system in a relatively short period. Kokushkin (2011: 1053) compares the post-communist transitions with similar processes which have taken place in countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa, and puts it as follows: 'Ancient regimes are forced out or forced to change significantly and thorough political and economic reforms are about to take place'. Moreover, changes characteristic of a transition society are felt in various spheres. Kennedy (2002 in Vihalemm & Kalmus 2008: 902) argues that it is visible by 'the framework of values, beliefs, symbols, and narratives, through which actors interpret the process of transformation of political and economic systems and undertake actions in the new circumstances'.

The fact that transition societies imply a wide range of changes relates to two important remarks which have been made in studying transition societies.

Firstly, the difference between transition and transformation. It is argued that the term transformation better captures the complexities of changes taking place in such a society. Stark (1994 in Kokushkin 2011: 1045) for example, argues: 'The term [transition] is associated with ideas about the superiority of capitalism as an economic system, disregard for any cultural and historical factors at play in a transitional country, and assumptions about an existing institutional vacuum and ability to start from scratch'. According to Stark, transformation is a broader term which better acknowledges former and future forms of systems, instead of the term transition which would imply a certain authority of one system above the other. However, many scholars continued to use the term transition society, even including the multi-dimensional contexts as proposed by Stark. Therefore, this research follows Kokushkin (2011) and others in using the concept transition society, while still including underlying factors and dynamics.

Secondly, the difference between top-down policies and bottom-up practices. It is argued that it is important to study both aspects in a transition society. Studies often focus on changes in policies to measure a certain development, whereas daily life practices taking place 'on the ground' are just as important and insightful (Kokushkin 2011). This becomes even more clear with the following argument: among Central and Eastern European countries there is 'a discrepancy between the speed of institutional reforms and the slowness of cultural changes' (Allaste & Cairns 2016: 3; Vihalemm & Kalmus 2008: 901). It means that by focusing on top-down policies which steer a country in a certain direction from one system to another, it is often neglected which underlying dynamics are at play. These bottom-up practices, such as daily life acts and attitudes of people, are just as important, but often overlooked. Thus, it is important to focus on these on-the-ground contexts and smaller stories as well in the study of transition societies.

In line with these discussions, Kokushkin (2011) explains and illustrates three research strategies of analysing transition societies, which have been used throughout the years. The first one is conducting a comparative study, which uses generalisations for the sake of comparing and analysing a region while diminishing country-specific characteristics. According to Kokushkin, this research strategy has often been used in former studies of transition societies, but it neglected essential elements and details. These are included with the second research strategy, a holistic case study. It focuses on country-specific features, or even of local areas, while lacking genuine generalisation, although it helps to better understand other contexts as well. Kokushkin argues that the third research strategy is the most compelling one: conducting a comparative case study, which aims to do both country-specific analysis as well as providing elements to generalize the results to other countries or a broader region. This research moves between a holistic and comparative case study; it is showing the richness of perspectives of specific people in a specific place, while including broader and underlying dynamics.

Thus, this research uses the concept transition society to focus on a multi-dimensional approach of major cultural changes within a country, to better understand the life-worlds in which the youth under study were born and grown up, and to recognize their positioning and perspectives of living in this specific society. To do so, this research focuses on contextual factors and daily life practices.

3.2. Belonging

Belonging is another important concept for this research, because it broadly grasps interconnections within one's life-world at various levels and throughout time, especially when this life-world is subject to change, as is the case for the youth under study in Romania as a transition society.

Belonging has been differently defined and discussed by various scholars in various fields. The contributions are ranging from descriptions of belonging to non-belonging, its benefits (and negative consequences when it is absent), its value-laden languages and frameworks, and they are often focused on minority groups or risk regions in society (Antonsich 2010; Lähdesmäki et al. 2016).

An important definition has been put forward by Probyn, to provide a stronger analytical tool than the concept identity: 'Belonging captures more accurately the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process which is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state' (Probyn 1996: 19 in Lähdesmäki et al. 2016: 234). By using belonging, it was possible to provide a broader analysis of phenomena to include social interaction, subjective experiences, emotional, external relations, and political aspects such as norm, restrictions, and regulations (Lähdesmäki et al. 2016). Thus, belonging is generally understood as a process of 'longing for' something, which is often co-constructed with others (Probyn 1996 in Köhne & Rasch 2018: 4). This relational aspect of belonging also becomes clear in the definition put forward by Yuval-Davis: belonging is a dynamic process wherein 'self-identification or identification by others, in a stable, contested or transient way' takes place (Yuval-Davis 2006: 199). When this socially constructed longing for is fulfilled, whether towards a place, person or a more mental state of mind, it might lead to feelings of safety, acceptance or inclusion for example (Antonsich 2010).

Because of the variety of conceptualizations and applications of belonging, it has been tried to distinguish the academic contributions. Christensen (2009) for example, makes an insightful distinction between the micro, meso, and macro levels at which belonging is constructed. This distinction will be used throughout the research to analyse youth's construction of belonging at different levels.

Firstly, belonging at the micro level is associated with interactions and relationships in everyday life. Secondly, at the meso level, belonging is related to collective organizations or institutions, such as political parties, social movements or schools. Thirdly, belonging at the macro level is understood as a connection to 'larger' imagined communities, such as nationalism or religion (Christensen 2009).

In the following, each of these levels will be further explained using contributions of important scholars in the field of belonging, and simultaneously the relevance of these contributions for this research are made.

Firstly, belonging at the micro level focuses on interactions and relationships in everyday life. It is a so-called 'local belonging', taking place in daily acts and attitudes, to feel comfortable with other people and in a specific place, and therefore it is a socially constructed practice (Savage et al. 2005 in Christensen 2009: 34).

Secondly, at the meso level, contributions of belonging are focused on relationships with specific institutions or organisations. For this research, it is interesting to focus on school belonging, because the youth under study are or were students. Thus, they spend or have spent a lot of time in school, whether in primary, secondary, or tertiary education. Allen & Kern (2017) argue that school institutions have the responsibility of educating youth in a crucial life-period, and to provide a sense of belonging within the school sphere. By reviewing various contributions, Allen & Kern provide three recurrent aspects to describe school belonging: '1) school-based relationships and experiences, 2) student-teacher relationships, and 3) students' general feelings about school as a whole' (Allen & Kern 2017: 17). It shows that various interrelationships are at stake when studying school belonging: youth's involvement and engagement, the interaction with other students, and the role of teachers, mentors, deans, and directors. Thus, a school institution is an important place to create or break belonging with its students. To better understand Romania's education system during and after communism, the following contextual chapter provides more insight in it. The notion of school belonging is further discussed and applied in a results chapter.

Thirdly, belonging at the macro level focuses on the connection to 'larger' imagined communities. One of the main contributions here is provided by Yuval-Davis (2006). She distinguishes between belonging and the politics of belonging. Belonging as an emotional attachment of feeling home or feeling safe, takes place at three levels: 1) social locations, 2) identifications and social attachments, and 3) ethical and political values. The first level is about belonging to a specific group (whether age, profession, nationality or ethnicity for example), which is not necessarily static or stable. The second level is about a person's own perception of and positioning towards a group. The third level is about how belonging is valued and judged. Then, the politics of belonging is about meaning-making and boundary practices and continuously challenging these practices. Or as Yuval-Davis (2006: 205) describes it: 'The politics of belonging involves not only the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers but also their contestation and challenge by other political agents'.

Especially Yuval-Davis' descriptions of the second level of belonging (identifications and social attachments) and of the politics of belonging are interesting for this research. As has been mentioned, the second level of belonging is about a person's own perception of and positioning towards a group. Yuval-Davis uses dual identity narratives of being and becoming for her analysis: 'They can relate to the past, to a myth of origin; they can be aimed at explaining the present and, probably above all, they function as a projection of a future trajectory' (Yuval-Davis 2006: 202). Thus, it is interesting to take into account, because it helps to understand youth's development of and connection with themselves, towards others, and their surroundings throughout time, using youth's own perspectives. The politics of belonging is also interesting, because it focuses on the interaction between 'higher' institutions and 'lower' actors and how they challenge their position

and power in society towards each other. It is interesting to take this into account as well, because it helps to understand youth's interrelationship with the country's system throughout time.

Furthermore, two sub-concepts relate to the politics of belonging, namely nostalgia (Haukanes & Trnka 2013) and presentism (Deák 2015). These sub-concepts are important for this research as well, because they describe a certain critical stance to not necessarily accept what has been given, and in turn to act upon it. It reflects youth's position towards past influences in the present.

Firstly, nostalgia has mostly been described as 'the mourning for the more predicate and stable conditions prevailing under communism, particularly in relation to work and various forms of sociality' (Haukanes 2004; Pine 2002 in Haukanes & Trnka 2013: 4). However, it is also argued that it is possible to define nostalgia not only as a longing for the past, but also as a longing for a different present and future. Thus, in this respect, nostalgia is analysed as a critical voice or even a political force. Haukanes and Trnka (2013: 4) describe it as follows: 'Collective nostalgia is often imbued with a political dimension; surpassing its conventional understanding as a 'longing for the past', the sentiment of nostalgia often couples affect with political critique, resulting in emotionally laden commentaries of past, presents, and futures'.

Secondly, presentism is described as a stance which, on the outset, looks like a refusal of and passive attitude towards the past, but when looking closer, it shows that this stance rather embraces and simultaneously criticizes the past, and therefore it is an active attitude (Deák 2015).

After reviewing the main contributions of belonging relevant for this research, I understand belonging as follows: a perceived and actual connection of a person with him-/herself, with others, and with broader surroundings – which could be (physical) places or (mental) spaces – for the sake of thinking and acting in a preferred manner. Thus, belonging is a co-creation, constructed with various actors on diverse levels and throughout time. This co-creation also includes contestation and challenges of meaning-making and boundary-work of acceptance and refusal of certain situations.

Thus, this research uses the concept belonging to focus on a multi-dimensional approach of a person's connections, to grasp youth's life-world and daily relationships at various levels and throughout time, in a country which is subject to change.

3.3. Interrelatedness transition society & belonging

The previous sections have shown that the theoretical concepts 'transition society' and 'belonging' are relevant for this research. Taking together, they strengthen the understanding of how youth construct their belonging in a transition society. Three elements are recurrent in the studies of transition societies and belonging and are used interrelatedly as an analytical tool in this research: belonging as a continuous co-creation with others and surroundings, the focus on contextual factors and smaller stories in transition societies, and the incorporation of diverse levels (micro, meso, macro) and a time frame (past-present-future). Hereby, a past-present-paradox at various levels of youth's belonging in a transition society becomes visible, which will be shown in the results chapters. First follow two contextual chapters put it in perspective.

4. Romania as a transition society

This context chapter provides more insight in Romania as a transition society, focusing on its main historical events concerning the communist regime, the revolution, and the post-revolution period.

4.1. Communist regime between 1947-1989

After the Second World War, the communist party within Romania gained more legitimacy with the help of the Soviet Union, although Romania has never been an official Soviet Union country, but a so-called satellite state. It means that Romania was under heavy influence of the Soviet Union, but it was granted to follow its own communist path within the country (Ciobanu 2010). Romania's first communist leader was Gheorge Gheorghiu-Dej between 1947 till his death in 1965. Hereafter Nicolae Ceauşescu followed up the leadership, moving towards a dictatorial regime, till his execution in 1989 (Kaplan 2016; Roper 2000).

During this communist regime of in total more than forty years, Romania was 'a rough totalitarian state, increasingly isolated internationally, with a monolithic centre of power and an unprecedented degree of intrusion in the private sphere of its citizens in a perpetual attempt to completely control the society' (Mungiu-Pippidi 2002 in Tătar 2016: 87-8). This was merely done by the national secret police, the *Securitate*. It was the second biggest national police at that time; Stasi of Nazi-Germany was bigger, and on the third place the KGB of the Soviet Union. The *Securitate* received collaborators by voluntary applications, but also by the usage of force via blackmailing people. The *Securitate* had various offices in the capital city to gain information from suspects, or to torture these people. Moreover, listening devices were installed in houses, and even the smallest acts, such as receiving letters or products from foreign countries, could be suspicious (Communist City Tour Bucharest 2017; Tătar 2016).

It could be argued that Romanians within this period had rights (such as housing, jobs, health care and other facilities), but faced many restrictions as well, especially when considering that any opposition towards the communist regime was almost impossible. This was due to 'the feeling that the *Securitate* is omnipotent and omnipresent in society' (Tătar 2016: 88). For example, there were some protests and movements in Romania to fight for higher wages and better working conditions, but only rarely against the communist regime. If there were protests, they did not have the same scale as in other East European countries at that time, such as in Hungary (1956 Revolution), the Czech Republic (Charter 77) or Poland (Solidarity movement in 1980). Mostly the Romanian social uprisings were oppressed by the regime, either by jailing, firing, torturing or murdering the people who were involved in it (Burean & Bădescu 2014; Kaplan 2016). Moreover, after Ceauşescu's visit to North Korea in 1971, his sense of nationalism, personality cult, and repression began to increase, which led to major infrastructural changes in the city (see next Chapter), and an implementation of austerity measures to finance his personal and political projects. It led to many Romanians suffering in poverty (Ciobanu 2010).

Thus, it is not surprising that Romania before 1989 is labelled as 'one of the most repressive regimes in Europe' (Tătar 2016: 88).

4.2. Revolution in December 1989

However, in December 1989, the Romanian Revolution created a turning point in the country's history: the collapse of the communist regime of more than forty years in Romania. It is argued that 'it was ultimately the absolute denial and refusal of the ruling party to admit its complete failure in all its claims to legitimate political authority that led to its paralysis and complete collapse in December 1989' (Ciobanu 2010: 15). After a successful protest in the western part of the country, in the city Timişoara, people seemed to feel strengthened. They started to show their resistance towards the regime in the capital city as well, by yelling during one of Ceauşescu his speeches, which turned out to be his last one. A quick, chaotic and bloody took-over by the army was happening, when it decided to change sides. Soon thereafter, Ceauşescu and his wife were executed after a short show trial (Ciobanu 2010; Kaplan 2016; Roper 2000).

4.3. Post-revolution period

It was a chaotic revolution, and in the years thereafter many economic, political, and socio-cultural changes continued to take place as well. Especially with the accession to the NATO in 2004 and to the EU in 2007, Romania went through major transitions. Moving from one system to another one in a short period of time, could be described as follows: 'The cultural condition of post-Soviet transitional societies is characterized by the parallel existence of symbols, values, and identities brought about by the 'new' (Western) cultural flows, and the 'old' (Soviet) traditions, values, and identities' (Sztompka & Vogt 2004 in Vihalemm & Kalmus 2008: 903). Thus, Romania made considerable efforts towards consolidating a modern democracy, although it is still and ongoing process with improvements and drawbacks (Kaplan 2016; Profiroiu et al. 2011; Roper 2000). Or as Roper (2000: 10) argues: 'The Romanian Revolution occurred in 1989, but it may take decades to complete'.

These ongoing developments within a transition society, are visible in a multiplicity of problems which are felt by citizens throughout the country. Romania and Romanians deal with corruption in politics, country-wide tax evasion, underfinancing of infrastructure, education and health care, low levels of trust and transparency among citizens and between citizens and the government, unemployment, and high rates of migration (Agabrian 2007; Bădescu et al. 2004; Eurostat 2015; Freedom of House 2017; Ghiaţău & Mâţă 2015; Marcu 2014; Roman & Vasilescu 2016).

For this research, it is most relevant to focus specifically on the development of the Romanian education system during and after communism. The Romanian education system during communism merely functioned as a place to 'prepare the manpower which was necessary for the socialist industry, and by means of distinct forms to ensure staff for the communist party' (Agabrian 2007: 1). It was focused on high numbers of students and characterized by compulsory courses (Agabrian 2007). Moreover, the role of teachers was appreciated, accepted, and respected by the community (Ghiaţău & Mâţă 2015). However, it changed when this ideological function of the education system did not fulfil an elite's question for broader studies such as IT and foreign languages, which in the end led to an underfinancing of the system (Agabrian 2007).

The communist legacy and the lack of enough financial support continued to characterize the system in the post-communist period. The infrastructure was underpaid, and the teacher's position undervalued, which led them to choose for another occupation (Agabrian 2007; Ghiaţău & Mâţă 2015). Problems in the Romanian education system are still visible nowadays; there is not only a lack of qualified teachers, but it also influences students' performances. The Romanian education system is structurally underachieving compared to other European countries (Agabrian 2007).

In the results chapters youth's perspectives towards their relationship with the school, teachers, and among students will be illustrated. Here, I would like to present two snapshots of a teacher and a former teacher assistant, to show the discrepancy in the Romanian education system.

Firstly, Christian tries to improve his lessons in his own way, to fight for better education. He is a teacher at universities in Bucharest and another Romanian city. Christian believes that lessons should be more to the point and focused on students' interests. According to Christian, this is not happening enough in the current Romanian education system. He states that the system is focused on providing students with a lot of information to prepare them for the rest of their lives. However, Christian believes that students are not able and willing to absorb a high amount of information, and that it is impossible to prepare them for the rest of their lives by only giving education like that. Therefore, Christian provides lectures with a couple of breaks in between to ensure focus. Moreover, he tries to grasp what students want to learn and he dives into those topics as well. Christian states that students are not robots, but human beings who have it all: problems and passions, ideas and ideals. In his opinion, teachers – as well as parents and politicians – have the responsibility to catch youth's capabilities and to use it. Thus, Christian tries to improve the education system from within.

Secondly, Ştefan also acknowledges the malfunctioning Romanian education system. He was a teacher assistant at a university in Bucharest. He felt that the Romanian education system is an old-fashioned one, which has barely been transformed to modern times. According to Ştefan, the system could be characterized as *'read-repeat-learn by heart'*. Students are asked to read texts, repeat them, and learn it by heart instead of trying to understand what it means. Ştefan believes that other learning methods are needed nowadays, such as using students' creativity, learning to take care of the environment, and developing information skills. However, Ştefan will not be working on it within the education system anymore, but he tries to do so outside of it.

To provide more insight in Romania as a transition society on a smaller scale and in various facets, the following chapter takes you on a walk through the capital city.

5. Bucharest as a city of contrasts – a walk through the city

In this chapter I take you on a walk through the capital city of Romania, Bucharest. It is known as a city of contrasts, and therefore it perfectly reflects a society in transition on a small scale. Moreover, it gives insight in the field work site as the place where my research respondents were born and grown up. This description is a compilation of my daily walks, in which I both embraced and disgraced the city.


My curtains in red-white-blue colours remind me of The Netherlands. However, when I open them, I immediately wake up in Romania: the burning sun of Bucharest warms my room, and the communist block buildings around are as static as yesterday and the years before. Moreover, the construction installation and its workers are still there. According to my roommate, the renovation of the building should have been finished a couple of months ago, but – *'like many projects'* – it is not yet ready. The same counts for the air conditioning in my room. I was promised it would be fixed soon, but because 'soon' became 'later' and 'later' became 'we do not know', I decided to buy a ventilator myself. To cool a little bit more, I take a shower. This time I am fine with the lack of warm water. While holding the shower head in my hand, because a fixed installation is missing, I see a slice of the city through the small bathroom window. People of the fresh market are preparing their fruits, vegetables, potatoes, bread, herbs, and homemade wines in their stalls. These older, hard-working persons do not have time to enjoy a Coca Cola as the young woman on the advertisement in their background is doing.

After my breakfast and highlights of the Romanian news, it is time to go outside. In the evening I will meet one of my respondents for the second time. During the day, I would like to go to the museum of National History and a book shop. It is half an hour walking to the city centre. Most people take the metro, bus or tram, but I prefer to go by feet, to experience the city at its best.

However, I do not prefer to get annoyed by all the traffic sounds around, of cars which are honking the horn while they neglected the red signs, not me. Via my earphones, I hear the music of a modern Romanian band, Jurjak. They sign about the city: '*Bucureşti e ca-n poveşti, micul Paris e doar un vis'.* It means the following: Bucharest is like stories; little Paris is just a dream. Whereas the capital city of Romania was formerly known as the Paris of the East, it lost its title. After a huge earthquake in 1977, Ceauşescu took its chance to rebuild the city in his preferred style. Not only citizens' houses, but also many more historical buildings were demolished to pave the way for block buildings, four-lane roads from the city ring to the city centre, and Ceauşescu's main prestige project: *Casa Poporului*, the house of the people, which became the second biggest administrative building in the world. Paradoxically, many people never took advantage of this building, rather the opposite: they were forced to help with constructing, they were removed from their houses to provide space for the building, and they needed to do with less water, food, and electricity to generate enough money for the construction of the building[2]. The boulevard in front is even called *Bulevardul Libertăţii*; I highly question the amount of freedom around here.
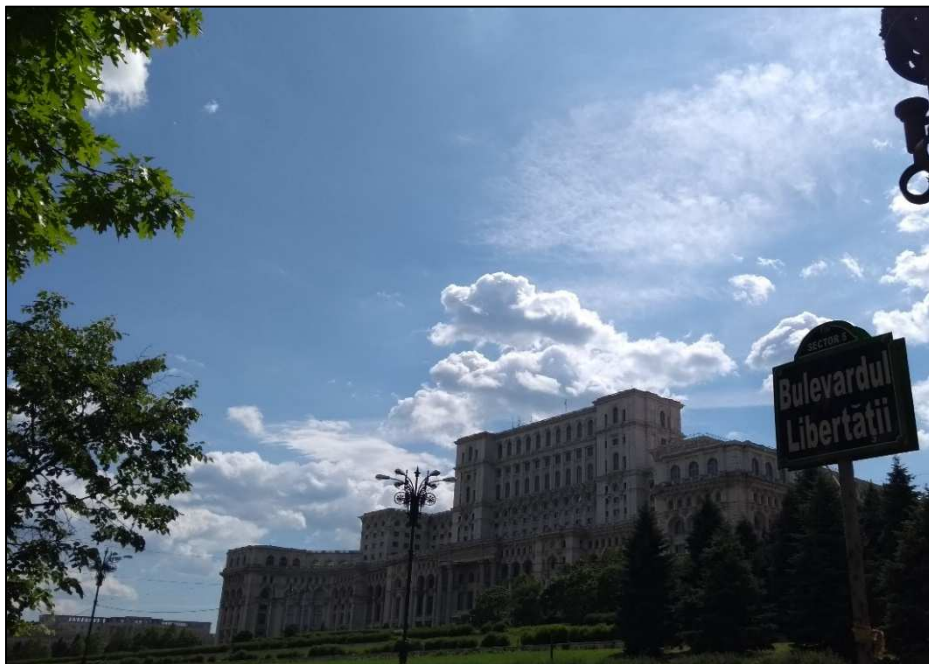
It all reminds me of the literal meaning of Bucharest. *Bucureşti*, in Romanian, is a combination of '*bucur'* and '*eşti'*, and it means 'you are enjoying'. Romanians creatively state the following: 'If you are enjoying, you will keep on enjoying'. Well, good luck with a city which is largely damaged and demolished.

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[2] Based upon information gained in a Communist City Tour, 2017.

On my way to the city centre I am surprised and shocked by the variety of contrasts at every part of the street. I see rich villas alongside abandoned industry areas, communist block buildings next to capitalist shopping malls, and brand-new Porsches beside Soviet-style Dacia's. Or modern roads next to broken pavements. And cycling lanes which suddenly end, or they appear again further ahead. Moreover, I also see extreme differences between people. Men and women in expensive suits and dresses are walking by people with old and dirty clothes who are holding up their hands for some money, but they are left in vain. Some of these people try to sell toilet paper, flowers, or telephones, or they move skilfully between the traffic to wash cars while these are waiting in front of the traffic lights. I am not sure if they get their money thereafter. Most of these people who are living and working on the streets are older, but I also notice children among them. Some try to carry their life by smoking cigarettes or sniffing glue.

I have been told that after the fall of communism a huge middle class fell apart. People either managed to get a lot of money, or they became poor. These extremes are still visible, but slowly this middle class starts to raise again. Till that moment, when extremes will fade away, not only among citizens, but also in infrastructure, it is possible to be intrigued by this city of contrasts.

When I almost reach my destination for the day, I notice a compilation of these contrasts at one spot: seeing a modern business building, a Romanian Orthodox church, block buildings, graffiti on it, renovated and demolished houses, and foreign advertisement billboards. I start to smile while thinking that it might be possible to enjoy Bucharest, exactly because of its contrasting characteristics.
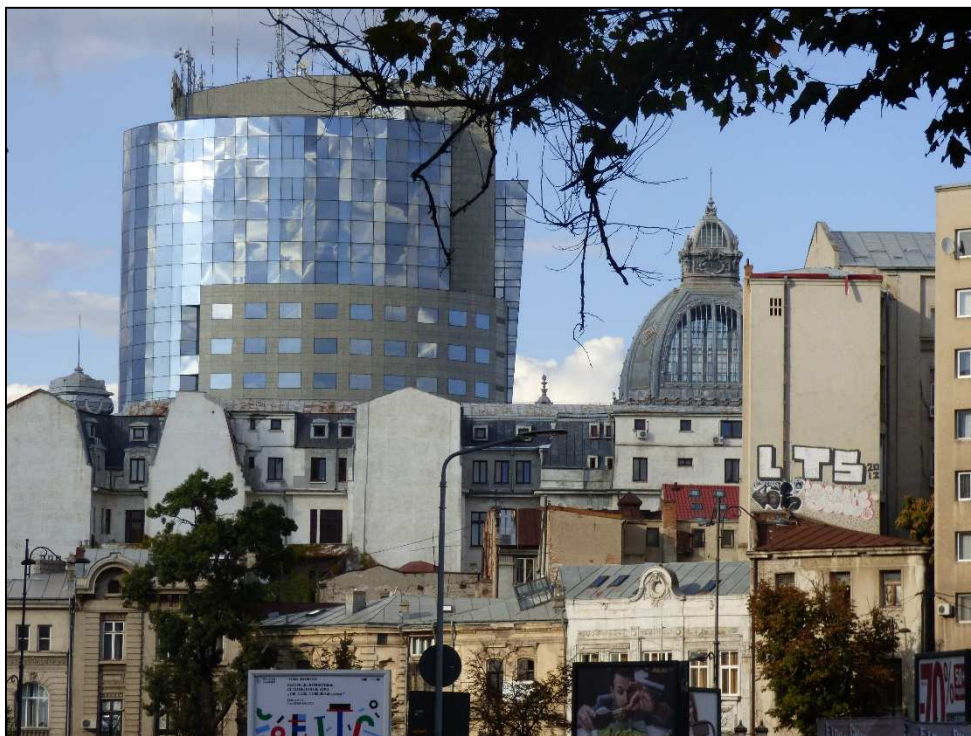
6. Absence of belonging in the present

In this chapter it is central how youth construct their belonging in the present. This construction takes place at a micro level. It focuses on relationships and interactions in everyday life (Christensen 2009). Youth try to gain connection by carrying out daily life practices and perspectives.

It is exemplified by two main practices in which youth's eagerness and expectation to connect to themselves, others, and their surroundings becomes clear. Firstly, youth would like to have discussions with their family members, friends, peer-students, teachers, and colleagues, to create a common ground of understanding. Secondly, youth would like to have role-models, which they expect their parents or teachers to be, for the sake of stimulating their own involvement and inspiration. For youth, these daily life practices are ways to create connection. However, they feel it is hardly happening. Therefore, it is argued that an absence of belonging is visible in the present.

6.1. Daily life practices as indicators of belonging at a micro level

In this research, belonging is understood as a construction of longing for connection with oneself, others, and broader surroundings, for the sake of thinking and acting in a preferred manner. Moreover, belonging is a co-creation, constructed with various actors at diverse levels and throughout time. One of these levels, the micro level, is used to analyse youth's construction of belonging in the present. It focuses on relationships and interactions in everyday life (Christensen 2009). It is a so-called 'local belonging', taking place in daily acts and attitudes, to feel comfortable with other people and in a specific place, and therefore it is a socially constructed practice (Savage et al. 2005 in Christensen 2009: 34). Thus, this chapter studies daily life practices and perspectives of youth as indicators of belonging at a micro level. It is exemplified by two main practices in which youth's eagerness and expectation to connect to themselves, others, and their surroundings becomes clear.

6.2. The lack of discussions leads to missing understanding

A first daily life practice by which youth try to create a connection, is having discussions. Youth would like to have discussions with their family members, friends, peer-students, teachers, and colleagues, to create a common ground of understanding. For them, having discussions is a manner to understand yourself, others, and the broader surroundings better. They also expect others to have the same inner drive for information gathering and sharing. However, youth feel it is hardly happening. They experience little room for talking about topics more in-depth, to dive into other topics or to gain new ideas. Thus, youth experience that the lack of discussions leads to a distance and missing understanding.

The following ethnographic portrait of Marius illustrates this. Marius (21, student) is eager to understand things better by starting discussions about it with his teachers and other students, but he feels that there is almost no space for it.

<div style="border:1px solid black; padding:10px;">

Marius, 21

Marius was born and raised in Bucharest, but his grandparents are from another part of the country. He visited them and that place many times, not only to see his family, but also to better understand his roots. He asked his parents and grandparents various questions about it, because he felt that it is part of his identity.

It becomes clear to me that Marius is not satisfied with surficial information, but he wants to understand things better. This attitude was and is not different in his formal education. During secondary school and nowadays at the university, Marius is eager to discuss topics more in-depth or he likes to start with new topics. However, he feels that it is impossible or undesirable by teachers.

Marius tells about one time when he wanted to discuss abortion, but his teacher stopped him. He tried to understand why and wanted to ask his teacher about it, but he did not receive an answer. In other lessons and with other teachers, Marius tried several times to start a discussion as well, but it did not work out. He feels that teachers rather prefer to follow the 'normal' lessons instead of diving deeper into topics. However, it does not satisfy Marius that it feels impossible or undesirable. He would like to see different viewpoints of his teachers and other students, because he believes that there are always more layers of one topic.

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Marius' story exemplifies a student's eagerness and expectation to have discussions in the classroom. For Marius, it would be helpful to have these, to better understand himself, others, and his broader surroundings. Although he explicitly expresses his wish for discussions, it is not answered by the ones who could do so. Thus, it leads to a distance between a student and teachers, which in turn leads to missing understanding.

Marius' story is representative for other youth's stories. More often, youth experience the lack of discussions during (secondary) school lessons or (university) lectures. They would like to have them, for a better understanding of what is taking place in and around them.

One of them is Alex, who is 26 years old and partly studying and partly working. He tells about one of his lectures in university in which his teacher wanted to set up a debate, which was something unusual. Alex was not surprised that it did not work out, because he felt that he and his fellow students were not used to have discussions. Alex states that students are rather used to sit and listen. Moreover, he feels that sometimes teachers and students are taking things personally during a discussion.

Furthermore, the absence of (proper) discussions in a school setting even goes beyond it. Youth state that they also experience it with most of their family members and friends. They feel that it is difficult to have in-depth conversations or open discussions at home or with their peers. It leads to creating further distance and missing understanding.

For example, Bogdan and Iulian, two students of 21 and 22 years old, feel that people are thinking like this: *'Asking questions is stupid, staying silent is smart'*. They experience that people are often not asking further questions, that they rather keep quiet, to prevent themselves from asking or saying something stupid. Sometimes, Bogdan and Iulian feel that it leads to a similar reaction from their sides as well, that they start to think similar too, which they feel is a bad consequence.

Another example comes from Rareş, who is 23 and employee. He is annoyed by shallow conversations at his work, about food for example. He would like to have discussions about politics or history, but he misses this with colleagues and other people around him. Moreover, he would like to see that people are thinking about their opinions and provide these with solid arguments, instead of simply copying what others or the media are saying. Rareş' dissatisfaction becomes clear in his following sentence: *'I am rather stupid among smart people than smart among stupid people.'* For Rareş as well, the absence of real discussions creates a distance and missing understanding.

The examples above are further confirmed by my own observation at the end of interviews and meetings with youth. Many young persons told me that they were happy and grateful to have a discussion with me. In hindsight, it seemed to be that the interviews were an exceptional moment for them to tell about their lives, their background, thoughts, struggles, ideas, and ideals. They told me that they were not used to it, but that they found it interesting. They felt that they could openly speak about topics which they normally did not discuss or not dive into that deep. It seemed to lead to a comfortable connection between them and me as a researcher, and to creating an understanding of what was on their minds.

Thus, youth face an absence of discussions in their private sphere (family, friends) and public sphere (peer-students, teachers, colleagues), which leads to feelings of distance and missing understanding in their own surroundings, the opposite of creating a connection for youth.

6.3. The lack of role-models leads to missing involvement and inspiration

A second daily life practice by which youth try to create a connection, is having role-models. Youth would like to have role-models, which they expect their parents or teachers to be, for the sake of stimulating their own involvement and inspiration. For them, a role-model is somebody who is capable in his or her job, knowledgeable, involved, and inspirational. This person would be an example for them and would encourage them to do the same. However, youth feel these role-models are barely present. They rather experience the opposite in their direct surroundings. Thus, youth experience that the lack of role-models leads to missing involvement and inspiration.

This is illustrated by the following ethnographic portrait of Adriana. Adriana (21, student) tells about her struggle of having many bad teachers in contrast to having a few inspirational ones, and how this influences her study behaviour.

> **Adriana, 21**
>
> While we are walking towards a shadowy place to sit down, I ask Adriana how her exam in the morning went. She keeps silent for a moment, then looks up with a slightly ashamed face. Adriana tells me that she did not take her exam, because she did not dare to anymore. Adriana states that not only the topic was difficult to learn, but also her teacher was not encouraging to her that she would pass the exam.
>
> It is not the only example which Adriana shares with me about bad experiences with people from school, whether it is a director, dean or a teacher. Already earlier she told me about a school director who was surprised to hear about the amount of courses Adriana had to follow; the director did not seem to be aware of it. Moreover, Adriana experienced deans who were insulting her or being abusive to others. Mostly Adriana tells about her teachers who are not knowledgeable enough, acting weird in class, being lazy or drunk during lessons or who are not respectful towards their students.
>
> Thus, I am interested if there are teachers with whom Adriana had more positive experiences. She needs to think about it for a moment. Then, Adriana tells me that during the two years of university so far, Adriana followed 24 courses in total, each given by different teachers. She states that only three, maybe up to six, teachers were good ones. I am curious what characterizes these teachers. According to Adriana, these teachers were prepared, involved, and inspirational to her. She feels that only these few teachers in university are motivating her to do her best and get high or higher grades.

Adriana's story gives insight in the positive and negative consequences of a teacher functioning as a role-model or not. When a teacher is capable, knowledgeable, involved, and inspirational, a student might copy this attitude. However, when the opposite is taking place, it seems that students are asking themselves questions such as: 'If my teacher is not prepared for the lesson, why would I?', or 'If my teacher is not involved in the lesson, why would I?' Thus, a role-model influences others' involvement and inspiration.

Adriana's story is characteristic for other youth's stories. More often, youth have negative experiences with people in- or outside a school setting, with persons whom they expect to function as role-model, which would be helpful for youth's (study) behaviour.

One of them is Catalina who is 26 years old, employee and doing a PhD. She was also discouraged and dissatisfied by her teachers, not only during her secondary school, but also by her PhD supervisor. She experienced teachers who were old and not used to interaction within the classroom, which did not motivate her. Moreover, her supervisor barely explained what was expected from her and provided almost no support during the process. Catalina needs one more year to finish her PhD, but she has been hesitating quite often to quit the project. When talking about it, she becomes angry and feels dissatisfied. Catalina states that these people do not seem to be interested in doing their job properly, which immediately influences her own involvement.

Thus, youth face an absence of role-models in their private sphere (e.g. family) and public sphere (e.g. teachers), which leads to being less involved themselves and feelings of missing inspiration of their own surroundings, the opposite of creating a connection for youth.

6.4.   Conclusion

It this chapter it was central how youth construct their belonging in the present. It became clear that youth's daily life practices of having discussions and role-models were ways to create understanding, involvement, and inspiration, and therefore to create a connection with themselves, others, and their broader surroundings. However, because they felt it is hardly happening, it is argued that an absence of belonging is visible in the present. The reasons for this absence are explained in the following chapter.

7. Remnants of the past lead to an absence of belonging in the present

In this chapter it is central how the past influences youth's absence of belonging in the present. These past influences are located at a meso level, within systems, institutions, and organizations (Christensen 2009), but also in mentalities of people as forthcoming of these systems. It specifically focuses on school belonging, because a school institution is an important place to create or break belonging (Allen & Kern 2017).

It is exemplified by two experiences which lead to disconnection. Firstly, the experience that youth feel caught in a rigid school structure, whereas they prefer more freedom and challenges. Secondly, youth's experiences with strict mentalities which do not give them support. Youth's experiences with the past in the present negatively impacts their belonging; it leads to disconnection. Therefore, it is argued that remnants of the past lead to an absence of belonging in the present.

7.1. Past influences at a meso level: focus on school belonging

Ongoing influences of the country's communist past impact youth's absence belonging in the present, as described in the previous chapter. These influences are located at a meso level, within systems, institutions, and organizations (Christensen 2009), but also in mentalities of people as forthcoming of these systems. Youth often refer to experiencing a lagging system within the country. It means that they experience, whether directly or indirectly, something in politics, economy, nature conservation, health care, or education, which they perceive as something old-fashioned or not yet transformed to modern times. They provide examples of corrupt politicians, unreasonable investments in infrastructure, low salaries, deforestation by foreign and Romanian companies, inadequate hospitals, and most of all: a rigid school structure. Because the respondents are or were students, it is not surprising that the education system is the most striking example of a lagging system to them. The consequence of this experience, a disconnection, becomes clear when specifically focusing on school belonging.

A widely-used definition of school belonging is the following: 'The extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment' (Goodenow & Grady 1993 in Allen & Kern 2017: 14). To be more specific, Allen & Kern provide three recurrent aspects to describe school belonging: '1) school-based relationships and experiences, 2) student-teacher relationships, and 3) students' general feelings about school as a whole' (Allen & Kern 2017: 17). It shows that various interrelationships are at stake when studying school belonging: youth's involvement and engagement, the interaction with other students, and the role of teachers, mentors, deans, and directors. Thus, school belonging focuses on the role and responsibility of various actors within the school sphere, whether in primary, secondary or tertiary education. When this role and responsibility is fulfilled, it might lead to essential positive outcomes. However, when school belonging is absent, it does the opposite. This leads to crucial consequences, especially because youth spend a lot of time in school. Thus, a school institution is an important place to create or break belonging (Allen & Kern 2017). Here, it seems that an absence of school belonging leads to a disconnection.

7.2.   Disconnected by feeling caught in a rigid school structure

A main experience of the past in the present which influences youth's absence of belonging, is within the school sphere. Youth feel caught in a rigid school structure. They experience the education system as a fixed system of rules, regulations, many obligatory courses, and straightforward lessons. Youth feel that the system has barely been transformed to modern times. They would like to have a more modern style of education, with more freedom and challenges within school. For example, they would like to learn specific skills or to gain practical knowledge, to really understand what is taught. However, since this is absent, youth often feel caught in the current system, which in turn leads to a disconnection.

This is illustrated by the following ethnographic portrait of Mihai. Mihai (19, student) started self-studying at home when the lessons in secondary school barely satisfied him.

Mihai, 19

During our walk through the city, we go in and out various parks. In each park, Mihai refers at least one time to his school life. He just finished secondary school and he will start studying after the summer holidays. He is planning to do two studies: first one which his parents would like him to study, thereafter one which he would like to study himself.

It is evident that Mihai loves to learn. Because the lessons in secondary school were not satisfying to him, he has spent many hours on self-studying. At home, he took time to understand things better, or to explore new themes and topics which were not discussed in class. For example, he started to understand the political system of his country, and then compared it with political systems of other countries. Moreover, he taught himself the Greek and Russian languages.

Hearing this, I am curious about a typical school lesson of Mihai. He remembers one lesson which was not encouraging at all to him. Mihai states that the teacher had asked the students to learn a text by heart. During the lesson, the students had to repeat this text in front of the teacher. The same text, student after student, the whole lesson. Mihai states that the teacher did not seem to get bored by it, but that the students did. Mihai sighs and laughs simultaneously; more often he experienced these kinds of lessons. Moreover, Mihai feels that teachers were telling the students how to think and behave, and to not have an opinion themselves.

Mihai wraps up his not-encouraging school life and teachers by stating that it did not so much annoy him, but that it was mostly boring to him. He did not feel challenged by the lessons and therefore he started to challenge himself after school. Mihai states that he felt and feels the need to really learn things, which was not possible in his formal educational period.

Mihai's story gives insight in the discrepancy between a rigid school structure and youth's longing for going beyond this structure. This mismatch leads the student to fulfil his need for a better and broader learning environment somewhere else, which is the opposite of the function of an education system. Thus, a disconnection is visible.

Although Mihai is quite exceptional in starting self-studying at home, his story is still characteristic for other youth's stories, concerning the fact that they feel caught in a rigid school structure which leads to a disconnection. More often, youth experience straightforward lessons, or even a strict curriculum with many obligatory courses, which are not all interesting to them, whether during secondary school or at the university.

For example, Bogdan and Iulian (see Chapter 6.2.), found it problematic that they needed to follow and do exams in fourteen courses during their 7th grade[3]. Not all courses were interesting to them, which led to difficulties in understanding each course. However, they were obliged to follow the curriculum and felt relieved when they managed to pass their exams in the end. They know that other students were not able to do so in one go and needed to do re-exams or even re-start a whole year. According to Bogdan and Iulian, they realise that various courses needed to be provided to students, but that it would be better if there would be more specialisations already sooner in the curriculum. It shows that Bogdan and Iulian pushed themselves to graduate, although they felt disconnected with the system.

Thus, youth experience the past in the present by feeling caught in a rigid school structure, which leads to disconnection with their surroundings.

7.3.   Disconnected by strict mentalities which do not give support

Another experience of the past in the present which influences youth's absence of belonging, is with strict mentalities of other people. Youth are often struggling with strict mentalities of other people, because it leads to not feeling supported by their own surroundings. Youth mainly refer to older persons, but sometimes they also feel similar mind-sets among some of their peers. Youth describe this mind-set as strict, restrictive, closed, no space for nuances or difficult to give another perspective. Moreover, youth often state that they live in their parents' or grandparents' world with their norms and values. Thus, it creates a difficult setting for youth, because they feel, think, and would like to act differently, but they often do not feel supported by their own surroundings. Therefore, it leads to a disconnection.

The following ethnographic portrait of Ioana illustrates this. Ioana (21, student) aimed to gain recognition from her family when she graduated, but it did not happen as she expected due to different life perspectives and an absence of reaching out to each other.

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[3] The 7th grade is part of the lower secondary school, when students are between 12-13 years old (Ministry of Education & Research 2001: http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE/natrap/Romania.pdf).

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Ioana, 21

When Ioana graduated her Bachelor of Science, she visited her father and his parents in the northern part of Romania. Ioana was 17 when she left that area with her mother, because there were problems between her parents. After living one year in another city with her mother, Ioana moved to Bucharest to study.

Ioana tells about the moment when she was meeting her father and grandparents after her graduation. Her father asked her if she would become a stewardess. Ioana explains that her father is focused on people with a uniform, because for him these persons have a certain status, or they accomplished something. Although she understands that her father thinks like this, because he served the army for 30 years, she seems to be angry with him about his comment. Moreover, Ioana feels that also her grandparents are traditionally thinking. Her grandmother asked her if she is able to cook. When answering that she is and that she finds recipes on the internet, her grandmother stated that it is not possible like that. In the meantime, her grandfather asked Ioana to bring him some ice cream. When she did so, he was not satisfied yet, and asked her for a plate and a spoon as well. *'Fă-ţi treaba'*, do your work, he said.

Ioana sighs and keeps silent for a moment.

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Ioana's story exemplifies the differences in life paths and perspectives between young persons and their parents or grandparents. Moreover, when a willingness to understand each other is missing, it leads to an absence of support, and in turn to a disconnection.

Ioana's story is representative for other youth's stories. More often, youth experience strict mentalities of their parents, grandparents, or even peers, which makes them feel not supported by their own surroundings, which leads to a disconnection.

One of them is Adriana (see Chapter 6.3.), who had difficulties with her mother's mind-set while choosing a study. Adriana considered a specific study which fitted her interests and grades at secondary school. However, her mother became keen on Adriana's consideration, and started to impose it on her. The more this happened, the less Adriana was sure about it. Then, she willingly started to get lower grades for some specific courses, to not be able to choose the study anymore she had in mind. In hindsight, she feels relieved that she did so, because she did and does not want to be *'put in boxes'*. Thus, Adriana felt not supported by her mother's strict mind-set, which led to a radical choice of doing something completely different. It shows that support is missing which in turn led to a disconnection.

Another example comes from Alex (see Chapter 6.2.), who experiences a strict mind-set of his mother and grandmothers. He states that they are still thinking in a communist manner. Whereas Alex and his father earn enough to go to a restaurant once and a while, his mother does not want to do so, because she feels it is something unnecessary and too expensive. Alex tried to have several discussions with her, to make her see things differently, but it did not work out. The same happens with his grandmothers. Alex tells about one exception which happened a couple of months before we met, with one of his grandmothers. He had long and in-depth conversations with her about a variety of topics, which never happened beforehand. Alex stated that he had the

best quality time with her in his whole life. Alex would be grateful if those moments – with his grandmothers and mother – would happen more often, to better understand each other and smoothen support from both sides. Thus, Alex tried to reach out to his mother and grandmothers, who are thinking in a strict manner according to him, but it did not work out, expect for one moment with his grandmother. It shows that a supporting basis is largely missing, which in turn led to a disconnection.

Thus, youth experience the past in the present by strict mentalities which do not give support, which in turn leads to disconnection with their surroundings.

7.4. Conclusion

In this chapter it was central how the past influenced youth's absence of belonging in the present. It became clear that youth's experiences of the past in the present, namely feeling caught in a rigid school structure and struggling with strict mentalities of other people, led to a disconnection with their surroundings. Thus, it is argued that remnants of the past lead to an absence of belonging in the present. The way youth are dealing with it towards the future, is described in the following chapter.

8. Eager to reconstruct belonging towards the future

In this chapter it is central how youth reconstruct their belonging towards the future. In the foregoing chapters, it became clear that youth's absence of belonging in the present is influenced by the past. This, in turn, influences youth's belonging towards the future, because they refuse to let the past also influence their future, and therefore they would like to reconstruct their belonging by changing their current situation. It is a twofold process of searching for and regaining belonging. It takes place at a macro level, because it focuses on the connection with 'larger' imagined communities (Christensen 2009), and because it focuses on a construction of personal and political belonging throughout time (Deák 2015; Haukanes & Trnka 2013; Yuval-Davis 2006).

Firstly, the search for belonging towards the future is described by youth's considerations of staying in or leaving Romania, to show youth's crucial search for belonging with the country and other citizens. Secondly, the regaining of belonging towards the future is described by youth's aims to restore connection in different ways. Some youth aim to raise awareness to let other people see things differently, and other youth aim to become active to show a good example to others. For youth, these intentions are ways to restore connection. However, youth feel that their reconstructing of belonging towards the future is a tough path, because of their own scepticism and the huge amount of time and energy to put in it to realize these changes. Despite this, it is argued that youth are eager to reconstruct their belonging towards the future.

8.1. Reconstruction of belonging at a macro level

The reconstruction of belonging towards the future is a twofold process of searching for and regaining belonging. It takes place at a macro level, because it focuses on the connection with 'larger' imagined communities (Christensen 2009) – namely with Romania and Romanians as citizens of the same country – and because it focuses on a construction of personal and political belonging throughout time.

Belonging at a macro level is often associated with notions of nationalism. An important aspect is the imagination of a connection with citizens of the same country, although it is impossible to be really connected with them all. The idea of being part of one specific country nevertheless creates that feeling of connection (Anderson 1983 in Christensen 2009). However, in the following section it will become clear that youth are in search of this connection with Romania and Romanians.

Moreover, youth are not only in search of their belonging, but they also try to regain it. This happens at a macro level as well, focusing on a construction of personal and political belonging throughout time (Deák 2015; Haukanes & Trnka 2013; Yuval-Davis 2006).

Firstly, youth's perspectives of and positioning towards a connection with Romania and Romanians towards the future can be understood as dual identity narratives of being and becoming. They aim to regain a connection which happens throughout time. This stance is seen as a person's identification towards and social attachment with a group, as part of personal belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Moreover, youth are entangled in a continuous challenge of positioning themselves towards the country's system and mentalities of other people as remnants of communism. This stance is described as politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Then, to focus more specifically on youth's challenge with regaining belonging on a time frame of the past-present-future, it is helpful to use the contributions of Haukanes and Trnka (2013) about nostalgia and Deák (2015) about presentism. Firstly, youth are not longing for a different past, but rather for a different future. This is a form of nostalgia as a critical voice or political force (Haukanes & Trnka 2013). Secondly, youth are facing the past, but simultaneously they try to refuse it by changing their current situation towards the future. This is described as presentism, an active attitude to both embrace and criticize the past (Deák 2015).

In the following sections it will become clear by which acts and attitudes youth specifically try to regain their belonging with Romania and Romanians at a macro level, but first we will have a look at youth's search for belonging.

8.2. Crucial search for belonging: should I stay or leave?

This section describes youth's crucial search for belonging with the country and other citizens, by highlighting youth's considerations of staying in or leaving Romania.

Youth are daily dealing with difficulties: having no discussions, no role-models, feeling caught in a rigid school structure, and struggling with strict mentalities. It leads to missing understanding, being less involved themselves and missing inspiration, feeling not supported, and in turn to a disconnection with their surroundings. It depends whether youth can deal with these difficulties. Some can handle it – at least for the moment –, and they would like to stay in Romania, and some of them would even like to improve the country's situation. Others are fed up with the country's situation, and they are keener on leaving Romania, for a better, brighter, and easier life abroad – whether for a short or long term. They are thinking of opportunities to study or work in another country, or they have already been abroad.

In the following, these two preferences and underlying perceptions of connection with Romania and Romanians will be shown.

8.2.1. Preference to stay in Romania

One of the youth's preferences is to stay in Romania, because of diverse reasons. Some would like to stay, because they are eager to make the most of it, or they even want to improve the society by becoming an active citizen. Others would like to stay, because of job or study opportunities or other activities. Moreover, youth's relationship with their family and friends or financial circumstances seem to play a role as well in their preference to stay. However, youth mostly experience their life in Romania as a struggle, because they daily deal with difficulties. Thus, on the one hand these youth would like to be connected with the country and other citizens, but on the other hand they feel it is not easy to do so. Therefore, youth's search for connection is characterized by a contradiction.

The following ethnographic portrait of Mihai illustrates this. Mihai (see Chapter 7.2.) tells about his dream of becoming a politician in Romania, for the sake of improving and connecting better to the country, although he feels it is a tough and time-consuming path.

Mihai, 19

The Romanian blue-yellow-red coloured braid in his hair is moving back and forth while Mihai is walking through the streets of Bucharest. He stops and looks up. Mihai points at the Romanian Orthodox church, the communist flats, the foreign advertisement billboard, and the office buildings around, as well as to the broken pavement which we are standing on. He states that the city does not know what it wants, that a direction is missing.

Mihai would like to see things differently in the city and in the country. Therefore, he wants to become a politician, to have the power to change things. He would strive for a better economy, a better infrastructure, and a better education system. He would like to do something great, to contribute something to the country. Mihai compares Romania with a baby: *'I want to raise it and to fully flourish it'*. Moreover, he wants to make it a better place for future generations, because he feels that Romania is his homeland.

However, Mihai states that it takes a lot of time and energy to realize his ambition of becoming a politician. First of all, he is not sure if it works out. Secondly, he needs to know people first. And lastly, it is possible that he should bribe himself into the political world. Mihai says that he would not sleep a night over it to get involved into bribery. Suddenly Mihai says: *'Romania is like fairy tale, everything is possible! We should be privileged to live here!'* I can hear the irony in his voice. He seems dissatisfied by how things are working, or better said, not working in Romania.

Moreover, Mihai is dissatisfied about many people leaving the country and not coming back anymore. He compares them with butterflies, who are instinctively flying away. Mihai admits that he will go abroad as well, but for the sake of using those experiences for coming back to Romania. Mihai states that he will continue to follow his dream, at least to give it a try, because he feels the urgent need for some people to stand up and to change situations from within.

Mihai's story shows a contradicting connection with the country and other citizens. On the one hand, Mihai is eager to change things in the country. As a politician he would like to make it easier, faster, and fairer to be involved in the political world, and then to start building a more efficient and effective society. On the other hand, it is exactly these difficulties which make it a tough path for Mihai. Thus, while holding on to his dream, Mihai is in search of a real connection with Romania and Romanians.

Other youth are also in search of a connection with the country and other citizens. They prefer to stay in Romania as well, at least for the moment, hoping that difficulties might diminish over time and the connection might become stronger both towards the country as well as between citizens.

One of them is Adriana (see Chapters 6.3. & 7.3.). She feels a partly connected with the country and other citizens, which she describes as follows: *'Romanians are like a distant relative, you love and you hate them at the same time.'* Adriana feels that Romanians hate each other, and they are mean to each other, but at the same time they love each other, and they take care of each other. For her, Romanians are like a family; it is yours, no matter what happens. It makes her feel connected, but it is a struggle as well. For the moment, she prefers to stay in Romania.

Another example comes from Ion. He is 30 years old and employee. He also feels partly connected with the country and other citizens. Ion tells about his past experiences abroad and his present choice of staying in Romania. When he was abroad several times, he felt delighted by different systems and people, and he made plans to move to another country. However, at the same time Ion was offered a job and other activities in Romania. Although he struggled and is still struggling with daily life difficulties in the country, he decided to stay. Ion states it as follows: *'Somehow, Romania is a faceted country. I hate it with love and I would go away, but I am still here.'*

Thus, these youth prefer to stay in Romania, while dealing with a contradicting connection with the country and other citizens.

8.2.2.   Preference to leave Romania

Another youth's preference is to leave Romania, because of better job or study opportunities or other activities abroad. These youth are mainly fed up with dealing with daily life difficulties regarding the country's system or other person's mentalities, which influence youth's connection with Romania and Romanians. It seems that they aim to create a better connection abroad.

The following ethnographic portrait of Catalina illustrates this. Catalina (see Chapter 6.3.) tells about her eagerness to leave Romania, but she finds it difficult to get a job abroad and therefore she feels caught in the country.

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Catalina, 26

Catalina comes home from another long day at her job. She looks tired. I ask her if she will take some rest in the evening. Catalina says that she would like to do so, but that she will send some applications again. She is eager to work somewhere else, preferably in her field of expertise and even more so in an organisation abroad.

During her studies, she gained some working experience in her field of expertise, but she became demotivated by her colleagues. Catalina noticed that they were not knowledgeable enough. She felt that they got the job by knowing people or by paying money. Catalina started to doubt whether she wanted to be part of it. Nevertheless, after finishing her studies, she tried to get a job in her field, but it did not work out.

Catalina also feels dissatisfied by her current job and colleagues. She does not like the work that much, but she simply earns money with it. Moreover, Catalina states that some of her colleagues are trying to get promotion by *'kissing the ass of the manager'*. Catalina prefers to earn her money in a fair way.

In her daily life Catalina struggles with many not-encouraging people and places surrounding her as well. She is fed up with the chaos in the city and with people who are not understanding her ambitions. Catalina states that she tried to change things, or to discuss with people, but that it did not work out. At the moment, she does not have the energy anymore.

The fact that Catalina is merely unhappy with her current life in Romania, brings her to the decision to go abroad. And not only for her own happiness she would like to leave Romania, but also for her children later. *'What if my child would be gay?'* she asks me. Catalina states that her child would not be accepted in Romania. However, it is difficult for Catalina to find a job abroad and to leave. Therefore, Catalina feels caught in Romania.

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Catalina's story shows a struggle between the eagerness to go abroad while simultaneously dealing with the difficulties to do so. It is exactly these difficulties which Catalina would like to escape: to do a job in your field of expertise, to get appreciation for the work you do, to enjoy a well-regulated system, and to be supported by surrounding people. Because Catalina cannot find these connections with her country and other citizens, she feels the need to go abroad for a better and happier life, for herself and for her children. Thus, there is an eagerness for an adventure abroad, hoping to find a connection with a country and with other citizens, which is currently not happening.

Other youth are also in search of a connection with the country and other citizens, but since this is not happening, they prefer to leave Romania and create a connection abroad.

One of them is Ioana. Ioana (see Chapter 7.3.) is eager to go abroad to feel better connected. In Romania, she often feels unsafe; whether she walks on the streets, when she needs to be in a hospital, or because of political decisions. Moreover, Ioana often feels not being supported by surrounding people, whether by her family, friends or peer-students. Ioana has been abroad for her studies, and when she finds another opportunity to go abroad, she will immediately go.

Another example comes from Vlad, who is 21 years old and student. Vlad states that he does not feel attached to a specific place. He says that he feels limited in Romania, because he cannot fully express himself. He is eager to go abroad for the long term, to continue studying and start working. Thus, it shows that Vlad is not connected to the country and other citizens, although it would have been easier for him if it was the case.

A last example is provided by Radu. He is 27 years old and employee. Radu feels that he cannot connect with friends or colleagues that much, who are rather focusing on a *'day-to-day-life'*. He states that their next prospect is the weekend, whereas Radu likes to think further about what he will be doing in the next years. He hopes to find something extra by being abroad, although he cannot really pinpoint what exactly that 'extra' means. Radu does know that he is often dissatisfied by the country's problems, such as corruption. On the other hand, Radu wonders whether he should appreciate the life in Romania more. Thus, it shows that Radu is in search for a connection with his country and other citizens, but because he cannot find it that much currently, he is eager to do so abroad.

Thus, these youth prefer to leave Romania, because they are mainly fed up with dealing with daily life difficulties regarding the country's system or other person's mentalities, which influence youth's connection with Romania and Romanians. Therefore, it seems that they aim to create a better connection abroad.

8.3. Regain belonging

The foregoing sections have shown that youth are in a crucial search of belonging with Romania and Romanians, because it influences their considerations of staying in or leaving the country. This section focuses on the regaining of belonging towards the future. It is described by youth's aims to restore connection in different ways. Firstly, some youth aim to raise awareness to let other people see things differently. Secondly, other youth aim to become active to show a good example to others. For youth, these intentions are ways to restore connection.

8.3.1. Raising awareness to fight indifference

Some youth aim to raise awareness to fight indifference. They are eager to start thinking and acting differently. They would like the same for others. Therefore, by spreading the word, they aspire to reach more people to create a broader effect. For them, it is a way to restore a connection with Romania and Romanians. However, youth also feel a sense of scepticism. They are partly unsure if they are capable enough, if there are others who have the same ideals, or if the effect will be big enough. Nevertheless, youth are trying to raise awareness in a variety of ways, which mostly comes back to their belief in small steps for bigger changes.

This is illustrated by the following ethnographic portrait of Rareş. Rareş (see Chapter 6.2.) tells about his dream of opening a bar in the capital city, which could function as a place where people can interact with each other and be informed, although he is not sure if it works out.

<div style="border:1px solid black; padding:10px;">

Rareş, 23

In between kilometres long communist block buildings, Rareş shows me a modern open-air cafe. I am quite surprised by this inconvenient bar at this inconvenient spot. The cosiness of pallets filled with pillows contrasts with the dark grey buildings above us. While we are sitting down, Rareş tells me about his dream of setting up his own bar. He is dreaming of a place where various people can interact with each other, where they can enjoy theme-parties, read books, dance and have drinks.

In his daily life, Rareş is missing this interaction, and especially the way people are not or badly informing themselves. He feels that it leads to people being opposites of each other. Rareş often notices that his friends and colleagues for example are either in a 'this is right' or 'this is wrong' position, in which there is almost no space for nuances. Rareş continues by stating that people should stop battling each other, because for him it does not make sense to be right; more persons can be right at the same time.

Rareş believes that better and more information, streamlined by a certain group of people – apart from the state or the media –, would help people to become more aware of their own opinions. Hereby people would be able to provide their opinions with solid arguments. Rareş himself tries to talk to others, but he would like to find a person who thinks similar, who could help him to spread the word of informing yourself better.

Rareş hopes to realise his dream in a couple of years, to realise a place where this informing interaction could also happen. Until then, he tries to get inspiration from places as where we are enjoying our drinks and discussions now.

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Rareş' story shows a young person's willingness to change a current situation towards the future, by raising awareness in a modern way. His dream is focused on developing and enlarging a better connection with the country and other citizens. However, he also feels partly unsure if he will manage to do so, especially because he feels quite alone in his ideas and ideals.

Other youth aim to raise awareness to fight indifference as well, for the sake of creating a better connection with the country and other citizens. Their aims come back to raising awareness by changing little steps in their acts and attitudes, hoping to let others see and do things differently as well.

For example, Bogdan (see Chapters 6.2. & 7.2.), who believes in minor changes which are helpful, whether in discussions or having faith that people are not alone in changing things. Bogdan often asks friends why they think in a certain manner, because he feels that they often do not really know why they think in a specific way. By asking them questions, he hopes to make them aware of their opinions. Moreover, Bogdan states that *'people should not think that they cannot do something on their own, because there might be another person on the other side of the country who thinks exactly the same way.'* Thus, Bogdan aims to change his current situation by raising awareness of thinking better and deeper about information, and to share the feeling of not being alone in changing something. It shows that he aims to create a connection with others by small steps.

Another example comes from Marius (see Chapter 6.2.), who feels the need to change things now, although he is not sure if he is the person to really change things. He argues that it needs a lot of time, knowledge, and other people to better understand world dynamics and then to do something about it. However, he also believes that it is possible to change something in a small manner. Marius' passion lies in art, and he is hoping to give people other perspectives by showing his artworks. When we say goodbye, he writes the following sentence in my notebook: *'Art is not what you see, but what you make others see.'* Thus, Marius aims to raise awareness by art, to let others see things differently. However, he also feels partly unsure about his own capability to really change things. It nevertheless shows an eagerness to connect with others and his surroundings.

The last example is provided by Ioana (see Chapters 7.3. & 8.2.2.), who believes in small steps for bigger changes as well. She would like to raise awareness about a variety of topics, preferably in a modern museum in which interaction about information is possible. She feels that museums in Romania are not providing this nowadays. Moreover, Ioana became aware of her own responsibility when she saw a cartoon of older people sitting on a bench, saying the following: *'Eu? Nu. Tu? Da!'*, which means 'Me? No. You? Yes!' Ioana realised that many people are not eager to strive for a change themselves, but that they would rather see other people making changes for them. Ioana hopes that she will be able to realise change in the future. Thus, Ioana aims to raise awareness by information-interaction in a museum, to connect with others.

Thus, these youth aim to raise awareness to fight indifference, to let others see and do things differently. For them, it is a way to change their current situation and to reconnect with Romania and Romanians, although they are partly unsure if it works out. This might explain their belief in small steps for bigger changes.

8.3.2. Become active versus *asta este viaţa*

Other youth aim to become active. They aspire to become an activist, volunteer, teacher, or politician, or by fulfilling another occupation which provides them with the power to change things, and which is recognized by society as such. They feel responsible for their own and others' lives. For them, it is a way to show a good example to others, and hereby to restore a connection with Romania and Romanians. Differently than the youth's perspectives described in the previous section, these youth seem to have a greater belief in their capability to change things. They try to transform the difficulties – which they daily face and which lead to disconnection – into connections and possibilities, although it asks a huge amount of effort, time, and energy of them. Therefore, this attitude is a firm statement against an often-heard Romanian expression *'asta este viaţa',* which means 'this is life'. Youth feel the need to take their responsibility to change things, instead of having in awaiting attitude and let others do the things for them.

The following ethnographic portrait of Raluca illustrates this. Raluca (21, student), tells about her life as an activist and volunteer and how she decided to do so.

Raluca, 21

While we are sitting down in a park, Raluca receives a phone call. One minute later she is finished and says that her mother called her, just to ask how she was doing. Raluca tells me that her mother calls her almost every day with the same question, sometimes even asking if she ate enough. Raluca laughs about it, and simultaneously she states that she does not have the same family feeling. She is grateful for how her parents raised her, but she does not see herself fulfilling that role in that way.

It reminds Raluca of her childhood. She was born and raised in a village, where it was common to not follow higher education and to early start with raising a family. Raluca is happy that her parents found it important that she would go to school and university, and therefore she moved to the capital city when she was old enough. In hindsight, Raluca sees herself as an outsider back home. She was reading books, went to school, and ultimately left the village.

Nowadays, Raluca has other focus points than raising a family. She states that the motor of her life is having your own responsibility. She finds it important to change things which you have an influence on. And since Raluca feels threefold vulnerable – as a woman, as a gay person, and being higher educated – she is eager to strive for her rights. Therefore, she became an activist and a volunteer in various organisations.

After telling about her fights (as Raluca describes her strive for rights), I wonder how she manages to be active in these diverse ways, besides her studies and side job. Raluca looks up, thinks for a moment, and then answers that she would like to do even more. However, she needs to choose her fights according to her time, energy, and health. Raluca concludes by stating that she is wondering why others are not doing something, and therefore she feels the need to fill the gap.

Raluca's story gives insight in a young person's decision to feel responsible for her own and others' lives. By taking up an active role, Raluca hopes to create a more inclusive society, and to gather more people with the same ideals. Thus, it shows a wish for connection with the country and other citizens, by being active herself as a good example.

Other youth also feel the need to become active themselves, to be a good example to others, and hereby to create a better connection with the country and other citizens.

One of them is Adriana (see Chapters 6.3., 7.3., & 8.2.1.) who wants to become a teacher. It might sound paradoxical, because we know that Adriana was demotivated by many bad teachers. However, Adriana feels that the few teachers who inspired her, brought her to the decision to become such a teacher as well; someone who can inspire and motivate students, albeit with a few words or sentences, because she felt how important it was to her. Thus, it shows that Adriana is eager to become an active role-model in the future, hoping to reach out to others, something which she misses herself nowadays.

Another example comes from Alex (see Chapters 6.2. & 7.3.), who is also eager to become a teacher. He already has some experience in teaching, and he would like to teach pupils, students, and more persons about a variety of topics, especially about calculations and estimations. He feels

that people are not knowledgeable and skilled enough to do so currently, but that it would help them to understand things better, to even understand the world better. When he passes by a primary school when going to his work, he often wonders how it would be to give lessons over there. Thus, it shows that Alex is eager to become an active person in the future, to be a good example to others, and hereby creating a better understanding of and connection with Romania and Romanians.

The last example is provided by Mihai (see Chapters 7.2. & 8.2.1.), who wants to become a politician. His ambition to do so has already been elaborated upon, but it shows a young person's eagerness to involve his time and energy to work on difficulties in the country, for the sake of improving it and creating a better connection with the country and other citizens.

Thus, these youth aim to become active to be a good example to others. For them, it is a way to change their current situation and to reconnect with Romania and Romanians, although it asks a huge amount of time and energy of them.

8.4.   Conclusion

In this chapter it was central how youth reconstruct their belonging towards the future. It became clear that youth refuse to let the past also influence their future, and therefore they preferred to reconstruct their belonging by changing their current situation. This reconstruction was a twofold process of searching for and regaining belonging. Firstly, youth were in search of a connection with the country and other citizens, by considering their choice to stay in or leave Romania. Secondly, youth aimed to regain a connection by raising awareness to fight indifference or by becoming active to show a good example to others. However, youth felt that this reconstructing of belonging towards the future is a tough path, because of a contradicting connection with the country and other citizens, because of dealing with daily life difficulties, because of their own scepticism to really change things, and because of the huge amount of time and energy to put in it to realize these changes. Despite this, it was argued that youth are eager to reconstruct their belonging with Romania and Romanians towards the future.

9. Conclusion

In this research it was central how youth's belonging at a micro level and meso level influenced youth's belonging at a macro level throughout time. Youth's belonging was understood as a co-construction of longing for connection with themselves, others, and their surroundings at various levels and throughout time. Therefore, the distinction between belonging at a micro, meso, and macro level was chosen to focus on specific manners and time frames in which belonging was constructed. Hereby, the existence of a past-present-future paradox of belonging in a transition society became clear.

On the one hand, an absence of belonging was visible in the present at a micro level. Youth's daily life practices of having discussions and role-models were ways to create understanding, involvement, and inspiration, and therefore to create a connection with themselves, others, and their broader surroundings. However, they felt it is hardly happening.

Remnants of the past, located at a meso level, led to this absence of belonging in the present. Youth's experiences of the past in the present, namely feeling caught in a rigid school structure and struggling with strict mentalities of other people, led to a disconnection with their surroundings.

On the other hand, despite youth's scepticism to really change things and the huge amount of time and energy to put in it to realize change, youth were eager to reconstruct their belonging towards the future at a macro level. Youth refused to let the past also influence their future, and therefore they preferred to reconstruct their belonging by changing their current situation. This reconstruction was a twofold process of searching for and regaining belonging. Firstly, youth were in search of a connection with the country and other citizens, by considering their choice to stay in or leave Romania. Secondly, youth aimed to regain a connection by raising awareness to fight indifference or by becoming active to show a good example to others.

Thus, a youth's struggle for belonging throughout time has been presented by this case study among youth in Bucharest, Romania.

A few important lessons can be drawn from this conclusion. Firstly, studying belonging at a micro level provides helpful insights to better understand daily life practices on a time frame of the past-present-future of people living in transition societies. One of these insights is that, unlike often presented, youth do care about their connection with Romania and Romanians, but they try to work with it in another way than is often measured. Belonging then, helped to provide this insight. Secondly, belonging is an essential element in creating a certain basis of trust and continuity in living in a transition society, to deal with continuous changes and complexities, which is vital for the well-being of citizens and the country as a whole. Therefore, and this is the third point I want to make clear, an important role and responsibility to recognize and work on belonging in a transition society lies in the hands of people and the government, of which the education system might be an effective starting point to do so.

Lastly, future research might help to further investigate this importance of the interrelationship of belonging in a transition society at various levels and throughout time, focused on youth.

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