

Mutual Aid After 1989. The Kolping Model in Romania

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Abstract: Following the fall of the communist regime in 1989, Romania faced major social and economic challenges stemming both from structural changes in society and from the mentalities formed during the communist era. In this context, Kolping International and its European network initiated a complex process to support the transformation processes in the Central and Eastern European countries, providing emergency material aid and gradually evolving toward a “help for self-help” development model based on the establishment of local associations and their projects. In this context, the process of building civil society required an investment on social structures that were unknown after the communist era. Another objective was to launch enterprises that would offer new perspectives to the disintegration of the large state-owned conglomerates. The article analyzes the stages involved in building a network-based mutual aid social structure composed of associations and their enterprises. This article outlines the conditions under which such a social structure can become functional. It analyzes the complete cycle in which the recipient of emergency aid achieves a level of autonomy and can become a donor. The transition from a community dependent on aids and expertise to an independent structure that works efficiently and is self-sustaining (Association Journal, 2018) is relevant to the entire spectrum of association networks established in Central and Eastern Europe by the partners from Western Europe.

Keywords: Civil Society, Post-Communist Transition, Community Development, Social Economy, Mutual Aid, Associative Networks

Introduction

The political and economic transformations following the 1989 Romanian Revolution created a social context characterized by uncertainty, economic restructuring, and the need to redefine social and institutional relationships. In the early years of the transition, many communities faced major difficulties, such as job losses, a decline in living standards, and the lack of functional social support mechanisms.

In this context, the establishment of the first associations aimed to organize and support the local communities. Among these were the initiatives of Kolping associations from Western Europe in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, organizations with a long tradition in the field of social and vocational training. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the provision of emergency material aid proved insufficient and risked creating a state of dependency for vulnerable groups. The aid provided by the Kolping network involved establishing a common goal for both donors and beneficiaries to set up local associations and, later, to develop social structures for mutual aid and community cooperation at the national level.

The purpose of this article is to present an associative model that can be implemented in developing countries, with effects both in terms of building a civil society and transitioning to a market economy. The entire network of partnerships between the West and the East, based on the concept of “helping others to help themselves”, has set as its primary mission the establishment of a complex organizational network comprising local and regional associations and businesses in Romania.

The Social and Economic Context of the Kolping Network’s Development

During the period of political change following 1989, Romanian society faced two major challenges: the transformation of mindsets formed during the communist era and the economic difficulties caused by the transition to the market economy. The closure of many industrial enterprises and the restructuring of the economy led to rising unemployment and increased social vulnerability. In this context, the initial forms of support provided to Romania by Kolping organizations in Western Europe consisted of shipments of humanitarian aid, which included essential goods. These actions had a significant impact on alleviating crisis situations, but it became clear very soon that material aid could not represent a sustainable solution for community development. The material aid provided proved insufficient and, at the same time, created a state of dependency.

The experience gained in the early years highlighted the need for a different approach, focused on developing the communities’ capacity to solve their own problems. Thus, the concept of “help for self-help” became the fundamental principle of Kolping’s activities in Romania.

The Kolping Family Associations and their organization

A central element of the Kolping strategy was the establishment of action groups within parish communities, which were viewed as spaces for civic participation and social solidarity. In such environments the community members were encouraged to collaborate, to identify and implement solutions to the local problems. The unanimous conclusion of the aid shipments organizers was that in Romania not only material aid that is needed, but “there is a need for visits and social interactions to encourage the people and build up the feeling they matter and are valuable” (Mair, 1994).

In 1991 in Blaj, following several discussions and failed attempts of Alfred Weiss of Vienna (Wien Central Archive), was established the first local association after the 1989 Revolution, bearing the name Kolping Family of Romania. Associations began to form in various communities, differing in terms of religion and ethnicity, comprising Romanians, Hungarians, and Germans, of Roman and Greek Catholic denomination.

After just three years, 40 new associations were reported in Romania, and their representatives decided to establish a national umbrella organization - the Central Organization of Kolping Families in Romania. A long series of discussions and negotiations followed to explore innovative solutions “in the event of massive nationalist demonstrations of force.” (Festing, 1994) The issue of electing individuals or a single person to lead the national association entailed favoring one’s own group, as each group was, in a certain sense, a victim of the communist system. The selection of a leadership was based on a compromise (Weiss) ensuring that all factions would be represented. The decision was made in Sfântu Gheorghe on September 26, 1993.

The decision to establish an umbrella organization for the associations, elect leadership structure, and establish the headquarters in Timișoara constituted essential steps in the initial endeavor to build a mutual aid social structure with Romanian characteristics. The groups and individuals involved in such an endeavor did nothing more than fulfill the

social nature of humans, prioritizing the common good over individual interests or group interests based on religion, ethnicity, or cultural affiliation of the specific historical regions.

In such a situation, even though multiple agendas overlapped, the common good prevailed, “not the individual good or the sum of individual goods, and having its own substance” (Danca, 2021). We can conclude that the support provided from outside the country—and especially the terms under which it was granted—along with the commitment of the individuals involved in Romania, contributed to the successful establishment of a single multicultural organization with a distinctly Romanian character. Such a structure transcended not only confessional and ethnic boundaries but also those of the Church’s administrative organization, extending beyond the boundaries of a single diocese.

The establishment of a central-level organization enabled the coordination of activities at the local and regional levels, facilitating the exchange of experience and the efficient use of resources. At the same time, the network benefited from financial support provided by Kolping International from German public funds.

The Kolping concept, applied within local associations, involved the implementation of support mechanisms consisting of emergency aid provisions and the funding of small-scale projects. The fundamental principle of the intervention was to promote the self-reliance of disadvantaged people by strengthening their ability to harness their own resources and initiatives to overcome daily challenges. In this context, the provision of support was conditional on the direct involvement of the beneficiary communities, through their own financial or in-kind contributions.

Building this network was a long-term process that involved collaboration among members, volunteers, staff, and donors from several countries in Western Europe and Romania. The 131 associations (Archives 1992–2024) reflect not only the scale of the movement but also the involvement and willingness to actively contribute to a democratic society, despite the risks associated with a difficult legacy and the slow realization of the actual situation, through practice and trial and error. We refer to the 86 associations in Roman Catholic communities, 43 in Greek Catholic communities, and the two associations established in Orthodox parish communities.

The elections and the operation of these associations represented an important democratic learning experience for the communities involved. Their members are engaged in volunteer activities, organizing social projects, and participating in training programs.

Association-affiliated businesses

In parallel with the associations’ activities, social enterprises were established with the aim to create jobs and contribute to local economic development. For the Kolping mission in Romania following the 1989 Revolution, the socio-political dimension was considered the most important; above all, those involved in the aid process believed that “economic aid is the priority, because first you must be able to live, and then you can philosophize” (Kriechbaum, 1994). These enterprises functioned as instruments of social and economic integration, offering employment opportunities to people affected by economic transformations, without necessarily seeking to make a profit (Fasching).

The enterprises established after 1992 had the task to build a community capacity that did not exist at that time (APA), in a society marked by the oppression of 45 years of bloody history and illegitimate violence (Final Report, 2006).

By 1994, 15 enterprises with over 100 employees had already been established, as reported in the Austrian press, accompanied by the conclusion: “a Kolping movement in Romania to regain trust and achieve economic independence” (APA). Although many of these initiatives were experimental, they served as an important exercise in fostering entrepreneurship and adapting to the market economy.

The concept of “help for self-help,” organization, and differentiation

The implementation of the “help for self-help” principle serves as a testing ground for a model in Romania where associations and businesses organize themselves together. The underlying premise is that the support provided to a community should contribute to developing its capacity to solve its own problems. Within the aid provided by Kolping, beneficiaries are not viewed as mere recipients, but as active partners in the process of identifying solutions for their own development. Even though many initiatives have failed, this approach has contributed to the development of social capital and the strengthening of cooperative relationships among community members.

Strengthening such a network has required, on the one hand, the harmonization of decision making between the local, regional, and central levels and the clarification of objectives for the association’s work and project activities. In this context, the need emerged in 2011 to establish a clear distinction between association activities (Archive Annual Reports)—understood as an expression of the ideal and participatory dimension, involving members, volunteers, and supporters—and the material component, focused on project development and securing livelihoods. The material component required a higher degree of professionalization, and it was deemed appropriate for it to be managed by specialists, independent of membership in the organization. This differentiation became necessary given the need to ensure professional management of implemented projects and to maintain a positive working atmosphere in the association’s day-to-day activities.

Thus, there is a significant expansion of the scope of the activities, which are no longer oriented exclusively toward members but also toward the external public. In this sense, a shift in the focus of organizational interventions can be observed, moving from within the network to outside it, reflecting a process of opening up and adapting to the needs of the broader community.

Leadership becomes distinct within both areas of activity—the associative and the project-based—and is provided by employees and volunteers democratically elected on the basis of a mandate. Nevertheless, each entity retains a distinct mission, subsumed under a common vision, oriented toward promoting and strengthening a society grounded in the principles of the common good (Profile, 2018).

Certain failures at the local level led to a concentration of funds on projects considered strategic, led by teams of professionals from within and outside the association. Although there was a potential conflict in the sense that communities had every interest in funding local projects, the decision to fund strategic projects for the organization at the central level took effect starting in 2001. Large-scale projects were intended to secure the necessary revenue and strengthen the association’s infrastructure at the central level (Annual reports, 2001)

An evaluation using the Weisbord method at the end of 2011, aimed at achieving a level of independence, highlighted the need for “a delicate adjustment and consistency with current practices, rather than a dramatic change” (Stan).

The long-term strategic objective was to achieve a sustainable and measurable improvement in living conditions. Achieving this objective was facilitated by integration into networks organized at the regional, national, and international levels. This approach is based on the premise that every individual possesses both the intrinsic motivation and the capacity to improve their own circumstances and socio-economic environment, provided that appropriate social opportunities are available.

These opportunities were implemented through the ongoing involvement of members and associations in Western Europe in training programs, as well as in the development and funding of projects and investments aimed at ensuring long-term sustainability.

The Role of Adult Education and Training

A key element of the Kolping model is lifelong learning and adult education (Rotaru, 2021a, p.190-196). The seminars organized within the network have addressed a variety of topics, such as personal development, civic education (Rotaru, 2021b, p.87-92), family life, and community involvement. By participating in educational programs and community projects, association members had the opportunity to gain experiences and skills that contributed to strengthening the human capital of local communities.

Social seminars, community activities, and programs for children, youth, and adults, as well as the organization of workcamps and project-based activities, are offerings in which several thousand people (Archives 1992–2023) from within and outside the association have participated each year. We are referring to a non-formal learning system, designed to enable individuals to acquire new skills and competencies so they can adapt, collaborate, and contribute to social development within the community.

One of the first community centers, designed to facilitate the organization of courses, seminars, and community activities, was inaugurated in Rusca Montană in 1993, serving as “a spark for community life and activity” (Fasching, 1993). Other centers were purchased or leased, built, renovated, and equipped in at least 20 localities using funds received as donations and through the contributions and involvement of members (KOR Archive, 1992–2024).

Organizational and Financial Autonomy

Since 1989, Romania has undergone a process of linear social transformation, in the sense that the social shortcomings of the past were acknowledged, and there was a desire to reach a new stage where the goals are desirable for the whole of society and where every individual can collaborate and contribute to the establishment of a community. The changes were gradual and follow a steady trajectory.

Adopting the principles of action—personality, responsibility, solidarity, trust, and competence (Archive, Annual reports 2010)—from the association’s profile contributes significantly to the development of an organizational culture for both associations and businesses. Organizational culture constitutes a competitive advantage over many economic actors, considering Kolping Concept’s first-place ranking in Braşov County for 2011 and the positive results achieved over the past 20 years (Archives 2012)

A community-based organizational culture represents the standard of excellence for the Kolping Movement, where sociability and solidarity reach a high level. The level of sociability and interaction between donors and beneficiaries determines and drives solidarity. Shared experiences within the community, particularly successes in current activities, create a sense of belonging, based on the fact that members know and trust one another. The principle of solidarity is fundamental (Profile, 2018) for the partnership activities and for all the support provided during the construction phase.

To achieve financial autonomy alongside an organizational culture, a scaling process stands out—that is, accelerated, exponential growth without a proportional impact on expenses, the number of employees in enterprises, or the number of associations. Scalability is in fact linked to the entire infrastructure created and the diversification of revenue sources, the investments made between 2013–2024, and the scope the network has managed to establish in the society (KOR Archives 1992-2024). With each new location where social and economic activities could be connected, the national relevance increases as well as the number of private donors and sponsors or the number of volunteers participating to associations’ activities.

The 199 projects implemented in approximately 50 localities between 1992 and 2012 contributed to the revitalization of local communities and the development of social and

economic initiatives (KOR Archives 1992-1994). These were ultimately experiments—some successful, others not—and provided the opportunity to organize project activities in a way that ensured the network’s sustainability. An interpretation based solely on economic outcomes or the results achieved in project implementation would not be sufficient, as the lessons learned and experiences gained were what mattered most. Even though these processes were costly, they highlighted possible paths forward.

In another vein, the organization and operation of the network was an objective undertaken by Kolping International through the aid provided for Central and Eastern Europe, targeting both local projects and training activities as well as large-scale projects aimed at strengthening the entire mutual aid structure at the central level. The multi-year funding programs provided aimed to finance training activities to activate communities by developing the necessary human capital, as well as those covering leadership and management, and projects deemed relevant to ensuring the necessary sustainability.

In the donor-beneficiary relationship, there was ample scope for action, with the chosen model being to replicate in Romania a functional system similar to that of the Kolping associations existing in Western Europe. Defining and planning the objectives and implementation measures was a joint effort, as involvement in decision-making meant that responsibility was considered equal, both for successes and for failures.

The Kolping model in Romania represents a complete development cycle of a donor-beneficiary relationship, in which the beneficiary in turn becomes a donor. After 2001, a new phase took shape, focused on a specific transformation, with general objectives established by the Romanian team to consolidate and ensure sustainability. This process was facilitated by the withdrawal of experts from Austria (Archive, 1999). The central Board of Directors charted its own course (the enlightenment phase) based on existing models of Western European associations, in which the established goal of becoming a self-sustaining organization could be achieved. The enlightenment phase required going through several processes until the entire network achieved autonomy in 2012. The focus is on relevant projects that ensure the revenue and infrastructure necessary for local associations to carry out their activities, organizing activities by region and diocese to highlight each one’s unique characteristics, and expanding activities through partnerships with public institutions and other NGOs.

We can conclude that the process of establishing a Kolping social support structure followed a phased evolution: the pioneering phase—community capacity building with external guidance (1992–2000), the enlightenment phase—self-consolidation and external support (2001–2012), the maturity phase—the social mutual aid structure becomes operational (2013–2024), and the internationalization phase—engagement in collaboration and economic cooperation policies (beginning in 2024).

Reaching this level of operation, characteristic of a well-structured mutual aid network, was the result of a lengthy process of institutional consolidation, carried out over 32 years of activity, beginning in 1992. After approximately two decades of institutional development and project implementation, the Kolping network in Romania achieved financial and organizational autonomy in 2012, successfully implementing large-scale projects following its independence, with investment budgets increasing severalfold compared to the 1992–2012 period (Archives, Reports 1992-2024).

This milestone marked the transition from a model reliant on external support to a sustainable one, in which the organization’s activities are funded by its own resources generated by social enterprises and implemented projects. The autonomy achieved allows the organization to define its own strategic directions and actively participate in international cooperation projects.

By formalizing partnerships with Kolping organizations in other countries, such as the Republic of Moldova and the Republic of Burundi (Archive, Iasi 2024), we can

conclude that the Romanian branch is capable of participating in the joint effort of industrialized and developing countries to change people's general living conditions in the long term and in a sustainable manner.

From the example of Romania's experience, we can conclude that if the basic principle of providing aid for self-help is respected in cooperation and economic development policy—over a relatively long period of time, measured in decades in our case—sustainable changes can occur. The basic condition is the establishment of multi-level partnerships based on mutual respect and shared objectives. Dependence on external individuals, experts, groups, institutions, and companies is limited in time; the situation in Romania demonstrates that sustainability can be achieved through social entrepreneurship and broad participation by members, volunteers, and people outside the network.

Mutual support must be viewed as a collective process within groups and associations and the establishment of common goals. Achieving that state of balance in which a network can sustain and support itself from within is the result of a long-term process, with the objectives being community building, the training and development of human capital, activity across multiple organizational levels, the establishment of social enterprises, and the initiation of partnerships with public institutions to achieve the common good.

Conclusions

Throughout the stages covered, we can observe a progression from building community capacity with the support of external experts to achieving a level of autonomy, with a view to future involvement in international cooperation and development policy.

To build a mutual aid structure, an organizational culture based on sociability and solidarity is required, along with a scaling process—that is, significant growth based on sustainable efficiency, for both social and economic activities. Without reaching this level, such a network of associations remains dependent on aid, lacking the capacity to manage large-scale projects.

Established with the aim of facilitating the distribution of emergency aid and organizing social seminars, Kolping Romania has become a functional, network-based social support structure. Through the development of social economy projects, a level of financial and organizational autonomy is achieved. Such an objective requires time and the completion of stages measured in decades. We are referring to a period of activity in Romania beginning in 1991, during which at least two decades involved intensive partnership work with over 40 local and national associations in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Italy (Archives, Partnerships after 1989).

The stages traversed by Kolping Romania can serve as a model, by achieving synergistic effects within a network that encompasses the concepts of membership associations, social projects, and entrepreneurship serving the common good.

The key factors that contributed to the process of building a mutual aid network in Romania include the democratization of society, the promotion of a multicultural model, the development of social entrepreneurship, and the cultivation of an organizational culture based on sociability and solidarity. The Kolping model in Romania demonstrates that it is functional and can remain resilient over time if it upholds its principles and maintains its organizational culture. We can conclude that this model, throughout its entire journey, can be replicated; the basic condition is to act in the spirit of its values and principles, so that the overall orientation is aimed at the common good.

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