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LIVING WITHOUT WATER: DROUGHT, INEQUALITY, AND CLIMATE SILENCE IN A ROMANIAN VILLAGE

Costel COCÎIU¹, Cosima RUGHINIȘ²

Abstract

This article analyzes the experience of the water crisis in a Romanian village affected by drought, placing its approach in the context of the Centenary of the Bucharest School of Sociology. Drawing on ethnographic research and an auto-ethnographic perspective, the study investigates how inequality of access to water is structured by administrative failures and infrastructural gaps. Using Dimitrie Gusti's conceptual apparatus of "frames" and "manifestations" as an analytical tool, the paper demonstrates how an ecological phenomenon (drought) is socially transformed into a crisis of governance and mistrust. The analysis also highlights the phenomenon of "climate silence", arguing that this is not just a consequence of a lack of information but an active social response to a crisis perceived as overwhelming and insoluble at the local level. By placing the lived experiences of villagers in dialogue with debates in political ecology and environmental sociology, the article contributes to understanding how ecological precarity is mediated by everyday inequalities and silences discourses about systemic causes. Finally, the paper emphasizes the enduring heuristic relevance of the monographic tradition for the analysis of contemporary socio-ecological issues.

Keywords: environmental sociology, water inequality, drought, climate silence, rural Romania, fieldwork, participant observation.

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Introduction

Access to safe drinking water, a fundamental right in everyone's life, is perhaps the most precious resource of a community. However, many rural areas in Romania face significant problems when it comes to this resource. The lack of water in Romanian village households brings with it many difficulties in daily activities, as well as an unsatisfactory standard of living. The lack of access to drinking water is becoming an increasingly acute problem as climate change intensifies. Ineffective management of this type of crisis, whether individual resource management or community management, leads to inequalities and disruptions in the daily life of society.

This article does not simply document a water crisis in a Romanian village but does so through a lens inspired by the monographic tradition of the Bucharest Sociological School. 100 years after the first field research coordinated by Dimitrie Gusti, the problems of the Romanian village have changed, but the immersive approach, attentive to all the 'frames' and 'manifestations' of social life, remains a heuristic tool of exceptional value. Thus, through the case study of the village of Broșteni, we aim to apply this Gustian spirit to a 21st-century issue: the intersection of social inequality, deficient local governance, and climate silence, in the context of an ecological crisis. This article analyzes not only an infrastructural failure, but also a phenomenon of 'climate silence', understood here as a form of socially organized denial (Norgaard, 2011), which manifests itself in the context of an ecological crisis that can be conceptualized as a form of 'slow violence' (Nixon, 2011).

The village of Broșteni in Vrancea County may serve as an example of what living in a rural area without access to a water supply network entail, how the daily life of its inhabitants is affected in such contexts, and what the disappearance of this resource has meant for the village's inhabitants. Whether we are talking about natural issues or regional resource management, people have witnessed the depletion of the water resource in the area. In the context of current climate change, the community has tacitly witnessed how water scarcity has been assimilated from the perspective of inequality, accepting and adapting to the unequal access of this resource. The research was also able to highlight a rudimentary systematization of households in terms of access to water, but also how drought induced in the villagers' daily life the sense of normalization of things as they unfolded, identifying it as a strictly local problem that provides the necessary framework for interpretations of climate risk, ecological inequality and climate silence as an assumed social fact. Starting from situations, but deepened, relying on ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews, the research succeeds in traversing an axis between rural household life and a faulty administrative course amid drought and water scarcity in the daily life of the rural community.

Working conditions, local economic development, but also the health of the inhabitants may be aspects that are affected by water scarcity that the research aims to highlight. The community of the village of Broșteni can be considered as an example of adaptation to unfavorable living conditions, with cases and practices of water conservation, while highlighting the shortcomings of a local and regional administration, as well as the efficiency of some solutions to improve access to water.

Literature review

Drought is a period in which water resources become insufficient to meet basic consumption needs and are considered one of the most serious “emergencies” globally. It affects both the natural environment and the social and economic life of communities. According to experts, drought and its related phenomena, such as aridification and desertification, are caused by a combination of global climate change, largely driven by the greenhouse effect, and human activities that interfere with the natural balance, such as irresponsible use of resources, massive deforestation and landscape changes that destabilize the hydrological balance (Chiriac *et al.*, 2005).

With a considerable destructive impact on ecosystems and an area of damage extending over about a quarter of the Earth’s surface, drought has become the second most serious environmental risk after pollution. Prolonged or recurrent droughts, repeated over several years, produce significant and devastating effects on multiple levels: ecological, economic, and social. The impact on the natural environment is evident in the degradation of agricultural land, loss of soil fertility, and deterioration in the living conditions of human communities. These impacts, coupled with the lack of water for daily activities, lead to a lower quality of life and directly affect food security and economic well-being.

Climate change, marked by rising average temperatures, is intensifying the phenomenon of meteorological droughts, which over time turn into hydrological droughts. This transition severely affects water resources, considerably reducing the flow of water sources, both in rivers and lakes, and underground. The impact is directly felt in the water supply of cities, industries, and agriculture, all of which are heavily dependent on water resources. At the beginning of the 21st century, research showed that about 72% of water used came from surface sources. Under conditions of hydrological drought, inland river flows can drop by up to nine times, causing major difficulties, especially in regions at high risk of drought. At the same time, groundwater reserves are also being rapidly depleted, leading to scarcity in already vulnerable areas. This phenomenon gives rise to severe ‘water stress’, with people directly affected by water scarcity and basic needs remaining difficult to meet (Chiriac *et al.*, 2005).

Water is the main factor through which climate change will impact people, ecosystems, and global economies. Water resources management becomes essential in the process of adaptation to climate change impacts. Although not a complete solution, sustainable water management plays a key role in both identifying problems and developing viable solutions, thus becoming a fundamental starting point in addressing the climate crisis (Sadoff, C., & Muller, M., 2009).

Both at European and global level, the water resources context is marked by specific challenges and opportunities, which require increased attention and an adapted strategy. Although water is essentially a renewable resource, human activities are increasingly contributing to reducing its availability, even in rural areas, agricultural regions and arid and semi-arid parts of the country (MMAF, 2023). Changes in the temporal distribution of rainfall and its constancy, together with changes in available water resources, will affect not only national economies but also social and environmental demands, with a particular impact on vulnerable communities already facing significant water scarcity.

Inequalities in access to water are likely to worsen as climate change progresses, but there are viable solutions to mitigate these impacts. Currently, around 25% of Romania's population is not connected to a centralized water supply system, the majority living in rural areas where infrastructure is often insufficient or outdated. In addition, about 60% of the drinking water used in the country comes from surface sources, which are much more vulnerable to prolonged droughts and climate change. In rural areas, around a quarter of the population depends on inadequate sewage systems, which increases the risk of water contamination in shallow aquifers already affected by unsustainable agricultural practices and a lack of proper solid waste management. These conditions make water sources a major risk factor for population health, especially in the context of climate change which will intensify these problems (World Bank, 2023).

To increase the resilience of rural communities in the face of climate change and water crises, it is essential to implement several policy measures. These include diversifying water sources to ensure a continuous and sustainable flow of resources, reducing water losses from existing networks, which is a significant problem in many areas, and closing the urban-rural gap in access to water supply and sanitation. There is also a need to implement energy efficiency standards in water management that both contribute to resource conservation (World Bank, 2023). Another important step is the promotion of sustainable practices, such as water recycling, which can help to reduce environmental impacts and provide alternative sources of energy. These measures not only improve access to water but also enhance the sustainability and energy independence of rural communities.

Anchor in the monographic tradition of the Bucharest School of Sociology

Our work follows the intellectual line of the Bucharest Sociological School, demonstrating the relevance of this research model at one century after its inception. Dimitrie Gusti's vision of a "sociology militants" directly involved in the problems of the nation (Gusti, 1968), provides legitimacy to a study that not only documents, but also problematizes an acute social crisis. Methodologically, the article uses the conceptual apparatus of "frames" and "manifestations" developed by Gusti (1968) to provide a holistic vision of the water crisis. The analysis focuses on the interplay between the cosmological and biological frames and the community's political-administrative and ethical-juridical manifestations.

Understanding, through the lens of Zoltán Rostás' interviews with H. H. Stahl, that the monograph is essentially a "utopia" of total knowledge (Rostás, 2000), we do not aim for an exhaustive description, but use the spirit of this work - immersion, direct research and the Romanian vision of the contemporary overall problem – for the complex of the contemporary method.

Contemporary debates in environmental sociology

Water policies and hydro-social inequality

Going beyond a purely technical or ecological perspective, the research aligns with critical studies that understand water as inherently political. Erik Swyngedouw (2004) argues that water flows are inseparable from capital and power flows, water management being, in essence, a process of restructuring social relations. Access to water thus becomes an indicator of inequality and exclusion. Therefore, the water shortage in Broșteni is not analyzed here as a simple infrastructural failure, but as a manifestation of local power relations and development policies that systematically neglect vulnerable rural areas. As Jessica Budds (2011) also emphasizes, a critical analysis of water must investigate who controls the resource, who benefits from it, and whose needs are ignored.

Slow violence and climate silence

To conceptualize the long-term and often invisible impact of the crisis, we appeal to the notion of "slow violence" proposed by Rob Nixon (2011). Unlike spectacular disasters, the water crisis in Broșteni is a crisis of attrition, a gradual disaster that erodes the economic security, health, and social fabric of the community over time. This form of violence, which unfolds over years, generates a specific social response, which we analyze through the lens of the concept of the "climate

silence”, theorized by Kari Marie Norgaard (2011). Community silence in the face of a systemic problem such as climate change is not just a consequence of a lack of information, but an active social phenomenon, a form of “organized social denial” through which the collectivity manages overwhelming emotions such as fear and helplessness, focusing on immediate problems and local explanations. Our article argues that the “slow violence” of the water crisis (Nixon, 2011) creates the psychological and social conditions for the installation of a deep “climate silence” (Norgaard, 2011).

Methodology

General aspects

This research adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach, deeply rooted in the monographic tradition of the Bucharest Sociological School. In the context of the Gusti Centenary, we considered that such an approach, which privileges direct immersion and a holistic understanding of social phenomena, is particularly pertinent to explore the complex problems of the contemporary Romanian village. The in-depth case study of the community of Broșteni, Vrancea County, allowed us to analyze the water crisis not as an isolated problem, but as a “total social fact” that manifests itself in multiple “frameworks” – ecological, economic, political and social – and determines specific “manifestations” in the daily lives of the inhabitants, from survival strategies to intra-community tensions and distrust in authorities. More than a simple inspiration, our approach claims to be a direct heir and an update of the monographic method, demonstrating that its spirit-immersion, attention to detail, and holistic vision – remains the most appropriate tool to decipher the complexity of current rural problems. Although the research did not benefit from an interdisciplinary team in the classical Gustian sense, the ethnographic approach compensated for its flexibility, allowing a single researcher to investigate the interconnections between these frameworks, thus respecting the fundamental holistic vision of the Bucharest School.

Thus, the research does not aim at statistical generalizations, but at interpretive depth, seeking to understand (in the Weberian sense of “Verstehen”) the social logic, perceptions, and practices that structure community life in conditions of ecological precariousness. This perspective is a natural continuation of Gustian’s approach to documenting social reality “from the grassroots”, adapted to a 21st-century issue: the intersection of social inequality, poor governance, and climate silence.

Objectives

Objective 1: Identifying community perceptions and practices related to water scarcity. We aimed to understand how the rural community assimilates the water crisis, how it has adapted to the living conditions imposed by it, and what resilience strategies it has developed at the household level.

Objective 2: Analyzing inequalities in access to water and the response of local authorities. We aimed to observe how administrative failures and infrastructural gaps generate and deepen social inequalities, as well as how these inequalities are perceived and negotiated within the community.

Autobiography

Wishing to emphasize a certain dynamic between the information we already had and the accumulation of information provided by the respondents through semi-structured interviews, the paper will also include an autobiographical part that will reinforce certain aspects of the community in the village of Broșteni from the perspective of the objectives of the paper. Focusing on the particularities of social relations in rural areas affected by climate change and inequalities, such as access to drinking water, the research outlines the analysis of the perception and adaptation of the community from the village of Broșteni on drought, access to water, and climate silence. Supporting both the author's personal and academic interests, the research shows how life in rural areas is affected daily by such problems, but also how, out of an acute need, villagers seek and develop diverse coping strategies in the context of the water crisis. Thus, the author's presence in the field is bound to provide an even more grounded framework for the work, being essential for a thorough analysis and understanding of the phenomena described. Starting from the constant interaction of the author with other members of the community, the participatory observation practically has a very broad framework for analyzing the situations, observing the needs and way of life of the inhabitants of the village of Broșteni, and observing their discussions about access to water, drought, or climate change. We believe that this way of working will allow a genuine understanding of the living conditions in the village, as well as an understanding of the community's way of thinking and reacting.

Site and sample description

The research was conducted in the village of Broșteni (Vrancea County), a rural community that has been facing severe problems with access to drinking water for over a decade. A central methodological element of this study is the positionality of the first author as a "native researcher". Having been born and raised in this community, the author has had a long presence and deep integration into village life. This status transformed participant observation from a method

used only temporarily into a long-term understanding, built up over time, enabling the capture of the evolution of the crisis, changes in attitudes, and the lasting effects on the social fabric. This auto-ethnographic perspective allowed privileged access to the data, overcoming the reluctance that an external researcher might have encountered, and ensured a high level of trust (rapport) with the participants.

Data collection was based on two complementary sources:

a) Long-term participant observation: Ethnographic notes, systematically accumulated over several years, document everyday water management practices, informal discourses about drought and authorities, as well as critical events that marked the evolution of the crisis.

b) Semi-structured interviews: Five in-depth interviews were conducted. Although the sample is numerically restricted, the selection followed the diversity of perspectives (gender, age, occupation, and location of the household in the village), aiming to achieve theoretical saturation on the central themes of the research. The justification for the sample does not lie in representativeness, but in the richness and depth of the qualitative data obtained, in full accordance with the principles of ethnographic research.

Research instruments and data analysis

The semi-structured interviews were guided by a list of flexible themes, covering perceptions of drought and climate change, personal experiences with water scarcity, adaptation strategies, economic costs, and relationships with authorities. In full agreement with Gusti's principle of direct contact with social reality, semi-structured interviews were designed as a tool to capture the unmediated "voices" of the community. The conversations were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed in full.

The data analysis followed an inductive approach, inspired by the principles of Grounded Theory. Both the interview transcripts and the field notes were subjected to a thematic coding process. In the first phase (open coding), concepts and categories emerging directly from the participants' discourse were identified. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes, such as "normalization of the crisis", "climate silence", "institutional distrust", and "structural inequality", which constitute the central axes of the analysis presented in this article.

Ethics

The research complied with ethical criteria, including the confidentiality of respondents, who identified themselves only by initials and did not ask for names in full. Also, before audio recording, participants gave their consent to this, acknowledging the purpose of the interview and that it could be stopped at any

time they requested. In general, the research sought anonymization to protect participants' identities.

Presentation and analysis of the results: a monographic perspective

The auto-ethnographic perspective: an insider's understanding of the crisis

This section represents a fundamental component of the methodological approach, adopting an auto-ethnographic perspective. In the Gustian spirit of direct research and full immersion, the position of “native researcher” offered a longitudinal, emic (from the inside) understanding of how the water crisis was experienced, perceived, and negotiated over time. The following presentation is not just a background but a source of primary ethnographic data, essential for deciphering the nuances of silence, inequality, and community resilience.

Water memory: from abundance to precarity

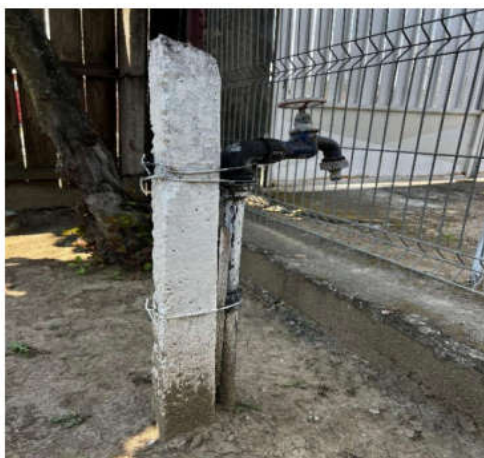
The long-term perspective allows for the establishment of a baseline essential for understanding the severity of the current crisis. In the collective memory of the community, water was a common good, a “gift of the earth,” which structured the rhythms of social and economic life. The rudimentary water network from the communist period, fed by forest springs and public fountains, represented the certainty of this resource. Even the Milcov River was a space for community interaction – a prime example being the practice of washing carpets in the summer, a social ritual that disappeared with the almost complete drying of the riverbed (Figure 1). The disappearance of these practices is not just an anecdote, but a sociological marker of the transition from an economy of abundance to one of precariousness.



*Figure 1: The flow of the Milcov River in the village of Broșteni, July 11, 2025.
Source: personal archive.*

Documenting the crisis: from the first signs to social fracture

The insider status allowed direct observation of how the crisis had progressively set in over the past decade. The decline in well flow, the failure of the old water network (Figure 2), and the futile attempts of locals to dig new wells were the first signs of a systemic problem. Beyond these technical aspects, the auto-ethnographic perspective was crucial to capturing the subtle social manifestations, often invisible to an outside researcher. It allowed, for example, access to informal discourses, rumors, and suspicions related to the manipulation of water network valves – a central phenomenon that marked the transition from a common problem to a source of intra-community conflict and mistrust. Thus, it was possible to document “from the inside” how an ecological crisis was socially reinterpreted in terms of favoritism and inequality.



*Figure 2: Non-functioning pump in a household in Broșteni.
Source: personal archive.*

The analytical value of the internal perspective

This approach not only facilitated access to data but also shaped their interpretation. A deep understanding of the local context allowed deciphering the gap between the official discourses of the authorities and the reality experienced by people, the hidden costs of the crisis (economic, social, and emotional), and the logic behind the “climate silence”. The feeling of “bitterness” mentioned in the field notes is not just a personal emotion, but a sociological datum reflecting an awareness of loss and helplessness, which underlies the analyses presented in the following sections. Therefore, this auto-ethnographic perspective represents the foundation on which the entire sociological interpretation of the article is built.

Analysis of the results

The analysis of the field data will distance itself from a purely descriptive presentation, pursuing a sociological interpretation of the water crisis in Broșteni. To provide a holistic vision, in the spirit of the Bucharest School, we will use the conceptual apparatus proposed by Dimitrie Gusti, structuring the analysis around the frameworks (geographical, economic) that condition social life and the manifestations (social, legal-political) through which the community responds to these conditions. This approach allows us to understand how a natural phenomenon – drought – is socially mediated and transformed into a crisis of inequality and governance.

Frameworks of the water crisis: the material foundations of precariousness

The Cosmological and Biological Frameworks: At the physical level, the crisis is defined by the degradation of water resources. The almost complete drying up of the Milcov River during the summer, once a vital source for irrigation and domestic use, is the most visible manifestation. Field data show that this phenomenon is compounded by a dramatic drop in the water table, which has led to the drying up of most public (Figure 3) and individual wells. Community efforts to dig new wells, sometimes up to 20 meters deep, have often proved futile. This arid geographical setting is not just a backdrop, but the material stage on which the entire social drama unfolds, imposing severe constraints on daily life.



*Figure 3: Dried-up public fountain in the village of Broșteni, in 2025.
Source: personal archive.*

Manifestations of the crisis: social and political responses

a) Ethical-legal and economic manifestations

The water crisis has profoundly tested and reconfigured the social fabric of the community. Unlike an idealized community solidarity, perhaps present in Gusti's interwar research, the water crisis in contemporary Broșteni reveals social fractures and an atomization of the response to the crisis. The most eloquent example is related to the rumors and accusations regarding the illegal manipulation of the valves of the old water network. The suspicion that some locals were benefiting from water at the expense of others fueled an atmosphere of deep distrust, eroding the social capital of the village. This visible inequality – “some could water their gardens in the middle of summer, while others had no water to wash their hands” – is a direct social manifestation of the failure of resource management.

Water scarcity translates directly into economic precariousness. In a community where subsistence agriculture played a central role, the inability to irrigate gardens has undermined the food security of many families. Moreover, the crisis has generated new direct costs: respondents estimate monthly expenses of between 200 and 500 Lei for bottled water, a significant financial burden in an area with modest incomes. The lack of water also affected occasional sources of income, such as day labor in agriculture, which almost completely disappeared. Thus, the economic framework reveals how an ecological problem is transformed into a driver of impoverishment and economic dependence.

In parallel with these fractures, forms of adaptive resilience have also developed. At the household level, villagers have improvised rainwater harvesting systems (Figure 4, 5a & 5b) and adopted strict water rationing and reuse practices (e.g., dishwashing water used for watering). These strategies, while ingenious, represent a form of individual, privatized adaptation to a problem that would require a collective and institutional response. They demonstrate the community's capacity to adapt, but at the same time highlight the absence of organized support.

The response of local authorities (LAUs) constitutes a central legal-political manifestation of the crisis. The data shows a persistent pattern of inefficiency, poor communication, and broken promises. The infrastructure modernization project, announced in 2022, has become a symbol of this failure: delays, contradictory information on the status of the works, and the abandonment of the construction site have deepened the population's distrust of institutions. Temporary solutions, such as bringing water by tanker, have been perceived as insufficient and unevenly distributed, fueling frustration.



*Figure 4: Improvised rainwater collection system.
Source: personal archive.*



Figure 5 a



Figure 5 b

*Figure 5, a & b: Household containers for collecting and storing rainwater.
Source: personal archive.*

b) Political-administrative manifestations: governance failure and climate silence

This institutional powerlessness directly contributes to another observed phenomenon: “climate silence”. Although they acutely feel the effects of the drought, most locals do not explicitly connect these “personal troubles” (C.W. Mills) with the global public problem of climate change. As the interviews show, the dominant perception is a superficial and limited one: the drought is seen as a natural, strictly summer phenomenon, a “temporary trouble” that affects agriculture, but is not associated with a systemic crisis.

Local discourse tends to normalize the drought or to look for alternative explanations, unrelated to global causes. A recurring theme in informal discussions, for example, is the belief that the anti-hail systems in Vrancea are an aggravating factor, because they “drive away the rain clouds as well”. This interpretation reflects a lack of education and information, but also a tendency to look for immediate and visible culprits.

Moreover, for the community, the drought problem is reduced strictly to the problem of water infrastructure. The villagers’ central argument is simple: “If there were running water at the tap, the drought would not affect us, because we would irrigate”. From this perspective, responsibility is transferred exclusively to the authorities, and climate change becomes an abstract and irrelevant subject. When the immediate urgency of the lack of tap water completely eclipses a global problem, and institutions fail to solve even this concrete problem, they lose any credibility to engage the community in a discussion about systemic causes. Thus, local administrative failure manifests itself as a direct obstacle to ecological awareness, fueling a collective silence and resignation in the face of a crisis perceived as inevitable.

Conclusions

By applying the monographic framework of the Bucharest School of Sociology to a socio-ecological crisis of the 21st century, this research demonstrated how a phenomenon – the lack of water – transcends purely technical or climatic explanations, becoming a total social fact. The analysis, structured on “frames” and “manifestations”, revealed that the drought in Broșteni is not experienced as a natural disaster, but as a deeply political crisis, produced and exacerbated by the failure of local governance and an uneven development of infrastructure.

A first major conclusion is that the inequality of access to water, manifested through tensions and suspicions at the community level, is not a simple consequence of the scarcity of resources, but a direct result of administrative inaction. The failure of the authorities to offer viable solutions and to communicate transparently has eroded social capital and fueled a state of chronic distrust, leaving each household to manage a collective problem individually.

The second central conclusion concerns the sociology of “climate silence”. We have shown that the silence of local people on climate change is not just ignorance, but a form of logical resignation. When the immediate urgency of survival eclipses abstract issues, and state institutions fail to address even the most fundamental need, discussion of global causes becomes an irrelevant luxury. Silence is thus a manifestation of learned helplessness, fueled by decades of administrative neglect. While we have documented numerous forms of resilience and adaptation at the household level, from rainwater harvesting to water reuse, we must conclude that these strategies, while admirable, represent a privatization of risk. They are individual solutions to systemic failure and cannot replace the need for coherent public policies and investment in rural infrastructure.

Ultimately, this case study had a twofold purpose. On an empirical level, it offered a detailed, ethnographic picture of how an ecological crisis is experienced “from the grassroots”. On a theoretical and methodological level, it demonstrated, in the year of the Centenary, that the legacy of the Gusti School is not a museum piece, but a living and powerful analytical tool, perfectly adapted to understand the complex and multidimensional problems of contemporary Romanian society.

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