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TRANSLATION AND TREASON: AN ANALYSIS OF POLICY DOCUMENTS ON THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN THE ROMANIAN SCHOOL COUNSELLING SYSTEM

Traducere și trădare: o analiză a documentelor de politici privind utilizarea
instrumentelor digitale în sistemul românesc de consiliere școlară

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TRANSLATION AND TREASON: AN ANALYSIS OF POLICY DOCUMENTS ON THE USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS IN THE ROMANIAN SCHOOL COUNSELLING SYSTEM

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Abstract

The analysis looks at the policy documents of the Centres for Resources and Educational Support regarding the use of digital technology in school counselling, as they were enacted at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. For this task, I employed a framework provided by socio-material theories (Cooren, 2010; Latour, 2005). Policy documents are designed to be obligatory points of passage (Callon, 1986) for human and non-human actors to bind them together for common goals. They take on a life of their own, beyond what their authors intended, in what is termed textual agency (Cooren, 2004). Using controversies (Venturini, 2010) as a means of retracing agencies, I analyse the references to digital technology within two types of documents: the institutional development plan and the managerial plan. The results point towards the existence of a state of incontrovertibility regarding the use of digital technology within the school counselling system, which precludes human and non-human actors from entering a negotiation process led by service managers and sets the stage for subversive actions (Callon, 1986). The failure of the policy documents to set themselves as obligatory points of passage opens up the school counselling system to being governed through obligatory points of passage designed by other actors with non-transparent and divergent agendas.

Keywords: actor-network theory, controversies, digital technology, school counselling, textual agency.

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Rezumat

Analiza ia în considerare documente de politici ale Centrelor de Resurse și Asistență Educațională privitoare la utilizarea tehnologiei digitale în consilierea școlară, care erau în vigoare la începutul pandemiei de Covid-19. În acest scop am folosit un cadru oferit de teorii socio-materiale (Cooren, 2010; Latour, 2005). Documentele de politici sunt menite să fie punct obligatoriu de trecere (Callon, 1986) pentru actorii umani și non-umani, pentru a-i aduce împreună în urmărirea unor scopuri comune. Ele capătă o viață proprie, dincolo de intențiile autorilor lor, prin ceea ce este numită agenție textuală (Cooren, 2004). Folosind controversesele (Venturini, 2010) ca un instrument de urmărire a agențiilor, am analizat referirile la tehnologie digitală din cadrul a două tipuri de documente: planul de dezvoltare instituțională și planul managerial. Rezultatele indică existența unei stări de incontrovertibilitate, referitor la utilizarea tehnologiei digitale în sistemul de consiliere școlară, ceea ce împiedică actorii umani și non-umani să se angajeze într-un proces de negociere condus de managerii de servicii și creează scena pentru acțiuni de subversiune (Callon, 1986). Faptul că documentele de politici eșuează în a se constitui în puncte obligatorii de trecere, deschide sistemul de consiliere școlară spre a fi guvernat prin punctele obligatorii de trecere create de actori, cu agende netransparente și divergente.

Cuvinte-cheie: *agenție textuală, consiliere școlară, controversese, tehnologie digitală, teoria actor-rețea.*

1. Introduction

Digital technology is not a sign of modernity but merely of recency. When arguing that we have never been modern, Latour (1993) refers to the forceful distinction between the natural, the social, and the discursive as the core of what is perceived as modernity. In order to be modern, we need not let the three combine, as we would in the case of the ethnography of village life in some remote part of the world. By reinforcing this distinction, digital technology embodies the idea of modernity in public discourse. The digital is presented as a new form of natural that does its utmost to eschew social and discursive critique. Keeping up with digital technology becomes a natural race for survival that is instrumentalised by its producers and bound together with the time aspect to create this view of a future beyond the control of ordinary human beings (Hooley, 2019).

The use of digital technology in career counselling has been a focal point of study for the past decades (Barnes et al., 2020; Hooley et al., 2010; Kettunen & Sampson, 2019) as they have spread rapidly within different counselling services for their perceived benefits (Iacob, 2020).

Career counselling is one of the core parts of the school counselling curriculum in Romania, along with managing a healthy lifestyle, social-emotional competencies, and learning to learn (Ministry of Education, 2017). In Romania, 42 Centres for Resources and Educational Support (CRES) govern the day-to-day activities of the counselling system. CRES managers are part of the larger group of managers of educational institutions - along with school managers, school inspectors, managers of teacher training centres, and the managers of the students' clubs - which must be part of the national body of experts (Ministry of Education, 2011b).

During the 2019-2020 school year, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school counselling system employed over 2500 counsellors, with diverging patterns of use of digital technology (Iacob & Borș-Georgescu, 2022). The pandemic dramatically precipitated the use of digital technology in school counselling services in Romania, as it presented itself as the only way to subvert the agency of the virus.

All educational school activities shifted to an online format in March 2020 despite low readiness from the system. The job description – which was part of the work contract of the school counsellors – made no specific reference to digital skills, even though there was an implicit expectation for them to perform tasks that require such skills. Furthermore, no system-wide investments in hardware or software have been made since the 2007-2008 school year. In the intervening years, the landscape has become fragmented regarding the available devices, tools, digital services, or skill acquisition opportunities. These discrepancies are most apparent when considering the urban-rural divide (Țibu, 2014). In order to bridge these gaps, policy documents developed at the CRES level are meant to bring together the competing agendas of many agents and chart avenues of action.

2. Analytical framework

During the early stages of my doctoral research, I faced an epistemological hurdle that, at the time, looked insurmountable. While collecting preliminary information in preparation for a research process on the use of digital technology within the Romanian school counselling system, I found them reducible to one position: the lack of funding prevented any systematic approach to using digital technology on the part of service managers. This lack of phenomenological complexity, as I conceptualised it at that moment, made me seek instruments that would enable me to enact a critique regarding the policies and practices around the use of digital technology.

The theoretical framework I have relied upon is based on actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005), developed by a group of sociologists of science gathered around Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and John Law in the early '80s. ANT is part of the larger family of socio-material theories, which challenge the assumption of a privileged position of humans when attempting to present and explain phenomena by recognising the agency of non-human actors. One core tenet of ANT is the symmetrical treatment of human and non-human actors within an analysis.

The concept of agency refers to the capacity of an actor to affect a state: the ice on the sidewalk is an actor during a winter morning's walk to school, as it can destabilise the person and requires effort to have its effect diminished. Agency does not imply any volition on the part of the ice, nor is it an exercise of the observer to personify it and make it quasi-human, but rather an attempt to make matter come to matter again (Barad, 2003).

In their public iteration, scientific controversies are debates about science involving both scientists and the general public (Martin, 2014). Within ANT-informed studies, mapping controversies is a basic exercise (Petrina, 2019; Venturini, 2010) that allows the retracing of agencies affecting a phenomenon: the tea that we drink has been sometimes produced through child labour and by deforestation, the clothes that we wear have rendered the Aral Sea a vast wasteland, prehistoric organisms fuel our cars on our way to work, contributing again to the shaping of the environment.

Engaging in controversies is a democratising exercise that creates a space for manifesting multiple actors' agendas. They are neither endless nor a sterile exercise. Latour (2020) exemplifies this by using the climate crisis: while it had a controversial phase in its initial stages, it has long reached the stage of incontrovertibility, which refers to the quality of a subject that underwent a controversial phase and, based on the arguments put forward, has reached one commonly agreed position.

What I had initially conceptualised as a lack of phenomenological complexity, I have afterwards reframed as an apparent lack of engagement in controversy. This analysis aims to investigate if and how CRES addressed the myriad potential controversies that are associated with the use of digital technology within school counselling (e.g., unequal access to hardware and internet connections, changes to the employment landscape, lack of digital skills, privacy-related issues, bias embedded in online search tools) in order to support the school counsellors to achieve their goals.

Management documents set themselves as obligatory points of passage (OPP) (Callon, 1986) as they seek to enrol the actors in projects that they govern. Callon's example refers to the fishermen of Saint Brieuç and their attempts to breed scallops for commercial harvesting. In that instance, the OPP was put forward by a team of researchers who, for the first time, attempted to co-interest the scallops in anchoring themselves on the devices set by the project team. He describes several ways of achieving enrolment: physical violence, seduction, transaction, and consent without discussion. A negotiated enrolment is preferable, as it diminishes subversive and treacherous actions from those forcefully enrolled.

Regarding the digital tools a counselling centre uses, the OPP aims to enrol the counsellors, the technology, the software and hardware providers, the students, and any other actors interested in participating. Management documents materialise the discourse of the CRESs and either the negotiation process or the forceful enrolment behind its development.

In ANT, texts are not considered sedimentations of practice (May, 1997) but rather technologies of translation and mediation (Nimmo, 2011), where inscriptions allow for the world to be mobilised (Latour, 1999). When exploring

these texts, we will look at them as inscriptions, in the sense of “*all the types of transformations through which an entity becomes materialised into a sign, an archive, a document, a piece of paper, a trace*” (Latour, 1999, p. 306), which means treating them “*not as reflections of reality or reports on reality but as enactments of reality*” (Nimmo, 2011, p. 114).

Documents have their own type of agency, called textual agency (Cooren, 2004), which refers to how we delegate to them the function of representing us and the autonomy they gain in relationship to us, their authors. Think of a sign on the counsellor’s door, announcing the intervals when she is available for individual sessions. The sign represents her when she is not there, speaking on her behalf, yet it is autonomous from its author. It will continue to give the same message even if the schedule was changed but not updated or if some circumstances, like having a cold or attending an urgent meeting, preclude the counsellor on a particular day from being present.

Texts have the function of re-presenting (Cooren, 2006), meaning to make something present again. A policy document does not just describe an ideal to be reached; it also gives testimony on the process of its creation, the options it did not choose, the steps to be taken, and the steps to be avoided. Once made public, it is also opposable to its creators, who become accountable to and for its contents. Thus, our textual creations end up creating us (Brummans, 2007).

3. Policy documents

The current managerial approach within educational services in Romania was outlined at the beginning of the century as part of a series of programmes aimed at reforming the primary and secondary educational system (Iosifescu, 2000a; Iosifescu, 2000b; Iosifescu, 2001). For this analysis, I have chosen two closely related documents: the institutional development plan (IDP) and the management plan (MP). The choice was motivated by the flexibility they engender and the vast array of practices they can capture, as each CRES can enact a comprehensive process in their development that involves all parties deemed to have a legitimate interest.

The IDP, referred to in some sources as the Institutional Development Project (Chină, 2019), was enshrined in law as an instrument that would be created by the head of the institution and approved by the Administrative Council (Ministry of Education, 2011a), with a top-down approach (Blendea et al., 2011) that discouraged dialogue and co-ownership of the project. This approach went against its intended purpose and how training was already set up to support managers (Nedelcu et al., 2009), which took a participatory approach to management and quality assurance.

The structure of the IDP usually includes a presentation of the institution, the institution's mission, strategic goals, actions to achieve the goals, time frame, roles and responsibilities, monitoring, and evaluation. Most IDPs also include one or two environmental scanning methods, initially developed in the '60s: the PEST analysis (Aguilar, 1967), along with its variants, and the SWOT analysis (Stait, 1972).

The Management Plan (MP) is an accompanying instrument that operationalises the IDP, ideally every year. Its intended purpose is to allow for consultations with all parties involved in its implementation, including beneficiaries of the educational system and their parents or guardians (Nedelcu et al., 2009). The structure of the MP usually includes a needs analysis, objectives, target groups, activities, expected results, resources, time frame, roles, and responsibilities.

The Ministry order governing the activity of the CRESs (Ministry of Education, 2011c) at the time of data collection did not directly mention the use of digital technology within school counselling activities, aside from regulating the existence of an IT specialist in each CRES. No other national-level policy documents were systematically operationalised within IDPs or MPs.

4. Methodology

The documents were collected in February 2020 by browsing the websites of the 42 Centres for Educational Resources and Support, with 39 of the Centres having their own websites. I have focused on two documents: the institutional development plan and the management plan. When they were

not readily identifiable through browsing, I used the embedded search tools of the websites with the keywords: “plan”, “development”, and “management”.

The cut-off date for the last update of the documents was 01.01.2015, as those issued prior to this date were no longer in effect - at most, they can be valid for up to 5 years - and they would have reflected a technological reality that had changed considerably.

Of the 14 IDPs that were accessible (Appendix A), two were outdated and were not included in this analysis. Out of the nine MPs (Appendix B), three had been updated during the school year when the data was collected, with another four updated the year before.

Each reference to digital technology was considered separately, except when a single term was repeated within a short span of text, which was usually in tables and denoted association between different types of content and communication channels, such as a website.

In addition, I have conducted three semi-structured interviews with CRES managers (M1, M2, M3) to understand their perspectives and approaches to using digital technology in counselling settings.

Table no. 1. *Examples of references to digital technology in IDPs and their connotational value*

Connotation		
Negative	Positive	Factual
<i>“Technology: equipment in counselling offices is lacking. Last update 2008.”</i>	<i>“Strong point: regular use of ICT in the evaluation process.”</i>	<i>“Presenting on the website all relevant information.”</i>
<i>“Weak point: inconsistency in updating the institution’s web page.”</i>	<i>“Opportunity: using the internet to search for the necessary materials.”</i>	<i>“Taking part in trainings on [...] ICT.”</i>
<i>“Many teachers are without skills in using IT.”</i>	<i>“Strong point: regular use of ICT in psychological evaluation.”</i>	<i>“Contracting consultancy services for updating the website of the institution.”</i>

5. Implicit engagement with controversy

I have identified 147 references to digital technology within the 12 IDPs analysed. Using a connotational framework, I have assigned the following values: 37 positive, 34 negative, and 76 factual (for a full breakdown, see Appendix C). Below are examples of these three types of references.

Positive references include contributions or aspirations towards enacting an idealised and hitherto undefined body that would fulfil equally undefined needs of the beneficiaries. Negative references mark the failure or the threats against this body. The factual references focus on setting up a functional computer network, acquiring basic skills to manage information, and applying vocational and psychological tests. They provide a glimpse of how this body might be materialised, even if no systematic approach can be gleaned from the references.

I identified a total of 48 references to digital technology within the nine MPs analysed, of which six I considered positive and 42 factual (for a full breakdown, see Appendix D). Below are examples of these two types of references.

Table no. 2. *Examples of references to digital technology in MPs and their connotational value*

Connotation	
Positive	Factual
<i>“Disseminating good practices during professional meetings and through the website.”</i>	<i>“Acquiring [...] PCs, copy machines, multi-purpose machines.”</i>
<i>“Posting all documents issued by the Centre on the www.cjraemm.ro website to fulfil the principle of institutional transparency.”</i>	<i>“Implementing the ‘Ora de NET’ (“the NEET class”) programme.”</i>
<i>“Transparency in disseminating activities: web page.”</i>	<i>“Monthly use of the CCP intranet platform for school and professional guidance by the school counsellors, based on appointments for each class.”</i>

The positive references are restricted to enacting good governance principles and were present in only two MPs. There is a clear distinction between the two types of documents in treating digital technology. It attests to the different

functions that are assigned to these documents and which are followed in the practice of creating them. It also points toward a deliberate attempt to engage with problematic aspects within IDPs while concentrating on the operational aspects within MPs.

Many elements that are associated with the use of digital technology were absent from these policy documents. For example, mentions of social media are almost non-existent, aside from a tiny number of instances where it is referred to as a way of delivering information to different target groups.

Some of the passages found in IDPs were very similar or nearly identical, which is evidence of a phenomenon of borrowing parts of these documents from one centre to another (e.g., Arad and Maramureş counties). The borrowing reflects a mechanistic engagement with the affected issues and a limited depth of the debate surrounding them.

6. Explicit engagement with controversy

Within all the documents analysed, there was only one explicit reference to a controversy:

“National context: Recently, in Romania, investments have been made for equipping schools with IT instruments and software, and currently, almost all schools have access to the internet. However, the Ministry often centralises and coordinates the acquisition of this IT equipment and software, resulting in investments and acquisitions that do not fully match the needs of individual schools (see the Microsoft scandal).” (CJRAE Covasna, 2016)

The scandal revolves around the acquisition of software licences for use within the educational system. Two years before the PDI of CJRAE Covasna was published, several high-profile politicians were indicted by the National Anticorruption Directorate (Direcția Națională Anticorupție, 2014). This mention, however, does not imply direct involvement in the controversy. There is a great distance between the observer who made the inscription and the place where it happened, without any recourse to action by the observer.

As suggested by the analysis based on connotational values, there is an explicit way IDPs attempt to engage with controversy: through environmental scanning tools. Many IDPs contain PEST and SWOT analysis, with most non-factual references found within this setting rather than as a standalone occurrence. Their presence in such frameworks does not provide an opportunity for the actors identified to negotiate a common goal. The CRESs seek to position themselves to achieve an undefined ideal in spite of, rather than with, the (limited number of) agencies they identify.

The formulaic approach, which forces the users of the PEST and SWOT analysis to think in terms of positive/hopeful and negative/threatening, could explain the balanced number of positive and negative references, which does not necessarily reflect a balance in the reality it translates.

When asked to reflect on critical incidents and controversial issues surrounding the use of digital technology, managers did not point out any systematic engagement with these topics. They denied there had been any incidents and considered attempts to create a framework for dealing with potential issues as over-regulating the school counselling system:

M3: *“To be honest with you, we haven’t had any incidents on this topic. Up until now, we haven’t had any incidents of this kind that we would create the need to over-regulate something of this sort.”*

The managers pinned the responsibility on the beneficiaries, even those in vulnerable groups, for not using the digital services provided by the CRES or the schools they attended.

M1: *“We provided those types of services, but they weren’t accessed too much.”*

M1: *“Pupils from disadvantaged groups, even if they had [received] tablets, still had low school engagement.”*

M1: *“There is a reticence in accessing counselling delivered through IT ... online counselling.”*

Finally, they referenced the need to have a scientific approach in approving and promoting a third-party app for use within the counselling system without providing details on how this works in practice:

M2: *“Any app needs to come from a credible source. It needs to be scientifically validated. You can’t have just anyone create an app and have us promote it.”*

The image that can be gleaned from the interviews is of disengagement from controversies and shifting of responsibility towards the practitioners, the beneficiaries and undefined scientific fora.

7. Problematic but uncontroversial

There are many problematic aspects that these documents raise, but no controversies related to digital technology in which the institutions they represent are engaged directly. This issue should be considered in the context of the limitations of the PEST analysis in its PESTEL variant (Diaz Ruiz et al., 2020), with its inability to account for the actors’ agendas, leaving the institutions which use them blindsided. Similar criticism has been levelled at SWOT analysis (Hill & Westbrook, 1997), going as far as suggesting it is not fit for purpose.

The pervasive theme within these documents regarding digital technologies is the existence of an idealised reference point towards which all personnel are expected to work, even though it lacks any clearly defined traits. In some instances, this reference point is presented under the name of fictitious *“national and European standards”*:

“The lack of our own office space precludes investment in IT networks for psychological testing at the quality level required by national and European standards” (CJRAE Mureş, 2016, p. 81).

At the moment of the time of collection, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education (ARACIP) did not set any standards or quality assurance frameworks regarding the provision of counselling services. The Agency mandated a minimal list of digital hardware for a school to be authorised or accredited (Romanian Government, 2008). However, this did not consider any counselling activities that might be performed with it, nor did it extend to the functioning of CRESs. The existence of standards on educational topics across the European Union is not

envisaged by its constitutive Treaty (Title XII, art. 165) (European Union, 2008). Such standards would be impossible to enforce, given the considerable variance of ways in which the educational systems are set up.

Many topics related to the use of digital technology were conspicuously absent, but silence about them also speaks. The absence of mentions regarding technologies like social media, digital games, and learning platforms meant their potential was still untapped and individual counsellors had to navigate possible pitfalls unassisted. This opens the floodgates to subversive and unregulated use of technologies. Failure to follow the prescribed usage of digital technology, followed by subversive use, has been documented previously in ANT-informed studies (Díaz Andrade & Urquhart, 2010; Lizarraga, 2019). By not acknowledging the existence of controversies, managers remove knowledge from public discussion (Callon, 1986) and prohibit negotiations and the retracing of agencies.

8. Conclusions

In front of us there is a discursive space that understands the concept of controversy regarding digital technologies in the Romanian school counselling services but, systematically shies away from the debates about the practices within the system. To achieve this, it creates a symbolic distance between where controversy manifests itself and where counselling is conducted.

While attempting to translate reality into inscriptions, the IDPs and MPs betray the same reality by refusing to engage with controversies and acknowledge the existence of non-human agencies. The reason is that its epistemological framework favours human agency over all other agencies. Its failure was evident in the months after the onset of the pandemic when the COVID-19 virus redrew the paths humans could safely walk, and digital technology became a way of subverting enrolment in the virus-governed reality. The pandemic was not an entirely unpredictable event, as we have been living in a vaccine-enabled reality for over 200 years, with regular disruptions caused by the emergence of new strains of viruses.

Left, over the years, with minimal material and conceptual support, the service managers of Romanian counselling centres have taken a formal approach to developing local policies meant to support the use of digital technology. Rather than engage in a critical reflection process and attempt to mobilise human and non-human actors, the documents they produced are mere checklists that attempt to enact an idealised body. Because it relies on implicit knowledge of what this body is, the system can only appeal to implicit responsibility from its members when things go wrong.

Management documents continue to act nominally as obligatory points of passage for the discourse. However, the translation they provide becomes betrayal (Callon, 1986), leaving the space wide open to subversive and treacherous actions. The failure of the CRESs to create OPPs through policy documents opens the door to other actors to attempt to entice and enrol the counselling system within their OPPs. When the discursive space undermines the expression of its controversial nature, the scene is set for funnelling the actors through other points of passage that employ a different ethical framework from that of the school counsellors, such as the sales plan of software providers, the self-replicating programme of a virus or interest groups with obscured agendas (Ideland et al., 2021).

Abandoning formulaic approaches, such as the SWOT and PEST analysis, and retracing agencies that manifest themselves within the practices of each CRES through controversy mapping (Venturini, 2010) would make visible the actors that have the power to displace their agendas regarding the use of digital technology. By asking “who is participating?” and “why are they participating?” CRESs can enter a negotiation process with those actors and their agendas. What will the next pandemic bring? How will we deal with the effects of war? What does the planned obsolescence of digital technology mean for the counselling system? Accounting for these diverse agencies will enable CRESs to enact the OPPs they propose and ensure better translation through representation.

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Appendices

Appendix A. List of counties and the last update of the IDP

County	Approved/updated	No. of pages
Arad	9.2016	39
Bistrița	9.2016	17
Bucharest	1.2015	2
Cluj	Out-dated	n/a
Covasna	9.2016	53
Ilfov	9.2016	50
Maramureș	9.2018	55
Mureș	11.2017	110
Olt	9.2016	45
Prahova	9.2016	31
Satu Mare	9.2016	29
Suceava	Out-dated	n/a
Tulcea	9.2016	40
Vaslui	9.2016	49

Appendix B. *List of counties and the last update of the MP*

County	Approved/updated	No. of pages
Arad	10.2018	12
Argeş	9.2016	21
Covasna	9.2018	28
Maramureş	9.2019	68
Mehedinţi	9.2017	61
Prahova	11.2019	25
Sălaj	10.2018	98
Vâlcea	9.2018	37
Vaslui	9.2019	16

Appendix C. *Distribution of references to digital technology within IDPs in each county and their connotational load*

County	Connotation		
	Negative	Positive	Factual
Arad	3	3	9
Bistriţa	0	1	2
Bucharest	0	0	4
Cluj	3	3	5
Covasna	1	5	11
Ilfov	5	5	9
Maramureş	7	3	5
Mureş	6	1	10
Olt	2	4	9
Prahova	2	2	4

County	Connotation		
	Negative	Positive	Factual
Suceava	4	3	3
Tulcea	3	3	9
Vaslui	0	1	2
Total	37	34	76

Appendix D. Distribution of references to digital technology within MPs in each county and their connotational load

County	Connotation		
	Negative	Positive	Factual
Arad	0	3	Arad
Argeş	0	11	Argeş
Covasna	0	2	Covasna
Maramureş	5	14	Maramureş
Mehedinţi	0	5	Mehedinţi
Prahova	0	3	Prahova
Sălaj	0	2	Sălaj
Vâlcea	1	1	Vâlcea
Vaslui	0	1	Vaslui
Total	6	42	Total

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