Prospects For The (Re)Opening Of The Processing Plant In Zlatna: Employment Intentions And Associated Factors – An Exploratory Quantitative Study

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Abstract:
This article examines how residents of the town of Zlatna and its surrounding localities relate to the (re)opening of a copper processing plant and to mining more generally, against the backdrop of postsocialist deindustrialization and contemporary debates on just transition. The study is quantitative and exploratory, based on a face-to-face administered questionnaire conducted between March and May 2024 (N = 127; valid N per item: 123–126), using a non-probability purposive sample. The instrument measured attitudes toward the historical role of mining, evaluations of the (re)opening of the plant, intentions to apply for a job, and perceived quality of life, alongside sociodemographic data. The results indicate a clearly favorable majority toward the project: 77% of respondents consider the opening of a new plant to be appropriate. The dominant perceived advantage is job creation (56%), whereas the main perceived disadvantage is the risk of pollution (62.2%), frequently articulated together with governance-related concerns. Intentions to apply for a job are moderate (31.8%) and are not significantly associated with occupational status ($\chi^2(24) = 26.656$; $p = 0.321$). Work experience in the former plant does not differentiate perceptions (Mann–Whitney, $p > 0.34$), whereas a favorable perception of the historical role of mining is moderately correlated with support for the project ($r = 0.441$; $p < 0.001$). The conclusions outline a social window of opportunity for local industrial development policies, conditional on robust environmental governance, transparency, and credible mechanisms for public participation.

Keywords: *mining; quality of life; postsocialist transition; industrial development; environmental governance;*

1. Introduction

The accelerated restructuring of the mining sector after 1989 constituted one of the most dramatic socio-economic transformations in Romania, generating massive job losses, out-migration, the erosion of social capital and far-reaching identity reconfigurations in communities dependent on extractive industries (Larionescu, Rughiniș, & Rădulescu, 1999; Dinică, 2000; Stegar, 2000; Schmidt &

Andrioni, 2011; Radu, 2015). Mining, frequently described in transition discourse as the "black hole of the economy", was simultaneously a central source of economic stability and local modernisation (Kideckel, 2004). This ambivalence – between the promise of development and the socio-ecological costs it entails – is evident in numerous cases, from the Jiu Valley to Roșia Montană (Cristea, 2006; Pascaru, 2004, 2013; Alexandrescu, 2011, 2020; Mucea, 2019, 2020, 2022).

Mining operations, particularly in resource-rich yet economically developing regions, frequently catalyse significant socio-economic change and have therefore attracted substantial scholarly interest in their multifaceted impacts (Antoci et al., 2019). While mining can create economic opportunities, generate employment and support infrastructure development, such benefits are often juxtaposed with considerable social and environmental harms, including socio-economic inequalities, cultural disruption and environmental degradation (Svobodová et al., 2025; Samosir et al., 2025). A nuanced understanding of these complex interactions is crucial for policymakers and industry stakeholders seeking to design strategies that maximise benefits while mitigating adverse consequences (Narrei & Ataee-pour, 2021; Mnwana & Bowman, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to identify the benefits that the mining sector ought to provide to local communities in order to offset its negative environmental effects, with a specific focus on employment intentions and associated factors linked to the reopening of a processing plant (Rey-Martí et al., 2023). More precisely, the study examines local community perceptions of employment prospects, anticipated socio-economic transformations and the potential for sustainable development initiatives to accompany the resumption of operations at a copper processing facility in the town of Zlatna, Alba County (Ngobese, 2015; Osei & Yeboah, 2023). For example, correlating demographic trends with residents' perceptions indicates a significant gap between the actual situation and how the future of the mining town of Roșia Montană is projected (Mucea & Marina, 2022).

Zlatna represents a locale marked by a dense industrial memory, where copper metallurgy has structured the local economy and biographical trajectories for decades. The closure of the former plant in 1997 constituted a historical turning point with long-term consequences for employment, demographic structure and community cohesion. At present, the proposed (re)opening of a copper processing unit reactivates the promise of economic revitalisation, while simultaneously rekindling anxieties regarding pollution and the possible reproduction of inequalities or clientelist practices in access to resources (Buțiu & Pascaru, 2011; Budai & Herța, 2016).

At the same time, European decarbonisation policies and debates on just transition further complicate the analytical landscape. The relaunch of industrial activities with significant environmental impact potential is confronted with more stringent regulatory requirements, reconfigured supply chains and pressing questions regarding the distribution of costs and benefits (Beckfield & Evrard, 2023; Eadson, van Veelen, & Backius, 2023). In this context, understanding local community perceptions becomes essential both for the sociology of development and for the design of public policies.

The aim of this study is to investigate how residents of Zlatna and its surrounding localities relate to the (re)opening of a copper processing unit, to describe intentions to seek employment in the new facility and to identify the socio-demographic and attitudinal factors associated with these positions. The article thus situates itself at the intersection of the sociology of post-industrial communities, studies of extractive industries and analyses of transitions towards new development regimes.

The specific research objectives are: (O1) to capture how the historical role of mining and of the former plant in Zlatna's development is perceived; (O2) to analyse public support for the opening of a new copper processing unit and the arguments advanced for and against it; (O3) to measure the degree of interest in employment in the new facility; and (O4) to assess perceptions of quality of life in the town and its relationship with support for the project. Four hypotheses are formulated: (H1) work experience in the former plant is associated with more positive perceptions of the new project; (H2) a favourable attitude towards mining and its historical role is positively correlated with support for reopening; (H3) socio-economic status influences the intention to apply for a job; and (H4) a more positive perception of quality of life is associated with opposition to reopening.

By foregrounding employment intentions, perceived quality of life and evaluations of mining's historical role in a single analytical framework, the study offers a contextually grounded perspective on how communities negotiate the trade-offs between environmental risk, economic security and future development trajectories in an era of decarbonisation and supply-chain reconfiguration. The remainder of the article presents the socio-historical context and theoretical framework, describes the research design and the profile of respondents, sets out the main findings and interprets them from a sociological perspective, and concludes with a discussion of the key implications and limitations of the study.

2. Study context

During the communist era, Zlatna was one of the most important industrial centres in Romania, due to its copper processing complex and chemical plants. In the 1980s, the complex produced approximately 15,000 tonnes of copper annually, as well as sulphuric acid and copper, iron, and magnesium sulphates. This activity transformed the town into a hub of heavy industry, but also into one of the most polluted towns in Europe, with high levels of noxious emissions and metallurgical waste that severely affected the health of the population and the surrounding environment. In order to reduce pollution, a 220-metre gas emission stack was built, yet the technical solutions proved insufficient, and local residents repeatedly reported the problems without seeing substantial improvements (Ţimonea, 2021; Guţă, 2023).

After the plant was closed in 2003, the authorities initiated plans for the economic revitalization of the area. Recently, the Ministry of Economy, in partnership with Zlatna Town Hall, has proposed the restarting of non-ferrous metallurgical capacities through the construction of a new plant for the production of electrolytic copper on the infrastructure of the former complex. The project aims to attract strategic investors and to integrate into the value chain of domestic resources, reducing the export of raw materials and generating high value-added finished

products. This initiative is included in the 2017–2020 Government Programme and has the objective of transforming Romania into a competitive economy based on innovative and environmentally friendly industries (Ministry of Economy, 2017).

3. Socio-historical context and theoretical framework

The literature on the transformations of post-socialist mining communities documents the profound effects of deindustrialisation, such as rising unemployment, labour migration, the reconfiguration of gender relations and family models, as well as the weakening of social capital (Larionescu et al., 1999; Kideckel, 2004; Schmidt & Andrioni, 2011; Budai & Herța, 2016; Radu, 2015). In the Jiu Valley, for example, industrial reforms have led to what Stegar (2000) calls an "economic and social collapse", while in Roșia Montană, the attempt to relaunch mining generated a large-scale social conflict with transnational reverberations (Cristea, 2006; Alexandrescu, 2011, 2020; Mucea, 2018, 2019, 2020).

These cases have fuelled debates on distributive justice, heritage and environmental protection, relocation processes, as well as public participation in decision-making related to industrial investments (Buțiu & Pascaru, 2011; Pascaru, 2013; Maftei, 2014). At the same time, recent research on "decarbonisation" emphasises how energy transition policies reconfigure not only jobs but also places themselves – communities, landscapes, and local identities (Mucea, 2022; Beckfield and Evrard, 2023; Eadson et al., 2023)

Zlatna is part of a historical genealogy of copper metallurgy, and the post-1997 decline has been perceived by many residents as a major rupture in the social order. This study proceeds from the premise that current perceptions of the (re)opening of a processing facility are shaped by the interaction between three registers: (a) the economic and symbolic memory of the mining past; (b) concrete experiences of restructuring and of life after closure; and (c) the horizon of expectations regarding quality of life and local development in the contemporary context.

4. Research methodology

The research employs a quantitative, exploratory design based on a questionnaire survey, in line with classical recommendations regarding the design of sociological investigations (Mărginean, 2004). The questionnaire, developed by the authors, was administered face-to-face in the town of Zlatna and in the surrounding localities under its administration between March and May 2024. Sampling followed a non-probability purposive strategy, targeting adult persons who had been residing in the administrative-territorial unit Zlatna for at least one year.

A total of 127 questionnaires were collected, with the number of valid cases varying slightly across items (valid N: 123–126), depending on non-responses. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the non-probability sampling, the results cannot be strictly statistically generalised to the entire population of Zlatna, but they offer a consistent picture of the dominant attitudinal configurations.

4.1. Objectives, hypotheses and analytical procedures

The overall aim and the four objectives (O1–O4) were operationalised into the research hypotheses H1–H4:

- H1: Work experience in the former complex is associated with more positive perceptions of the opening of the new facility (tested using the Mann–Whitney U test, with a dichotomous grouping variable "worked/did not work in the former complex").
- H2: A favourable attitude towards mining and its historical role is associated with support for the opening (tested using Pearson's correlation between the assessment of the historical role and the perceived opportunity).
- H3: Socio-economic status (occupation) influences the intention to apply for a job (tested using χ^2 between occupation and intention to apply).
- H4: A more positive perception of quality of life correlates with opposition to the opening (tested using Pearson's correlation between the assessment of quality of life and the perceived opportunity).

The analyses included descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) and significance tests (Mann–Whitney U, χ^2, Pearson correlations), with a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$. The cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for causal inferences, but only for the identification of associations between variables.

4.2. Research instrument and variables

The questionnaire comprised four main blocks of items:

a. Perceptions of the historical role of mining and of the period of the former complex, including global evaluations ("overall opinion of the role of mining in the town's development") and statements regarding the standard of living and the main problems (e.g. "during the period of the former complex people lived well"; "the main problem was pollution").
b. Attitudes towards the (re)opening of a copper processing facility, measured through direct questions regarding the perceived opportunity of opening ("definitely yes" – "definitely no"), Likert-type items on anticipated consequences ("it is good news"; "it will create jobs and development"; "it will increase the standard of living"; "it will increase pollution"), and open-ended questions about the main advantages and disadvantages.
c. Intention to seek employment, measured by a five-point scale item (from "to a very small extent" to "to a very great extent") capturing respondents' willingness to apply for a job in the new facility.
d. Perception of quality of life and sociodemographic characteristics: an overall evaluation of quality of life in Zlatna (five-point scale), statements regarding the town's prosperity and attractiveness ("Zlatna is currently going through a prosperous period"; "it is a town where it is worth living"), along with variables such as gender, age, education level, occupational status, length of residence, and work experience in the former complex.

5. Profile of respondents

The investigated batch is balanced in terms of gender distribution: 50.8% men (64 respondents) and 49.2% women (62 respondents). Respondents' ages range from 19 to 72 years, with the most numerous cohorts being 50–59 years (30.3%) and 40–49 years (22.2%), indicating a concentration in the age groups that are active or approaching retirement.

From an educational standpoint, the predominant level is high school (47.2%), followed by bachelor's studies (20%), post-secondary school/foremen's school (11.2%), master's studies (11.2%) and 10 grades/vocational school (10.4%). This profile reflects an educational structure close to the patterns of industrial communities, in which secondary and technical education occupy an important place.

Occupational status indicates a predominantly active population: 82.5% of respondents are employed, 10.3% are retired, and the rest are distributed among unemployed persons (with or without unemployment benefits), students, and authorised self-employed persons (PFA)/entrepreneurs. Although the proportion of unemployed persons is relatively low in the sample, the segment of persons without unemployment benefits proves relevant in the analysis of employment intentions.

Another important element is the relationship with the territory: 91.1% of respondents have been living in the Zlatna for more than one year (they have not recently been away working abroad), which suggests strong residential embeddedness and gives consistency to the analyses regarding perceptions of quality of life and local development. Some respondents report having worked in the former complex, which allows testing of the hypothesis regarding the influence of biographical experience on current perceptions.

Overall, the sociodemographic profile outlines the image of a community with relatively diverse resources, largely active on the labour market (though not necessarily in Zlatna itself), residentially anchored and with a direct or mediated memory of the previous industrial period.

6. Study findings

Taken together, the findings outline a complex but relatively favourable situation regarding the opening of a new processing facility in Zlatna. There is a clear pro-opening majority, primarily motivated by expectations of job creation and local development. This support is accompanied by a positive economic memory of the mining past and by a predominantly good evaluation of the current quality of life.

At the same time, the risk of pollution is perceived as the main disadvantage, and issues of integrity (corruption, clientelism) recur in the open-ended responses. The result is a conditional, "yes, but" type of support, in which the social legitimacy of the project critically depends on environmental standards, decision-making transparency, and fairness in recruitment processes.

From the perspective of determinants, attitudes towards mining and perceptions of quality of life matter more than work experience in the former complex or current occupational status. This suggests that local policies oriented

towards (re)industrialisation must take into account not only the structure of the labour market, but also the community's symbolic and value configurations.

6.1. Mining memory and perceptions of the past

Most respondents formulate a favourable assessment of the historical role of mining in the development of Zlatna: 39.7% rate this role as "good" and 36.5% as "very good"; 19.8% hold a "neutral" opinion, and only 4% express a "poor" opinion. At the same time, 82% consider that during the period of the former complex "people lived well" (total or partial agreement), and 71.1% agree that "after the closure of the former complex things went worse". These results indicate the existence of a positive economic memory of industrialisation, perceived as a time of relative prosperity.

However, the same memory clearly retains the environmental costs: 86.3% of respondents agree (totally or partially) with the statement that "the main problem in the period of the former complex was pollution". By contrast, 82.8% now believe that "the current level of pollution in Zlatna is low". Thus, a balanced retrospective assessment emerges, which simultaneously recognises the socio-economic benefits of mining and its negative externalities for the environment.

Sociologically, this dual register – economic prosperity and high pollution – constitutes the evaluative context in which respondents formulate their positions regarding the (re)opening of a new facility: support for potential industrial development is conditional on explicit guarantees concerning pollution control..

6.2. Support for opening a new copper processing facility

In response to the question regarding the perceived opportunity of opening a new copper processing facility, 42.9% of respondents choose "definitely yes" and 34.1% "probably yes", summing up to 77% favourable opinions. Opposition is clearly in the minority: 7.1% "probably no" and 11.1% "definitely no", while 4.8% do not know or do not answer. In the same vein, 79.7% consider that the opening would be "good news", confirming the existence of a pronounced pro-opening majority.

The items on anticipated consequences bring to light the motivational core of this support: 64.8% fully agree with the statement that the opening "will create jobs and development", and 20.8% partially agree. In the open-ended question regarding the main advantages, 56% of respondents spontaneously mention "jobs", while other advantages (local development, income growth, infrastructure) appear less frequently. Thus, a representation emerges in which employment is the keystone of the project's legitimacy.

Conversely, the dominant disadvantage identified in the open-ended item is pollution (62.2% of mentions). This disadvantage is often associated with governance issues: respondents evoke the risk of corruption, clientelism in employment, and the "enrichment of certain influential persons". From the perspective of procedural justice theory, these concerns suggest that social acceptability depends not only on the distribution of benefits and risks, but also on the perception of fairness and transparency in the implementation process (Buțiu & Pascaru, 2011; Pascaru, 2013).

Hypothesis H2 is supported by the data: the Pearson correlation between the assessment of the historical role of mining and support for the opening is positive and moderate ($r = 0.441$; $p < 0.001$; $N = 126$). As perceptions of the historical role shift from "neutral" to "good" and "very good", the proportion of those who consider the

opening "definitely appropriate" increases. Thus, a valorising economic memory translates into pro-development preferences, without, however, cancelling awareness of environmental risks.

6.3. Intention to work in the new facility

Interest in applying for a job in the new facility is moderate. On the corresponding item, 38.9% of respondents state that they would be interested "to a very small extent", 11.1% "to a small extent", 18.3% "to a moderate extent", 15.1% "to a great extent" and 16.7% "to a very great extent". Approximately one-third of the sample (31.8%) therefore show high interest ("great/very great"), while half express low interest.

From the perspective of occupational status, the distributions suggest distinct profiles: employees tend to be more reserved (37.5% report interest "to a very small extent"); retired persons also concentrate very low options (61.5% "to a very small extent"), while unemployed persons without benefits stand out through very high interest (50% "to a great extent", 50% "to a very great extent"). However, the χ^2 test does not indicate a significant association between occupation and intention to apply for a job in the event of the facility re-opening ($\chi^2(24) = 26.656$; $p = 0.321$; $\Phi = 0.460$; $V = 0.230$; $N = 126$), thus refuting hypothesis H3.

The sociological interpretation of this result indicates that, beyond one's formal position on the labour market, the decision to apply for a job in a mining/metallurgical facility is influenced by more subtle factors: the perceived compatibility of one's qualifications with future jobs, trust in the fairness of recruitment processes, the assessment of environmental and health risks, as well as biographical projects (e.g. whether one intends to remain in the locality). Employment intention cannot be mechanically inferred from occupational status, even if certain segments (such as unemployed persons without benefits) descriptively display a stronger appetite for such opportunities.

6.4. Perception of quality of life and its relationship with project support

The overall evaluation of quality of life in Zlatna is predominantly positive: 59.1% of respondents describe it as "good" or "very good", while 35% opt for "neither good nor poor" and 5.7% for "poor/very poor". Moreover, 79.3% consider that "Zlatna is currently going through a prosperous period", and 82.4% agree with the statement that "Zlatna is a town where it is worth living". These results indicate the existence of a background of civic optimism, despite the structural challenges of the labour market. It should not be overlooked that Zlatna lies at a distance of approximately 37 km from the county capital, Alba Iulia; commuting for work is relatively easy, both by private car and by public transport (bus or train).

Hypothesis H4, according to which a better evaluation of quality of life would be associated with opposition to the opening of a new facility (in the logic of a possible NIMBY-type scenario), is refuted. The Pearson correlation between the assessment of quality of life and support for the opening is positive ($r = 0.264$; $p = 0.003$; $N = 122$). Descriptively, among respondents who consider quality of life to be "very good", the proportion of those who deem the opening "definitely appropriate" is substantially higher than in groups with more reserved evaluations.

This result suggests a "consolidation of well-being" logic: in communities that perceive themselves as being on a positive trajectory, industrial projects are not seen as a threat to the status quo, but as potential amplifiers of favourable trends, provided that environmental and governance risks are adequately managed..

6.5. Work experience in the former complex and current perceptions

To test H1, three dependent variables were used: (a) the assessment of the opportunity of opening a new facility; (b) agreement with the statement that the opening would be "good news"; (c) agreement with the statement that the opening "will increase the standard of living". The grouping variable is work experience in the former complex (yes/no). The Mann–Whitney U tests do not indicate significant differences between groups: for opportunity, $U = 1505$, $Z = -0.946$, $p = 0.344$; for "good news", $U = 1434.5$, $Z = -0.796$, $p = 0.426$; for "will increase the standard of living", $U = 1630.5$, $Z = -0.135$, $p = 0.893$.

Although mean ranks suggest, in some cases, a slightly more favourable inclination among those with work experience in the complex, the differences do not reach statistical significance. Hypothesis H1 is therefore refuted. Sociologically, this indicates that direct biographical work experience in the complex does not constitute a major cleavage in current public opinion; perceptions are shaped more by the present context and by collective representations of mining than by individual experiences from several decades ago.

7. Conclusions and limitations

The study highlights four main conclusions. First, Zlatna is currently in a social window of opportunity for (re)industrialisation: a significant majority of residents support the (re)opening of a copper processing facility, perceived as a chance to consolidate local well-being. Support is fuelled by a positive economic memory of the mining past and by strong expectations regarding jobs and development.

Second, the intention to work in the new facility, although moderate overall, is significant in vulnerable segments of the labour market (unemployed persons without benefits), but is not decisively determined by current occupational status. This suggests that public policy interventions (training, retraining, counselling) should be calibrated not only to occupational categories, but also to risk perceptions and trust in the project.

Third, public perceptions are structured more by contemporary attitudes towards mining and evaluations of quality of life than by individual work experience in the former complex. The fact that those satisfied with quality of life are, on average, more favourable to the opening contradicts simplified NIMBY-type scenarios and supports the idea of a "consolidation of well-being" logic.

Fourth, the risk of pollution and mistrust in the integrity of institutional processes are the main conditions of the project's legitimacy. For current support to turn into an enduring consensus, local policies should include: (a) strict environmental standards, monitored and communicated to the public through accessible indicators; (b) robust integrity mechanisms in recruitment and contracting; (c) genuine, not merely formal, procedures for public participation, in

line with the recommendations of the literature on concentric participation and the glocalisation of industrial projects (Buțiu & Pascaru, 2011; Pascaru, 2013; Alexandrescu, 2020).

The study nonetheless has important limitations. First, the sample is non-probability, purposive, which restricts the generalisation of the results to the entire population of Zlatna. Second, the instrument is being used for the first time, so there are not yet strong psychometric validations of the scales employed. Third, the relatively small size of the sample and variation in valid Ns per item may affect the stability of some estimates. Fourth, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions, but only the identification of associations between variables.

For future research, the following would be useful: (a) studies on probability samples that would allow more robust inferences; (b) multivariate models (for example, ordinal regressions or structural equation models) for estimating the net effects of attitudinal and sociodemographic variables on project support and employment intentions; (c) qualitative research (interviews, focus groups) to deepen the understanding of mechanisms of trust formation and perceptions of procedural justice; (d) comparative analyses with other mining communities in similar situations, in the broader perspective of energy transition and decarbonisation.

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