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Developments from communist thinking to market ideology in Romania

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Title: Firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective: Developments
from communist thinking to market ideology in Romania. A mass media story

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Abstract

Firm-employee relationships are dependent on the wider societal context and on the role business plays in society. Changes in institutional arrangements in society affect the perceived responsibilities of firms to their personnel. In this study, we examine mass media discussions about firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective via a longitudinal study in Romanian society. Our analysis indicates how the expected responsibilities of firms towards employees have altered with the changing role of firms in society since the early 1990s. These transformations correspond to the ideological developments, from communist to market-based thinking, which have taken place in post-communist Eastern Europe.

More specifically, our study shows how the diminishing expectations of corporate social responsibility (CSR) are linked in mass media to increasingly important talk of human resource management (HRM). Human resource management is a modern business approach believed to address personnel needs and organisational objectives simultaneously. The congruency of goals in human resource management may mistakenly lead to the conclusion that organisations are inherently responsible toward their personnel. We argue that this may not necessarily be the case. Human resource management, matching well the new free-market ideology in post-communist Eastern Europe, was eagerly embraced in that it defined firm-personnel relationships. In this study, we question whether this was an adequate theoretical perspective for Romanian firms to adopt as it lacks sufficient ethical grounding. We also call for a higher awareness concerning the role of mass media in the management literature, since its current role in constructing the ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’ in firm-personnel relationships is hardly considered.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, employees, firm-employee relationships, human resource management, business media, Romania, ideology

Introduction

Firm-employee relationships can be approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives such as *inter alia*, work and organisational psychology, industrial relations, human relations and personnel management. In this study, a corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach is taken to analyse how firm-employee relationships have been discussed in mass media texts in the context of post-communist Romania. We first look at different views adopted in the literature on firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective and discuss their ideological underpinnings.

From a liberal perspective, corporate social responsibility is nonsense. The liberal economic doctrine formulated by Adam Smith in his famous work “The Wealth of Nations” promotes a vision of society in which the social, economic and political actors have distinctive roles (Vallentin, 2010). Taking care of the ‘social’ dimension does not lie within the expertise of a firm since there are other institutions specifically designed to handle social matters. Supporters of the liberal doctrine claim there is no need for business to go beyond economic and legal tasks (Levitt, 1958; Friedman, 1970; Crook, 2005). Thus, firm responsibility to employees would be restricted to legal obligations, such as the payment of a market-determined wage or honouring the right to holidays.

From a contrasting standpoint, communist doctrine, whose origins are drawn from Marxist ideology, placed employees at the core of enterprise policy. Provision of employment and equal social services to employees were significant aims for the communist enterprise (Kornai, 1992). From this perspective, business responsibilities to employees are broad and range from protection against unemployment to services such as housing, recreational activities or education for employees’ children. The collapse of communism significantly

changed labour relations in Eastern European countries (Cazes and Nesporova, 2003). During the transition period from the centrally-planned to the free market economy, various employee mistreatment practices came to the attention of the European Union and other international organisations (e.g., European Commission, 2008; OECD, 2008). Thus, the firm-employee relationship in Eastern Europe from a responsibility perspective represents an interesting phenomenon worthy of closer examination.

Human resource management (HRM) literature has much in common with the social responsibility approach to firm-employee relationships. There are two popular versions of human resource management: the 'hard' and the 'soft' HRM. The 'hard' version of human resource management (Storey, 1987, p. 8) represents a "narrow version of personnel which emphasises the quantitative, calculative and business-strategic aspects of managing the 'headcount' resource in as 'rational' a way as for any other economic factor". To make effective use of employees, managerial control over labour, surveillance and hierarchical relationships are considered appropriate (Fombrun et al., 1984). Decisions concerning employees are to be made based on labour productivity and costs (Legge, 1995). From this perspective, employees merely represent a cost, a passive resource that is easily manipulated, while employees' needs and well-being are neglected.

The 'soft' version of HRM (Guest, 1987) is an influential theoretical perspective that emphasises a win-win approach to business responsibility toward employees. The basic tenet of this approach is that engaging with the professional and personal needs of employees results in higher commitment to work and consequently, better work performance (Legge, 1995). Thus, paying attention to employee well-being is rewarded in either financial or non-financial terms (Hiltrop, 1996). Employees are perceived as unique assets, whose attraction

and retention offers the firm a competitive advantage. Involving employees in decision-making and recognising their contribution to the organisation stimulates their identification with corporate goals. Thus, concepts such as communication inside the organisation, flexibility, empowerment, participation and professional development are highly valued for their people-oriented perspective. However, this approach is based on neo-liberal thinking, which maintains that firms can take care of social issues as long as it benefits the business. This theoretical perspective is also known as “the business case” approach.

In spite of the popularity of the ‘soft’ HRM or the business case responsibility to employees, a number of recent critiques have challenged its ideological underpinnings. The neo-liberal approach on which the ‘soft’ HRM is based has been seen as an insufficient attempt to reconcile the competing social and economic goals of a firm. Critics claim that in aiming to demonstrate the congruency of economic and social goals, their conflicting nature has been concealed (e.g., Dickens, 1999). Issues supporting the interest of firms and employees are emphasised, while social issues challenging the economic rationale are downplayed.

A recent body of research has emerged to cope with the deficiencies of the business case approach. The attempt is to ground firm-employee relationships on ethical theoretical approaches. Ethical human resource management claims that it is a moral obligation for managers to address employee issues outside their immediate business interest (Rowan, 2000). This necessity emerges from the inability to solve employee-related dilemmas by exclusively employing a ‘soft’ HRM perspective. When employees’ rights and needs are not well served by the achievement of corporate goals, a firm may tend to downplay the importance of employee-related issues. ‘Soft’ human resource management is selective in improving employees’ wellbeing; its selectiveness results from a predominantly

managerialist approach (Dickens, 1999). Some scholars go further to claim that ‘soft’ HRM is a subtle way of shaping employees’ identities, values, and even lifestyles (Greenwood, 2002; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). HRM is used to align individual beliefs to organisational goals, in order to suppress potential conflicts which may emerge between the employee and the organisation (Deetz, 2003). While widely perceived as conferring comfort at work to employees, the potential of ‘soft’ HRM to act as a disguised tool to impose ever more work and expectations on employees has been pointed out in the literature. Critical researchers have raised concerns over the masked role of ‘soft’ HRM in assuring managers that employees are committed to their work and sacrifice more of their free time for the organisation. The tension between business goals and employees’ needs, however, cannot be eradicated by the unitary claims of HRM, as firm-employee conflicts have always been inherent in employment relationships (Keenoy, 1990). Critical scholars claim that what makes ‘soft’ HRM particularly intriguing is its ability to create the illusion of reconciling employees’ expectations and strategic aims of the firm. To denote the concealed capture of the HRM by the economic goals of business and exclusion of the “human side” of HRM, Keenoy (1990) talked about HRM as “a wolf in sheep’s clothing”, while Fowler (1987, p.3 – as cited in Noon, 1992, p. 26) claimed HRM is nothing more than “a covered form of employee manipulation dressed up as mutuality”. Thus, a new form of controlling employees emerged in HRM practices, which differs from the former “technical control” in intensively productive units (Deetz, 2003). It is a soft, hidden control that subjugates employees’ interests with organisational ones, with the benevolent consent of the deprived employees. Rowan (2000) also notes that an unequal power relationship exists between employees and their employers and that employees lack bargaining leverage. For this reason, Rowan (2000) claims that ethical approaches to employee problems are essential. Ethical considerations are important in addressing classic issues such as equal opportunity and discrimination. In

addition to these, scholars bring up the more subtle consequences of business activities for employees. ‘Soft’ human resource management concepts such as flexibility, commitment or organisational culture are commonly associated with good employee practices and with responsible firms. However, critical scholars contend that these concepts can have adverse effects on employees. Work flexibility and employee empowerment initiatives have been linked to work overload and impaired work-life balance (e.g., Johansen, 2008; Archel et al., 2009). Due to these challenges, HRM scholars have explored ethical perspectives on firm responsibility through various ethical frameworks to determine which would suit best the nature of firm-employee relationships (see Winstanley and Woodall, 2000; Greenwood, 2002; Schumann, 2001).

Aim of the study

Various views on firm-employee relationships have been outlined above. In contemporary societies, there are active debates on which view better suits organisational practice. Different societal actors engage in such debates. This includes not only practitioners or academia but also non-governmental organisations and mass media. This study focuses on the latter. Although mass media is a prominent and influential actor, its involvement in societal debates on firm-employee relationships has not been researched much.

This study is conducted in a scarcely researched and societal context. Since the prevalence of Western-oriented research is well recognised (Halme et al., 2009), we focus on Romania, a post-communist country in Eastern Europe. Due to its unique context, Eastern Europe serves as an interesting research setting.

Subsequent to 40 years of centrally-planned economies, countries in Eastern Europe have experienced rapid transformations in their economic, social and political institutions. The period during which such changes have taken place is commonly referred to as the ‘transition’. Twenty years after the communist regimes collapsed, many of the former communist countries in Eastern Europe have become Member States of the European Union. The profound changes in these countries offer researchers a rare opportunity to understand developments in business responsibility thinking and its linkage to societal transformations.

Although countries in Eastern Europe have experienced major transformations in the last two decades, little is known about firm-employee relationships. For this reason, our aim is to examine this issue by analysing *mass media discussions of firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective in the societal context of Romania*. We take a longitudinal perspective and look at the developments of mass media discussions over a 15-year period in transitional Romania. The paper contributes to the emerging body of literature examining the phenomenon of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Eastern Europe, e.g., Estonia (Kooskora, 2006), Poland (Lewicka-Strzalecka, 2006) and Romania (Korka, 2005).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. We first look at mass media and their role in societal debates. We then present some features of firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective in the context of post-communist Eastern Europe in general and Romania in particular. The following section introduces the data collected and the method by which the data are analysed in this study. This is followed by an empirical analysis and findings, and the paper concludes with a discussion section.

The role of mass media in societal debates on the meanings of corporate responsibility to employees

Mass media, in their various forms, represent an influential actor that actively participates in societal discussions on diverse issues. Due to their high visibility in society, mass media set the agenda for public debates (Terkildsen and Schnell, 1997). Media agenda-setting theory, popular in mass communication studies, suggests that mass media are partly responsible for the salience or silence of topics debated in society. Empirical studies substantiate this claim, demonstrating a positive correlation between mass media coverage of issues and visibility of issues to the public (Funkhouser, 1973; Ader, 1995).

In participating in public discussions, mass media claim to have the role of providing impartial information to their audience. However, language is not a neutral carrier of meaning. In post-modernism, language plays a role in constructing the social world since it is loaded with values, beliefs and principles (Berger and Luckmann, 1987). Thus, mass media have the potential to shape people's thinking and behaviour. The extent to which mass media succeed in influencing the audience's vision of the world is more challenging to assess. The literature suggests that for the audience to give credence to mass media stories depends on multiple factors such as the nature of the topic (Zucker, 1978, cited in Brown and Deegan, 1998) as well as audience reception to and interpretation of the message (Livingstone, 1990; Graber, 1988). While consumption of mass media messages is a more controversial issue, there is wide agreement on the role of mass media in constructing a vision of reality (van Dijk, 1997; Fairclough, 1995). Thus, mass media construct their own interpretation of an issue rather than merely reflecting societal debates. However, mass media constructions are not an individual product; societal actors and discussions in society greatly influence this product.

Mass media discussions of business issues are a routine of everyday life; thus, the potential to influence business people's thinking is high. Some evidence indicates that managers are not terribly interested in reading academic scientific literature and do not pay much attention to professional textbooks. Instead, reading the press is part of their everyday routine (Alvarez et al., 2005). In management literature, research has shown that mass media create corporate visibility and reputation (Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis, 2006), construct the image of people working in companies (Chen and Meindl, 1991) and make dominant a corporate agenda (Capriotti, 2009). Mass media are also seen as an arena in which business actors lose or (re)gain their legitimacy in society (Elsbach and Sutton, 1992). The research mentioned above suggests that mass media cannot be considered an insignificant actor in society, nor are they playing a neutral game. Moreover, in the CSR field, the study by SustainAbility, Ketchum and the United Nations Environment Programme (2002) claims that mass media have the ability to influence the way people think about companies and their role in society.

It is essential to understand how mass media construct the relationship between a firm and its stakeholders. The research at hand aims to address this question and looks at how mass media discuss firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective. We do not examine the impact of mass media texts on their audience, i.e. businesspeople, managers and the like. Our investigation is limited to interpreting the kind of vision created by mass media texts in relation to firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective. While there is potential for mass media to induce changes in business thinking and practices, the extent to which this has been achieved is not considered here.

Firm-employee relationships in the context of post-communist Eastern Europe

The historical pattern of Eastern Europe over the past 70 years is unique. For the purpose of achieving the aims of a just society, private farms in rural areas became public property (a phenomenon known as collectivisation, starting in 1949), private medium and large enterprises were nationalised (starting in 1948) and small firms formed socialist cooperatives. State control of various economic mechanisms also became an essential feature of communist countries in Eastern Europe.

The significant societal changes in Eastern Europe affected the status of employees in business activities. Its origins drawing from Marxist ideology, the communist doctrine was intended to be a critical response to increasing social inequalities in the capitalist world and placed employees at the core of its ideology (see Elster, 1985). To alleviate social inequalities, the collectivisation of private means of production was meant to rebalance the power between employees and capital owners. Employees were granted numerous social benefits in their relationships with enterprises. Enterprises extended their responsibilities beyond the normal tasks of business firms in Western countries today and provided a wide range of social protection services (Kornai, 1992). Protection of citizens against unemployment became a major aim of communist enterprises. A number of social services were also provided for employees. Large enterprises, many of which represented the most important employer of a small village, offered their personnel services such as housing, children's day care and education, sports facilities and health care units.

In spite of its ambitious aims, the communist ideology largely failed in practice to place the employee at the core of its interests. Despite that fact that it secured employment and numerous social benefits for employees, evidence shows that unsatisfactory working and

safety conditions (Haraszti, 1978) and low wages negatively affected employee job satisfaction (Blanchflower and Freeman, 1994; Freeman, 1992). Labour rights abuses, such as limiting the mobility of employees or suppressing the formation of independent trade unions, have been reported in literature (e.g., Freeman, 1992; OECD, 2008).

The communist period in Eastern Europe ended in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the communist governments collapsed under the demands of civil societies for democracy. Eastern European countries committed to radical institutional changes to reflect new orientations towards democracy and free-market economies. Rapid societal transformations have yielded negative implications for employees. Enterprise restructuring, privatisation or closure have resulted in massive layoffs, which proved especially problematic in areas where a single large enterprise was the major employer. Substantial changes for employees have also taken place due to a reconsideration of the business firm's role in society. Employees working in state-owned enterprises have suffered from diminished social benefits, and employment security is no longer being granted.

Numerous abuses of employees on the part of firms have been reported during the transition (e.g. ILO, 2007; Woolfson, 2007; Vaughan-Whitehead, 2005). While many of the aspects described below are common to the Eastern European region, we specifically refer to the context of Romanian society. One of the most significant abuses of employees has been the widespread phenomenon of illegal employment, also referred to as 'informal work' or 'grey work', i.e., work without an employment contract or that falls outside of state regulations (Neef, 2002; Stanculescu, 2005). The phenomenon has been facilitated by a low standard of living dating back to the early 1980s (Kim, 2005; OECD, 2008; Neef, 2002), massive layoffs during the transition and a weak private sector, unable to integrate the unemployed

population. These problems abated to some extent in the early 2000s (see Cindrea, 2007; Popescu et al., 2010), when the job market changed. In spite of the developments that occurred during the transition, the OECD noted in 2008 that ‘informal work’ persisted in Romania. The OECD (2008) estimated that the incidence of informal work ranged between 20 and 50% of total employment.

Labour conditions, too, have often been under scrutiny, particularly due to the high rate of exposure to health hazards in the workplace. Numerous cases of injuries and deaths occurred due to inadequate equipment and safety measures (European Commission, 1998). Labour unrest, especially in the public sector, has been a significant indicator of employee job dissatisfaction (e.g., Keil and Keil, 2002; Vasi, 2004). Particularly in the early part of the transition, numerous countrywide strikes took place due to the diminishing purchasing power of the population and sinking standards of living.

Unpaid overtime work, age discrimination and child labour have also been blamed, given their widespread occurrence in business activities (Musiolek, 2000; Stanculescu, 2005). Gender discrimination and the erosion of women’s status in the labour market have also been reported (Degtiar, 2000; Oprica, 2008). Ethnic discrimination against Roma minority has been pointed out as a problem in Europe but is especially severe in Romania (Rat, 2005; European Commission, 2008). In addition, employee-related literature in Romania discusses the recent growing incidence of stress, anxiety, long working hours and exhaustion, all of which impair the quality of work life (e.g., Breje, 2010; Mituț, 2010).

Data and research method employed in the study

The empirical data of this paper consists of a Romanian weekly business magazine, *Capital* whose content in the period of January 1993-December 2007 is examined in this article. The

timeframe selected for this study (1993-2007) is intended to coincide with the transitional stage of Romanian society. The very early years (1990-1992) could not, however, be examined. There are various methods for estimating the end of transition towards the free-market economy (e.g., macro-economic performance, economic and political institutions etc.). In this study, we take the accession to the European Union structures as an indicator of Romania's readiness to function as a democratic and economically viable, free-market society. We also examine 2007 as the actual year of Romania's accession to the European Union.

Although the business press market currently offers numerous choices, there are fewer options when it comes to business magazines that cover the entire transition period. According to the statistics published by the National Bureau of Auditing Number of Printed Copies and the National Study of Audience¹, *Capital* magazine has been among the most important Romanian economic publications on the market for most of the transition period. Moreover, at the time the data were selected for this study (2006), *Capital* had the greatest market share of Romanian business magazines. *Capital* business magazine has enjoyed high credibility among Romanian business people during the transition and has commonly been considered a prestigious source. For these reasons, the magazine has been an important actor in the Romanian business press community.

The data used to analyse firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective consists of three sub-sections of *Capital* magazine that constantly dealt with employment issues. The most important of these was '*carriere*' (careers), which was dedicated to aspects related to employees and human resource management. A second section, '*profil*' (profile) consisted of descriptions of a single firm, usually following a chronological line, from the

moment of its establishment to the present. This section was chosen for this study because it provided an opportunity to analyse what aspects (if any) of the employee-firm relationship received the attention of business press. The third section, '*interviu*' (interview), consisted of texts reproducing a dialogue between a reporter and an interviewee. The interviews were usually reported as such, with no additional comments. The subjects discussed varied significantly from one interview to another. This section was also examined for the purpose of observing the issues on which business press focused when discussing employee-related issues. The 'Interview' and 'Profile' sections provided limited material for our purposes. Most material was provided by the 'Careers' section. Quantitatively, the number of articles varied greatly over time². A detailed table with the number of articles examined for this study is presented in Annex 1.

Firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective were rarely discussed in *Capital* as a topic as such. The concept of corporate social responsibility had been unknown to the Romanian business environment during the communist period (prior to 1989) and much of the transition period. Nonetheless, implicit assumptions regarding firm-employee relationships, the role of employees in a firm and corporate responsibility towards employees can be found in the texts. It is on these assumptions that we focused our analysis for this study.

In analysing the data, we paid particular attention to the constitutive role of language (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Language not only plays a representational role but it also constructs the social world (Berger and Luckmann, 1987). In our case, the texts analysed reflect the way business press has come to interpret the relationship between the firm and the employee. In order to understand mass media representations, it is also crucial to look at the context in

which they occur (Phillips and Hardy, 2002; van Dijk, 1997). Mass media texts can affect societal debates, but mass media are also influenced by discussions and events taking place in society.

Our study follows the tradition of interpretative research (Ryan et al., 2002; Bryman and Bell, 2007). The data is qualitative and were analysed using textual interpretative analysis (Livesey and Kearins, 2002). The method consists of an iterative reading of texts based on a process of sense-making. The texts in the business press have been coded with a social responsibility framework in mind. More specifically, we started from the idea that, regardless of the societal context, the relationship between a firm and its employees is based on a set of rights and responsibilities. We were interested in the responsibilities assumed to be deliberately undertaken by firms and which are commonly perceived as the ‘social responsibilities’ of businesses.

Our framework of social responsibilities to employees was based on an extensive review of corporate social responsibility and human resource management literature. A number of studies used pre-defined lists of items in their analysis of responsibilities to employees. This is especially the case for articles examining corporate voluntary social reporting (e.g., Guthrie and Parker, 1990; Gray et al., 1995a, b). For instance, Gray et al. (1995a, b) utilise their pre-defined categories related to employees: equal opportunities, health and safety or consultation with employees.

A more extensive list of items to be considered when analysing corporate responsibility toward employees was developed by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) in their various versions of Reporting Framework (the first version being released in 2000 and currently with

the forth exposure draft under public consultation). GRI's framework includes performance indicators related to issues such as *inter alia*, labour-management relations, training and education, equal remuneration for women and men, diversity and equal opportunity.

Various articles in the literature also examined specific aspects of the firm-employee relationships. For instance, discrimination based on various grounds such as gender, ethnicity, race etc. (Adams and Harte, 2000; Adams and McPhail, 2004, Demuijnck, 2009), equal opportunity (Adams et al., 1995) and abuses at work (Royle, 2005) are topics discussed in literature.

In addition, we scrutinised the employee literature in Eastern European countries. This literature is critical to this study since it signals aspects or problems in firm-employee relationships specific to the region. For instance, some articles discussed Roma's poor status in employment (Nasture, 2005), widespread informal work in Eastern Europe (Kim, 2005; Neef, 2002), labour unrest during the transition period (Keil and Keil, 2002) and the deteriorating status of woman at work (Degtiar, 2000).

Two points must be noted here. First, only a few aspects examined in the literature have been identified in our data. This observation led us to discuss the missing themes in the conclusions of this article. Second, our coding has not been restricted to pre-defined categories. There was also flexibility in allowing potential themes to emerge from the data. For instance, legal responsibility regarding employees is considered to be self-evident in the Western literature. In our data, however, aspects such as wage payment or other legal benefits emerged as important responsibilities and thus, were considered in the coding process.

The initial coding process was followed, iteratively, by reflections on data and theoretical aspects, interpretations, re-readings and reinterpretations of data. For instance, in a second round of reading, attention was paid to the stated attitude of business press towards stories described (i.e., whether or not it was supportive to existing business practices). The stated reasons for the adopted attitudes of the business press were also considered.

Discussions of firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective in Romanian business press

What constitutes firm responsibility to employees is largely open to debate. In this study we did not confine ourselves to particular definitions or typologies but preferred to let the data talk. At the same time, it is acknowledged that having been educated ourselves in the West, we have a mind-set which has been highly influenced by Western literature on corporate social responsibility and human resource management. In this study we examined discussions on firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective in *Capital* magazine and noticed changes over time. Three main periods were identified in the course of the transition in terms of business press discussions concerning firm-employee relationships. In determining the periodization, the years marking the beginning and the end of the periods were not strict, since changes occurred gradually over time. The years indicate that some changes became more pronounced over time. The main characteristics of the three periods are presented below.

During the first period only, we divide business press discussions according to form of ownership, i.e., state-owned enterprises and private companies. The reason for doing so is to highlight the distinctions between the two sectors while also noticing similarities. In the following two periods, we only focus on similarities since no new differences can be

observed. For each of the periods, the discussions begin with a broader introduction of the contextual factors affecting business activities and their impact on firm-employee relationships. Discussions in *Capital* magazine then follow.

1. Talk in the early years of transition (1993-1997): Human resource management practices to change communist mentalities regarding business and increase employee performance

The private sector was confronted early in the transition with a shortage of managers trained for the purpose operating in a private firm and inadequate management tools for the free-market economy (Littrell and Valentin, 2005). The managerial style that was adopted during communism differed substantially from management practices in a free market economy in that it gave prevalence to objectives such as production, quantitative output and employment provision. Hierarchical relationships within an organisation as well as a low level of concern for employees' views also defined the communist management style (Kornai, 1992; Edwards, 2002). The managerial style was largely perceived in society as being the root of economic failure during communism and in the early stage of the transition. In this context, changing managerial style emerged as a priority in the business world (Constantin et al., 2006). A characteristic of the private sector during the transition was the business preference for 'grey' labour due in part to economic hardship (Vasile and Ioan-Franc, 2008). Next, we shall look at business press interpretations of the role of employees in the process of the transition towards profit-oriented management.

In the *Capital* texts we analysed, employees in the private sector were approached from a mixed perspective that was both instrumental and ethical. The instrumental approach was

quantitatively preponderant and had some resemblance to the ‘hard’ dimension of human resource management, which subscribes to a liberal approach to business responsibilities. Employees were tools to be managed, but their needs were not taken into account beyond legal requirements. Thus, consistent with the liberal approach, the legal responsibilities of firms to employees were mostly emphasised. For instance, illegal or ‘grey’ work was not tolerated in the texts, and legal employment was considered to be a basic right of an employee.

Consequently, social responsibility topics were scarce at this stage and were mostly discussed in connection with business needs. Training and education clearly dominated the talk about employees since training played a key role in re-educating business people and employees for the purpose of “shaping an economic way of thinking, which targets profit” (no. 6, p. 15, 1993, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section) and “changing the mentality and the managerial system in Romania” (no. 2, p. 17, 1994, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section). In terms of social responsibility, we can mention discrimination against women and health and safety issues, to which, however, only several texts were dedicated.

Overall, employees continued to be viewed as a means to achieving business goals. These goals were narrowly defined in the early period of the transition. The interest was mostly in changing the communist style of management and acquiring practical managerial techniques. Tools such as salary systems, personnel training, selecting and recruiting personnel were commonly linked to the goal of increasing performance, efficiency or skills:

“The question is: what are the policies, procedures and techniques which, given the motivational and non-motivational features of individual performance, can increase the interest in performance?” (no. 48, p. 14, 1994, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section)³

The profit-oriented managerial style became the criterion by which to judge the appropriateness or inappropriateness of business practices in relation to employees. The prevailing managerial thinking in Romania was believed to be the main cause of the inadequate management of employees and thus, poor economic performance. The managerial indifference to modern practices of human resource management was much criticised in the texts.

The ethical approach emerged in some descriptive texts, where ‘human-face’ or ‘sensitive’ small-scale entrepreneurs appeared concerned with employees’ needs, especially during the economically difficult times of the transition. In these texts, employees were no longer objects or resources, but human beings with needs and values, benefiting from their employers’ affection, care and, sometimes, compassion. Some entrepreneurs, cited in *Capital*, alluded to the human values mentioned above:

“He knows that his employees sometimes take home food products from his factory. But he states: ‘I still close my eyes [to pilfering] because I know the difficulties they [the employees] have, and salaries are quite small for their needs’” (no. 43, p. 6, 1994, extracted from the ‘Profile’ section).

The state-owned sector was highly affected during the transition period. State-owned enterprises had to become competitive in Romania’s emerging free market, and efficiency

and profitability criteria were new principles guiding their activities. The restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises resulted in employee redundancies, which were needed due to the overstaffing of enterprises during communism (Cazes and Nesporova, 2003). Thus, the changing role of the state-owned enterprises in relation to employment and social services provided to employees were key issues to be discussed and clarified in society. Similar to what occurred in the private sector, communist managerial style was an important challenge in state-owned enterprises, which were criticised for being bureaucratic and autocratic in their relationships with employees.

The social function of enterprises, a major aim during communism, was met with criticism in *Capital*. The Marxist vision of the firm, placing employees at its heart, was no longer appropriate. On the contrary, neo-liberal doctrine appeared to dominate *Capital* discussions. Thus, social provision to employees was perceived as a task of the state and was not considered a business matter. The following is an excerpt from an article whose sub-title, “State-owned enterprises do not have profit as their aim but social protection”, ironically criticises the unwillingness of state-owned enterprises to adapt to neo-liberal ideas:

“[...] enterprises became centres of social protection: layoffs are made, almost exclusively, on non-economic criteria. Elderly employees, divorced women with children and so on are not dismissed. [...] Protecting these social categories has to be done by the state and not by firms. Firms, whether state-owned or private, should have a single aim: profit” (no. 6, p. 2, 1994, extracted from an editorial).

Restructuring and layoffs in state-owned enterprises, as a reality of the transition period, was interpreted from a business perspective as a necessary condition to achieving much-needed

efficiency. The responsibility was placed on state institutions, which were to provide professional reconversion programmes and not on state-owned enterprises or privatised enterprises. The neo-liberal ideology adopted in *Capital* talk discarded the social mission of enterprises.

The above analysis indicates how the business press constructed their vision of firm-employee relationships which went out to the broad public. Social aims, as exponents of a communist ideology, were no longer tolerated. Free market ideology was incompatible with the social values held during the communist era.

2. Mid-transition talk 1998-2004: Human resource management practices to overcome economic hardship during the transition period and increase corporate success

The mid-transition period witnessed new problems for firms and their employees. While the entire transition was marked by macro- and micro-economic instability, the period of 1998-2000 was especially difficult for the business community due to an economic crisis that affected Romania (Pop, 2006, pp. 84). Economic indicators deteriorated, the number of bankruptcies increased, foreign firms entering the Romanian market intensified competition and some firms shifted to the informal economy (Pop, 2006). Thus, Romanian firms experienced economic hardship that was deepened by the inter-firm arrears crisis affecting the entire business environment (see Santarossa, 2001). In spite of that, Romanian firms increasingly had to become attractive employers. Multinationals, newly entering the Romanian market, offered higher wages and better working conditions, thus setting new benchmarks for local firms in terms of modern human resource management practices (Faggio, 2001; Trif, 2000).

Under the new circumstances, *Capital* texts also had new interpretations of firm-employee relationships. The ethical perspective on employees diminished considerably over these years while a transition from the 'hard' to the 'soft' human resource management could be observed. New aspects of firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility viewpoint became important. Training and education remained the most significant topic discussed, but much more attention was paid to employee well-being. A variety of new tools for human resource management were introduced to the business community, such as *inter alia* benefits to employees, stimulating working environment, organisational culture and communication at work. A change towards a neo-liberal perspective took place, and responsibility towards employees became accepted as a means to enhancing business objectives. As part of the neo-liberal doctrine, legal responsibilities also continued to be emphasised in this period since apparently 'grey' work had persisted throughout the transition.

In spite of the fact that employee needs were being better addressed, the labour force continued to serve as an instrument for business purposes. Hence, business case talk became dominant, replacing the liberal perspective (the 'hard' HRM) prevailing early in the transition period. The purposes for which HRM was used broadened as compared to early stage of the transition. Human resource management was not strictly related to efficiency and performance but was also a prerequisite to the successful management of a firm. Competitive advantage, consolidating the market share, corporate image, product quality, relationships with business partners and customer satisfaction were all linked to practices of human resource management. For example, the provision of employee benefits was seen as a way to motivate employees in order to achieve corporate success:

“Successful companies found that they can have a substantial competitive advantage if they know how to properly motivate employees. Very many managers have learnt a whole range of subtleties in order to improve people performance and loyalty” (no. 50, pp. 62-63, 2000, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section).

Likewise, human resource management, through its tools for addressing employee well-being and a company’s attractiveness as an employer, also acted as a means of surviving the economic crisis affecting Romania:

“Results indicate that managers who learnt how to renew their human management systems and how to increase personnel competence have succeeded in facing challenges and economic crises” (no. 50, pp. 58-59, 2001, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section).

Many of the developments in these years appeared to be linked to the new HRM practices introduced by foreign firms, especially multinationals. Clear distinctions were made between the predominantly negative picture of domestic firms and the positive image of foreign-based firms in terms of ‘appropriate’ behaviour to be adopted in employment matters. Human resource management, in its ‘soft’ version, became the criterion for differentiating between successful foreign firms and inefficient local firms:

“In multinationals there is a harmonisation of these five dimensions of professional satisfaction (work, salary, promotion, superiors, colleagues) with cultural values. This is typical for an organisational culture concerned with supporting employees, interested in their needs, promoting a friendly, open and informal atmosphere” (no. 34, pp. 36-37, 2001, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section).

“How many Romanians find satisfaction in their work is difficult to estimate because Romanian managers are not interested in finding out” (no. 2, p. 19, 1999, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section).

While various factors preventing Romanian firms from implementing HRM (such as communist, autocratic managerial style and economic hardship) were acknowledged, *Capital* texts remained critical towards the inability to assimilate foreign practices. Since the business case for HRM dominated the texts, other topics dealing with ethical responsibilities (e.g., discrimination at work or equal opportunity) did not receive much attention.

In short, the ideological constructions of appropriate business behaviour continued in *Capital* in the mid-years of the transition. The texts analysed promoted modern Western practices of human resource management. Despite HRM emphasis on employee well-being, its instrumental approach was evident. In assessing the suitability of local versus foreign practices in human resources, the texts revealed, once again, the underlying principles on which they relied.

3. Late transition talk about employees (2005-2007): Human resource management as a means of attracting and retaining employees

The late transition period was marked by significant changes in the labour market that were already incipient in the mid-transition stage. In addition to multinationals becoming common actors in the local market, a massive emigration of the Romanian population took place in the transition period (Vasile and Ioan-Franc, 2008). According to the OECD (2008), more than three million Romanians were working abroad in mid-2007. A significant decrease in the

birth rate after 1989 added more pressure to the job market in the late 2000s. Increased business activity (the appearance of foreign firms and small firms) during these years raised the demand for qualified employees, and the market faced labour shortages. The transformation of the labour market from an employers' to an employees' market added more expectations of local firms. Nevertheless, the late transition period was an economically prosperous period with high rates of economic growth. Thus, firms were better equipped to address employees' needs.

Meanwhile, the concept of corporate social responsibility had become more familiar to Romanian society. *Capital* initiated a series of articles specifically concerned with discussing the concept of CSR. Nevertheless, talk about the relationship between firms and employees continued to be done using the 'soft' version of human resource management. One reason may be the relatively narrow interpretation of CSR as corporate philanthropy or voluntarism in Romanian society and elsewhere in Eastern Europe (see Elms, 2006).

In late years of the transition, the business case for human resource management was intensively promoted as a means of attracting and retaining employees. Paying attention to the social needs of the employee was now a significant aspect of the firm-employee relationship in a period of labour shortages. Facing high competition in obtaining a well-trained workforce, firms were encouraged to use a variety of instruments to satisfy the financial and non-financial expectations of employees. These were thought to motivate employees, increase their commitment to the firm and reduce personnel turnover. Thus, the topics discussed in the late transition period addressed these new developments to a large extent. While training and education remained a constant topic, a number of sophisticated tools to address employee well-being were now in fashion. Among them were, for instance,

psychotherapeutic services for employees, work-life rebalance, pleasant work atmosphere, team building to consolidate employee communication and professional counselling and development. Psychotherapeutic services were needed to address employees' depressive states, or resolve work-related dilemmas, such as finding a work-life balance, or coping with younger, better performing colleagues. To improve life-work balance, services which aim to relax the employee, such as dance courses or even casino evenings, were mentioned. Such talk remained instrumental in linking good managerial practices toward employees to business strategic thinking and success:

“We established the first corporate university in the country with the aim to increase productivity in our firm and to help employees in their efforts to develop their careers. Likewise, developing human resources is an essential part of our strategy” (representative of a Romanian bank, no. 41, p. 65, 2005, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section).

The business case for human resource management practices continued to be used as a means of constructing the ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’ in firm-employee relationships. Below is an example of how ‘doing good to do well’ talk was normatively pursued:

“Multinational companies are already applying EU practices in Romania. And the results are visible. They have prosperous businesses and happy employees” (no. 25, pp. 46-47, 2005, extracted from the ‘Careers’ section).

In short, from an employee perspective, the later years of the transition witnessed a return to the ‘social’. What was denied in the early years of the dataset now became acceptable and even desirable. The texts constructed the ‘social’ as a required part of business strategy and a

prerequisite for success. However, the ‘social’ in the late transition differed from other forms of the ‘social’ encountered in the early transition. The ethical approach in the early years of transition emphasised human values and unconditional care for employees, which apparently vanished in the late transition. A strategic and unitary approach, underlying the congruency of goals between employees’ needs and business goals replaced it. Likewise, the denial of the ‘social’, especially considering post-communist enterprises, illustrated unawareness of the potential benefits of a strategic approach to managing employees. The development of the ‘social’ approach to employees during the transition period may apparently be without significance, as long as employees’ expectations are in the end well served. However, the ethical and the strategic approach to the ‘social’ reflects Keenoy’s (1990) distinction between traditional and strategic HRM. Keenoy draws attention to the idea that the development from traditional to strategic HRM is associated with numerous risks, among which the exclusion of the “human side” from the organisational values, which is significant.

Conclusions and discussion

This article analysed a rich source of data over a 15-year period and looked at business print media discussions on firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective in the context of the post-communist Romania. We analysed media expectations of firm responsibilities and their perceptions of the actual accomplishment of these obligations. In this last section of the study we will reflect on lessons learnt and those not learnt from our empirical investigation.

Firstly, the results of the study indicated that various approaches to firm-employee relationships from a social responsibility perspective can be identified in the business press texts. These were not static over the 15-year transition period. The moral talk in the early transition period about the altruistic attitude of small entrepreneurs in relation to their

employees abated in the mid-transition period and almost disappeared in the later years of the transition. Likewise, the instrumental talk discussing firm-employee relationships from a human resource management perspective did not remain constant over time. A rather indifferent attitude concerning employees' needs existed in the early stages of the transition. This into an attitude marked by an increased consideration for the various aspects that would help employees enjoy their work. This dynamic over time was not fortuitous. We suggest that mass media talk adapted to developments in society. The emergence of a business case for firm responsibility toward employees ('soft' HRM) in the mid- to late-transition period appears to be linked to a society and a business community in transformation. In the course of the transition, an economy that initially had been dominated by domestic enterprises with a high interest in learning the practical managerial skills required in a free-market economy transformed into an economy with a higher preponderance of foreign-owned firms.

Despite the variety of firm-employee approaches in mass media, an instrumental perspective on firm-employee relationships prevailed throughout the transition period. Corporate responsibility toward employees was mostly discussed within a human resource management approach whose role, however, varied throughout the transition. HRM provided tools to change communist mentalities in the early transition period, while in mid-transition it was a means to overcoming economic hardship during the crisis. Late in the transition, HRM tools were needed for attracting and retaining employees in a market suffering from labour shortages.

Secondly, there was a tendency to dismiss the approaches to firm-employee relationships that did not comply with a liberal perspective in the early transition years and with a neo-liberal perspective in the mid- to late-transition period. For instance, the moral talk grounded in the

Marxist thinking, according to which employees are entitled to a high level of social protection, was heatedly denied. Ensuring various social services to employees, as an aim of communist enterprises (Elster, 1985), was considered to be an inappropriate role for enterprises in a market economy. Thus, the liberal thinking adopted in Romanian society and reflected in mass media texts reshaped firm-employee relationships in accordance with the aim of profit-making.

Another approach to firm-employee relationships dismissed in the texts was the autocratic perspective inherited from formerly communist enterprises. This autocratic perspective of managing employees, emphasising surveillance and the strict control of labour, was questioned in terms of how it served the firm. The arguments used relied, again, on liberal and neo-liberal ideology, according to which business performance and profitability are primary aims of business activities. No ethical perspective to explore the deficiencies of an autocratic approach was taken in the texts analysed.

The dynamic of discursive approaches to firm-employee relationships reflects well the ideological transformations taking place in Romanian society. The ideological shift in the early 1990s made the former social mission of communist enterprises illegitimate while promoting the neo-liberal ideas to guide firms' activities. This restricted firm responsibility toward employees to legal expectations and economically sound actions. Such ideological transformations took place in the entire society as result of numerous factors, such as the influence of external institutions. Mass communication literature points out that media do not independently construct their vision of society (Fairclough, 1995) but are under the influence of broader societal discussions. However, in this context, mass media provided the support needed to legitimise the new objectives being pursued by the government. The profound

developments during the transition period, with shifts towards the ‘economic’ and recently towards the ‘social’ appear to mirror trends occurring also in the Western societies. More specifically, the 1980s were marked in the West by severe economic crisis and harsh policies initiated during Thatcher/Reagan periods. Consequently, the significance of social issues diminished considerably, as various scholars pointed out (e.g. Blowfield and Murray, 2008). Late 1990s experienced a return of the ‘social’ on the corporate agenda, after which corporate talk about social and environmental concerns proliferated. This development could be, however, largely attributed to the increasing corporate interest in a strategic use of the social and environmental talk that serves its interests.

Thirdly, there are positive but also negative implications of the current approach to firm-employee relationships promoted in mass media texts. As mentioned, a human resource management perspective was adopted in mass media texts. The empirical results reflect the important role HRM played in mass media texts in reshaping firm-employee relationships. Compared to a rather ignorant approach to employees’ needs in the early transition years, HRM concepts and tools introduced in the mid- to late-years of the transition paid considerable attention to employee well-being. The texts analysed in this article, which targeted the Romanian business community, promoted the idea that treating employees with respect and catering to their needs would result in better outcomes for the business. The promotion of this idea in the media encouraged businesspeople to be more sensitive to employees’ expectations and to address them properly. Thus, in supporting HRM practices, mass media texts constructed a new vision of the work place, one in which employees are important. While the impact of this vision on the business community has not been analysed in this research, mass media texts still play a vital role in highlighting the need to improve the working lives of Romanian employees.

In spite of the positive changes introduced by the HRM practices, there are also shortcomings to be discussed. While addressing numerous aspects of business responsibility to employees, HRM also neglects others. We thus shall look at the missing themes in mass media texts and try to understand the reason for the discrepancy between salient and non-salient topics.

Among the scarcely addressed themes in the texts analysed were discrimination at work and non-equal opportunity. Concerns have been expressed at the European and international levels about gender discrimination, ethnic minorities and disabled persons (UNDP, 2007; European Commission, 2008). The CSR literature and practice also considers discrimination and equal opportunity as problems that must be alleviated in the business world (Adams and McPhail, 2004; Adams and Harte, 2000; Kamenou and Fearfull, 2006a, b). Discussion of these issues in mass media was, however, scarce and of a general nature, providing few examples of business practices. Only one text addressed the issue of Roma employment, but it was positive in its assessment of how discrimination against Roma developed in the Romanian workplace. The text suggested that entrepreneurs were willing to employ the Roma population, and, thus, discrimination against Roma began to diminish. No discussion took place about the rights of disabled people and employers' attitudes towards this population group. The same holds true for the problematic issue of child labour.

Another important theme concerns health and safety issues at work. Significant concerns have been expressed at the European Union level about the high incidence of accidents and mortality in Romanian workplaces. Despite this, only occasional texts addressed the issue, and the responsibility was frequently shifted from businesspersons to the regulatory system. It was not considered to be the responsibility of a firm to ensure the functionality of safety

procedures. Rather, such texts discussed the legal norms that were considered to be inappropriate to encouraging firms to be active in the field of health and safety at work.

The circumstance of missing themes indicates a key weakness of human resource management and its use in corporate social responsibility literature. ‘Soft’ HRM is partial and selective. It provides firms with the opportunity to address responsibilities that serve their direct interests while allowing the neglect of those deemed unimportant from a business standpoint (Dickens, 1999). Human resource management, as currently theorised and practised, aligns employee and organisational interests. It emphasises the common benefits HRM provides to employees and the firm, but it conceals the potentially conflicting issues (Legge, 1995). Our study illustrates well the selectivity of a HRM approach towards employees. The analysis revealed that business-related issues such as commitment, communication, motivation, professional development, active participation and satisfaction at work received attention in mass media, whereas aspects not directly linked to a business outcome, such as discrimination, equal opportunity or health and safety, were not attractive for the mass media.

For the reasons indicated above, we question whether the contemporary version of firm responsibility toward employees, as exemplified in the mass media texts analysed in this study, is appropriate not only in regard to the local context, but also worldwide. Greenwood (2007) argues that engaging with employees, as a modern form of human resource management, does not imply a responsible attitude towards them. There is a gap between the two concepts resulting from the missing values that should underpin HRM practices. An emerging body of literature points out ethicality as the value needed in human resource management (e.g., Winstanley and Woodall, 2000; Schumann, 2001; the special issue of the

Journal of Business Ethics on Ethics and HRM, vol. 111, issue 1, 2012). For Sudhir and Murthy (2001), ethics in business has the potential to alleviate problems existing at the workplace. Greenwood (2002) also claims that, at the very least, there are moral obligations towards employees. These obligations, however, can be easily overlooked in the quest for efficiency and productivity.

Finally, mass media are one of the actors engaging in societal debates on the firm-employee relationship. Unfortunately, in this study we do not have evidence on how successful mass media were in influencing their audience, nor how their discussions shaped the Romanian society's vision of firm-employee relationships. Arguably, mass media constructions of a particular phenomenon are not a single-sided process since debates in society also influence media discussions. However, mass media can provide much needed support for legitimising the actions of other societal actors, as was the case in our study. Thus, we think that revealing the ideological underpinnings of mass media texts remains important, at least due to their potential impact on the business community and society in general. As Gee (1990, p. XX) claims, "language is inextricably bound up with ideology and cannot be analysed or understood apart from it". Further research on the audience perspective of the ideological underpinnings of mass media is thus needed.

Notes:

[1] The statistics for the National Bureau of Auditing Number of Printed Copies (average copies per edition) are available at www.brat.ro and for the National Study of Audience (market share information) at www.sna.ro.

[2] As part of a larger research project, the magazine has been viewed in its entirety, and other relevant texts outside the three sections mentioned have also been used for this article. This was vital for providing the overall background, needed to understand data in its context.

[3] The extracts are normally taken from journalist-made texts. Whenever appropriate, the source on which the quotation is based (e.g., businessperson, HRM firm) is specified. Names of persons and companies have been deleted from the text, since they are not needed for our purposes.

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Annex 1 Quantitative information on the number of articles published in the three *Capital* sections

Year	Career section	Interview section	Profile section	Total
1993	77	42	86	205
1994	89	47	54	190
1995	67	45	28	140
1996	68	51	18	137
1997	64	37	20	121
1998	63	10	9	82
1999	105	2	31	138
2000	120	9	18	147
2001	88	11	18	117
2002	92	15	25	132
2003	108	9	25	142
2004	97	13	3	113
2005	70	6	-	76
2006	63	16	4	83
2007	53	34	11	98