A REVIEW REGARDING FOOD CONSUMPTION IN ROMANIA – TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS IN THE POST-PANDEMIC CONTEXT

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REVIEW

Abstract

This paper presents a review regarding food consumption in Romania, emphasizing recent trends, challenges, and socio-economic implications in the post-pandemic context. The study identifies a diet still dominated by cereals, dairy, and meat, with moderate growth in fruit and vegetable intake. The COVID-19 pandemic caused major behavioral changes, driving a shift toward basic foods and revealing inequalities between income groups. Post-pandemic inflation further limited access to balanced diets, especially among vulnerable households. Despite these pressures, a gradual move toward more diversified and sustainable food consumption is evident. The review concludes that Romania is undergoing a slow transformation of dietary habits, influenced by economic and social factors, and highlights the need for coherent public policies to ensure food security, affordability, and sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

Food consumption represents one of the most sensitive components of economic and social behavior, situated at the intersection of resource availability, cultural preferences, and the population's socio-economic conditions. In the current global context—marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent economic and energy crises, and the intensification of inflationary phenomena—the analysis of food consumption becomes essential for understanding the level of well-being and food security at the national level (FAO, 2022; Eurostat, 2023).

In Romania, the structure of food consumption reflects a combination of traditional dietary patterns specific to Eastern Europe and the socio-economic transformations accelerated over the past two decades. Although household incomes have gradually increased, the high share of food expenditures in total household budgets remains one of the largest in the European Union, exceeding 24% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023). This strong dependence on food prices highlights a significant economic vulnerability, directly influencing the population's access to a balanced and healthy diet.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for change in food consumption behaviors. Mobility restrictions, economic uncertainty, and limited access to goods led to a reorientation toward basic food products, a reduction in dietary diversity, and an increase in the consumption of processed foods (Dumitras et al., 2021).

At the same time, higher-income households adopted more sustainable and health-conscious consumption patterns, including a growing preference for online grocery shopping, thereby intensifying the polarization among population segments (Mureșan, 2022). From a macroeconomic perspective, the pandemic and successive crises have revealed the fragility of the national food system, emphasizing the need for resilient and sustainable food policies (World Bank, 2023). In this regard, the analysis of food consumption trends in Romania has not only a descriptive dimension but also a strategic one, offering valuable insights for public policy formulation and for optimizing food production and distribution systems.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of the main trends and determinants of food consumption in Romania during the period 2020–2023, combining theoretical insights with empirical analysis.

The main objective is to highlight the changes in food consumption structure resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent socio-economic transformations, as well as to identify future trends in Romanian food consumption behaviors. The study adopts a review-based approach, complemented by a statistical evaluation of data provided by the National Institute of Statistics (INSSE) and Eurostat, in order to identify structural changes in consumption behavior, socio-economic implications, and future directions in the post-pandemic context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The analysis of food consumption patterns has evolved from a descriptive economic topic into an interdisciplinary field that integrates economic behavior, public health, and sustainability. Scholars increasingly emphasize that food consumption reflects not only purchasing power but also social norms, cultural identity, and environmental awareness (Reisch et al., 2021; FAO, 2021).

At the European level, recent research highlights a gradual transition toward sustainable and health-oriented diets, aligned with the objectives of the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy (European Commission, 2020). These transformations include an increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, and plant-based alternatives, along with a gradual decline in red meat consumption (European Food Safety Authority, 2022). However, the pace of transition varies significantly across regions, being slower in Central and Eastern Europe due to income disparities and structural limitations in food markets (Eurostat, 2023; OECD, 2023).

In Romania, food consumption patterns have remained relatively stable, maintaining a predominantly carbohydrate-based diet, while the intake of protein-rich and nutrient-dense foods has grown only modestly (INSSE, 2023). Studies show that food consumption is still strongly influenced by price sensitivity and income inequality, reflecting a low elasticity of demand for essential food items (Popescu, 2019; Bărbulescu, 2023). These findings confirm that the Romanian food system continues to face challenges related to affordability, accessibility, and quality.

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified these structural constraints. Dumitraş et al. (2021) demonstrated that Romanian consumers shifted toward basic, storable, and affordable food products, such as bread, dairy, and potatoes, while reducing the frequency of grocery purchases. Mureşan (2022) observed a dual behavioral pattern: while lower-income households reduced diet diversity, higher-income consumers increased spending on healthier and local products, signaling a polarization of food choices during the pandemic. Other authors (Bran et al., 2021; Smedescu & Dinu, 2022) stressed the digital acceleration of the food sector, highlighting how e-commerce became an essential channel for food distribution during lockdowns. This process encouraged the modernization of supply chains and created new opportunities for small local producers, but also introduced challenges related to logistics, price transparency, and consumer trust (Fernández et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the pandemic coincided with a surge in food inflation and global supply chain disruptions, whose effects persist in the post-pandemic context. According to the World Bank (2023), rising food prices disproportionately affected Eastern European economies, increasing the risk of nutritional insecurity among vulnerable groups. Research on consumer psychology (Mattioli et al., 2022) shows that post-crisis food choices are shaped by both economic constraints and perceived food safety, with sustainability and local origin emerging as new decision criteria.

At the same time, several studies underline the importance of environmental sustainability and the reduction of food waste in shaping future food policies (FAO, 2022; OECD, 2023). In Romania, recent initiatives promoting sustainable consumption—such as community-supported agriculture (CSA) and short food supply chains—remain at an early stage but show growing potential for resilience and inclusivity (Bărbulescu, 2023).

Overall, the review of the literature reveals that food consumption in Romania is influenced by a combination of economic, social, and environmental factors, embedded in a rapidly changing global context. The convergence between the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, inflationary pressures, and sustainability objectives outlines a complex landscape in which households continuously adapt their

dietary habits to maintain balance between affordability, health, and resilience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of food consumption in Romania over the period 2015–2023 reveals several significant trends that reflect both the influence of the socio-economic context and the transformations triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Data compiled from the *Food Balance Sheets* published by the National Institute of Statistics (INSSE, 2023) indicate a relatively stable structure of food consumption, typical of emerging economies in Central and Eastern Europe, yet with a gradual tendency toward diversification in recent years. In 2023, average per capita food consumption in Romania continued to be dominated by cereals and cereal-based products, which remain the foundation of the national diet, exceeding 90 kg/person/year. They are followed by milk and dairy products (70–80 kg/person/year) and meat and meat products (60–65 kg/person/year), while vegetables and fruits each account for approximately 60 kg/person/year.

Source: INSSE – Food Balance Sheets (Indicator: Average annual per capita food consump-
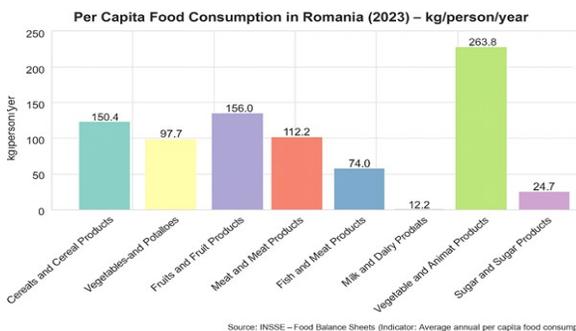
This structure, illustrated in *Figure 1 – Per capita food consumption in Romania (2023)*, confirms the persistence of a traditional dietary pattern based on a mix of plant and animal products. At the same time, a slight increase in meat and dairy consumption can be observed, associated with post-pandemic economic recovery and improvements in household living standards. The evolution of food consumption between 2021 and 2022 (as shown in *Figure 2 – Evolution of per capita food consumption in Romania*) reveals a general trend of stabilization, with moderate fluctuations during the pandemic years. In 2020, there was a temporary decline in fruit and vegetable consumption, mainly due to mobility restrictions, supply chain disruptions, and higher prices for fresh produce. Conversely, the 2021–2023 period marks a gradual recovery, supported by the resumption of economic activities and the adaptation of consumer behavior.

Source, INSSE Food BalancSheets (Indicator: A verage annual per, apita food consumption kurpetoi)
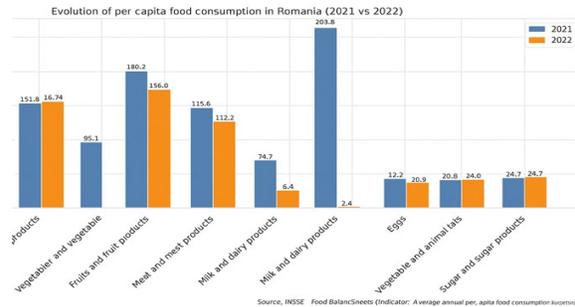
Across major food groups, the data suggest a slow transition toward a more diversified diet, though consumption remains strongly influenced by economic factors. The moderate increase in meat, dairy, and egg consumption reflects both improved disposable incomes and a preference for foods perceived as "safe" in times of uncertainty. Meanwhile, the stagnation in sugar and fat consumption may indicate rising awareness of nutritional risks and the positive influence of health education campaigns (Mureșan, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on food consumption behavior. Previous research (Dumitras et al., 2021; Bran et al., 2021) indicates that Romanian consumers exhibited a clear shift toward staple foods and reduced shopping frequency, particularly in urban areas. Among low-income households, economic uncertainty and mobility restrictions led to simplified dietary patterns, with increased reliance on inexpensive, long-shelf-life products such as bread, potatoes, and canned goods. In contrast, higher-income households displayed more selective and health-oriented food choices, preferring local, organic products and online purchases. This polarization underscores a growing fragmentation of the Romanian food market, where income disparities play an increasingly decisive role in shaping dietary behavior.

After 2022, economic recovery overlapped with food inflation and rising energy costs, creating new constraints on consumption. According to Eurostat (2023) and the World Bank (2023), Romania recorded some of the highest food price increases within the European Union,

significantly affecting the ability of vulnerable households to maintain a balanced diet. The direct consequence of this trend was a decline in meat and fruit consumption among lower-income segments and a corresponding increase in the share of staple foods such as cereals, potatoes, and vegetable oils. Consequently, the post-pandemic dynamics of food consumption appear to reflect adaptive economic strategies rather than voluntary lifestyle changes.

The results suggest that disposable income, price dynamics, and nutritional education are the main determinants of food consumption patterns in Romania. While the overall dietary structure remains relatively stable, a gradual divergence between urban and rural models of consumption is becoming evident. Urban consumers show greater openness toward healthy, local, and sustainable products, whereas rural households continue to favor traditional, locally sourced, or home-produced foods.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of food consumption trends in Romania between 2015 and 2023 reveals a relatively stable dietary structure, yet a slow progression toward diversification, influenced by economic, social, and cultural factors. The COVID-19 pandemic marked a major turning point, temporarily altering purchasing and eating behaviors, widening income-based disparities, and exposing household vulnerability to economic uncertainty. The post-pandemic period has been characterized by strong inflationary pressures, which have constrained access to high-quality food and maintained a high share of food expenditure within household budgets. Nevertheless, a gradual transition toward more conscious and sustainable food consumption can be observed, supported by income growth, the digitalization of food retail, and increasing interest in local and health-oriented products.

The findings confirm that the main determinants of food consumption in Romania are disposable income, price dynamics, and nutritional education. Moreover, a clear divide between urban and rural environments is evident, reflected both in food preferences and in access to diverse and safe products.

Looking ahead, there is a need to develop integrated public policies that ensure equitable access to healthy food, promote local production and short supply chains, enhance nutritional education, and reduce food waste. The consolidation of food security in Romania depends on the ability of institutions and society to balance the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the national food system.

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