

EMPLOYMENT IN INDUSTRY: AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF REINDUSTRIALIZATION IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the evolution of industrial employment in Romania over the period 1991–2023, contextualizing it within broader European structural transformations and the current debates on reindustrialization. Industrial employment remains a key indicator of economic structure and productive capacity, and its dynamics offer insight into both competitiveness and long-term development trajectories. Using comparative analysis based on World Bank data, the study highlights Romania’s distinctive path, marked by a sharp decline in industrial employment during the 1990s, followed by a partial reindustrialization and subsequent stabilization.*

The findings underscore Romania’s persistent reliance on industry relative to both Western and Eastern European benchmarks, suggesting both competitive advantages and structural vulnerabilities in the context of the green and digital transitions. The paper concludes that sustaining industrial employment will depend on investments in technology, skills, and innovation, essential for strengthening long-term economic resilience and convergence

Keywords: *European Union, Romania, industry, employment.*

JEL Classification: *E24, O14, Q01.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, industry has once again emerged as a central theme in debates on economic development, competitiveness, and the resilience of European economies. After a prolonged period during which many European states experienced processes of deindustrialization, economic and political discourse has increasingly shifted toward the idea of reindustrialization. Within the European Union, reindustrialization has come to be regarded as an essential instrument for supporting smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. Industry is no longer assessed solely in terms of its direct contribution to value added, but also through its spillover effects on other sectors, particularly services, research and development, logistics, and trade. In this sense, reindustrialization does not imply a simple return to traditional productive structures; rather, it refers to a transformation of the industrial base through

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technological upgrading, innovation, digitalization, and integration into value chains with higher technological intensity. Thus, the new European industry is associated not only with production itself, but also with the capacity to generate productivity gains, export performance, better-qualified jobs, and a stronger competitive position on international markets.

For Romania, the issue of reindustrialization is particularly relevant, given the profound transformations the country has undergone since 1990. The transition to a market economy was accompanied by major industrial restructuring, factory closures, a massive reduction in industrial employment, and a reconfiguration of the economy's productive profile. In many cases, deindustrialization was not the natural outcome of a shift toward an advanced post-industrial economy; rather, it was premature in nature, marked by the loss of productive capacity, the weakening of local industrial ecosystems, and the widening of territorial disparities. At the same time, European integration, the attraction of foreign direct investment, and the development of sectors such as the automotive industry, electrical and electronic components, manufacturing, and other export-oriented activities contributed to the emergence of new industrial hubs.

In this context, Romania's reindustrialization cannot be understood as a mere restoration of its former industrial structure, but rather as a process of rebuilding and modernizing productive capacities in line with new technological, environmental, and competitive requirements. It entails strengthening industrial sectors with high potential, increasing domestic value added, reducing external dependencies in strategic areas, and developing a productive base capable of sustaining long-term economic growth. Moreover, under current conditions, reindustrialization is closely linked to the Romanian economy's ability to capitalize on the opportunities created by the green transition, digitalization, the reconfiguration of global production chains, and European industrial policies.

A central element of this discussion is industrial employment. Its importance for economic development stems, first, from the fact that industrial jobs are generally associated with higher levels of productivity than those found in many low-value-added activities. Second, industry has a strong capacity to generate indirect employment effects through demand for logistics services, maintenance activities, research and development, local suppliers, and commercial networks. Third, industrial employment contributes to the formation of technical and technological human capital, thereby supporting innovation and long-term competitiveness. At the same time, the relationship between reindustrialization and employment is far from straightforward. Industrial development can create new job opportunities, revitalize regions affected by economic decline, and reduce dependence on low-productivity sectors. However, today's industrial modernization is also accompanied by automation, digitalization, and organizational change, all of which reduce demand for low-skilled labor while increasing requirements for technical, digital, and adaptive skills. Consequently, the success of reindustrialization should not be assessed solely by the number of jobs created, but also by their quality, occupational structure, qualification requirements, contractual stability, and contribution to economic convergence and social cohesion.

Against this background, the paper aims to analyze the evolution of industrial employment in Romania from the perspective of reindustrialization, using a comparative approach. The study examines Romania's trajectory in relation to the EU average and to the average of Eastern European countries, in order to identify similarities, divergences, and the broader implications of these developments for long-term economic sustainability.

2. REINDUSTRIALIZATION AND INDUSTRIAL EMPLOYMENT: CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Over the past two decades, reindustrialization has once again become a central theme in the European debate on the model of economic growth, competitiveness, and strategic autonomy. After a prolonged period during which many European economies underwent processes of deindustrialization, reflected in the declining share of industry in gross value added and employment, European institutions began to regard the strengthening of the industrial base as an essential condition for economic resilience, innovation, and adaptation to the green and digital transitions (European Commission, 2017). Within this new vision, reindustrialization does not signify a return to traditional productive structures, but rather the development of a modern industry that is more technologically advanced, less energy-intensive, and better integrated into European and global value chains (European Commission, 2017). Reindustrialization is also linked to restoring Europe's capacity to generate productive and competitive jobs in a global context shaped by geopolitical pressures, technological competition, and the reconfiguration of supply chains (European Commission, 2026).

For Romania, the issue of reindustrialization is particularly relevant, as the economic transformations that followed 1990 were accompanied by a profound process of industrial restructuring. The transition to a market economy involved the closure or downsizing of many industrial enterprises, a sharp decline in industrial employment, and the fragmentation of productive ecosystems built during the previous period. Deindustrialization in Romania was abrupt and deeply disruptive, being accompanied by the dismantling of local economies, urban decline, and the widening of regional and socioeconomic disparities (Popescu, 2021).

However, Romania's trajectory cannot be reduced to only industrial decline. Following its accession to the European Union, integration into the single market, foreign direct investment, and the expansion of sectors such as the automotive industry, electrical equipment, metal processing, and other export-oriented segments contributed to the emergence of new industrial poles. The OECD notes that the industrial sector remains a major employer in Romania, with a significant share of industrial employment concentrated in the automotive industry and its related activities (OECD, 2021). At the same time, World Bank highlights that productivity dynamics and the reallocation of resources toward more efficient firms have played an important role in the transformation of the Romanian economy, including in industry (World Bank, 2020).

In this context, Romania's reindustrialization must be understood as a process of modernizing and strengthening the productive base, rather than as a mere restoration of the former industrial structure. Such an approach entails a shift toward activities with higher value added, greater technological intensity, stronger innovation capacity, and deeper integration into European value chains. Reindustrialization is also closely linked to the broader objectives of European economic policy: decarbonization, economic security, digitalization, and skills development. In Romania's case, these objectives take on additional significance, as they intersect with the need for real convergence, the reduction of regional disparities, and the consolidation of sustainable economic growth (European Commission, 2023)

The importance of industrial employment for economic development stems, first and foremost, from the fact that jobs in the industrial sector are generally associated with higher levels of productivity than those found in many low-value-added activities. Second, industry has a significant capacity to generate indirect employment effects through demand for logistics services, maintenance activities, research and development, local suppliers, and commercial networks. Third, industrial employment contributes to the development of technical and technological human capital, thereby supporting innovation and long-term competitiveness (OECD, 2025).

Moreover, the relationship between reindustrialization and employment is a complex one. Industrial development can create new job opportunities, revitalize regions affected by economic decline, and help reduce dependence on low-productivity sectors. However, today's industrial modernization is accompanied by automation, digitalization, and organizational change, all of which reduce demand for low-skilled labor while increasing requirements for technical, digital, and adaptive skills. Consequently, the success of reindustrialization should not be assessed solely by the number of jobs created, but also by their quality, the level of qualifications required, contractual stability, and their capacity to support economic convergence and social cohesion (OECD, 2025).

3. INDUSTRIAL EMPLOYMENT IN ROMANIA: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

For Romania, industry has traditionally constituted a central pillar of the economy, making a significant contribution to exports, productivity, and employment. However, the transition to a market economy, integration into the European Union, and the increasingly pronounced shift toward services and technology have brought about profound changes in the structure of employment. In this context, comparing Romanian trends with the EU average makes it possible to highlight structural differences, the pace of adjustment, and the challenges associated with industrial modernization. The comparative analysis therefore seeks to capture the evolution of the share of employment in industry, the differences in dynamics between Romania and the EU average, as well as their implications for economic convergence and the sustainability of industrial growth in the medium and long term. For cross-country comparison, the paper uses the World Bank indicator 'employment in industry', while selected national and Eurostat references are used for contextual interpretation; these classifications are not fully identical and should be interpreted with caution.

The evolution of industrial employment in Romania after 1990 reflects one of the most profound structural transformations of the national economy. At the beginning of the transition, Romania inherited a highly industrialized economic structure, characteristic of the socialist development model, in which heavy industry, machinery manufacturing, metallurgy, chemicals, and other energy-intensive branches played a dominant role in both employment and gross domestic product. The transition to a market economy, however, brought about a major rupture: price liberalization, trade openness, the collapse of traditional external markets, the loss of competitiveness among a large number of enterprises, and delays in corporate governance reforms triggered a rapid process of industrial contraction and employment decline. The specialized literature shows that, in Romania, the deindustrialization of the 1990s was not merely a gradual decline in the share of industry, as was typical of advanced economies, but rather an abrupt and disruptive process with significant social and territorial effects. Thus, during the 1990s, the dramatic loss of industrial jobs was accompanied by an increase in employment in agriculture, indicating an atypical reallocation of labor, directed more toward subsistence activities than toward modern services, as occurred in other European economies undergoing transformation (OECD, 2008).

The first stage, corresponding roughly to the years 1990–1996, can be characterized as a period of productive disorganization and incomplete adjustment. Structural reforms were slow, and many state-owned industrial enterprises continued to operate under conditions of low efficiency, high losses, and dependence on public support. The World Bank noted that effective industrial restructuring began late, being delayed by strategies aimed at temporarily protecting non-competitive sectors and by the slow pace of privatization (World Bank, 2004).

The second stage, broadly situated between 1997 and 2006, was marked by accelerated restructuring and gradual adaptation to the requirements of European integration. During this

period, pressures related to macroeconomic stabilization, the conditionalities associated with the accession process, and the need to enhance competitiveness led to the closure or downsizing of a significant number of large enterprises, particularly in traditional industries. The European Commission's report on Romania's progress toward accession showed that restructuring advanced unevenly: some manufacturing sectors, such as textiles and clothing, furniture, and electrical equipment, performed better in exports, while other segments remained burdened by losses and incomplete reforms. Thus, the restructuring process was not linear; rather, it combined the necessary adjustment of non-competitive firms with the loss of a substantial share of productive capacity and the associated jobs (European Commission, 2004).

The cumulative outcome of the first two stages was the transition from an economy overspecialized in industry to a more diversified, yet also more fragile, structure in terms of social and territorial cohesion. The first decade of transition was characterized by a strong process of deindustrialization, reflected in the significant decline in the share of industry in both the economy and employment, with direct effects on sustainable development and labor market dynamics.

Romania's accession to the European Union on 1 January 2007 marked the beginning of a new stage, characterized not by a return to the previous industrial model, but by a recomposition of the industrial base. Integration into the single market, broader access to foreign direct investment, the strengthening of exports, and integration into European value chains fostered the development of more competitive manufacturing branches, particularly in the automotive industry, electrical and electronic components, furniture, machinery, and other export-oriented activities. The World Bank shows that Romania's economy underwent a structural transformation in the 2000s and 2010s, shifting from a base dominated by heavy industry toward a new combination of trade-integrated manufacturing and services, in the context of greater openness to investment and competition (World Bank, 2024). In other words, after accession, Romanian industry became more connected to external markets and more productive in certain segments, though not necessarily more labor-intensive.

In the years following accession, changes in the industrial sector were also influenced by the 2008–2009 economic crisis, which affected external demand, investment, and output. The subsequent recovery was driven primarily by firms and sectors already integrated into international production networks, thereby favoring a more selective model of industrial growth. European reports and competitiveness analyses indicate that the structure of Romania's economy has remained relatively more industrial than that of many other Member States.

Recent trends confirm that industry continues to play an important role in the employment structure, even though the economy is now far more service-oriented than it was in the 1990s. National statistical data show that, in 2024, the secondary sector, which includes industry and construction, accounted for 32.6% of total employment, while services represented 56.1% and agriculture 11.3% (NIS, 2025). These data suggest that Romania still retains a relatively significant employment base in the productive sector, but also that the long-term trend is one of a declining relative share of industry in favor of services. At the European level, manufacturing nevertheless remains a major employer, with around 30.2 million people employed across the EU in 2023, confirming that the issue is not the disappearance of industry, but rather the transformation of its organizational form, technological intensity, and occupational profile (European Commission, 2025).

Overall, the long-term analysis shows that the evolution of Romania's industrial sector after 1990 can be summarized in three major phases: a period of abrupt deindustrialization in the 1990s, a phase of restructuring and competitive selection in the pre-accession period, and a phase of post-accession industrial recomposition based on European integration, foreign investment, and export-oriented specialization. This trajectory highlights the fact that Romania's reindustrialization, in its contemporary sense, can be defined by the strengthening

of competitive industrial branches, the improvement in job quality, and the expansion of productive sectors capable of generating higher value added.

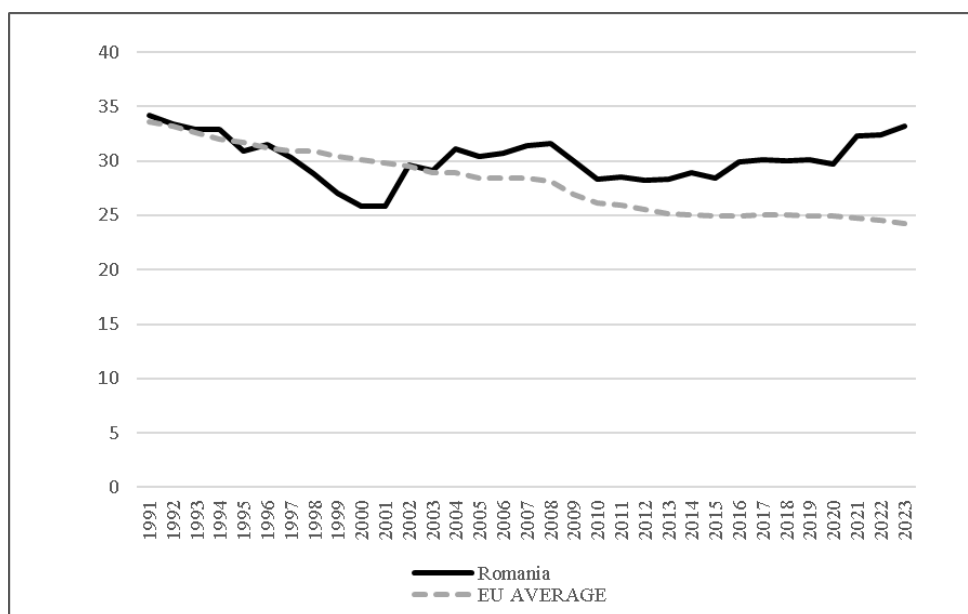
Romania vs. the EU average

As regards the employed population, Romania's industrial sector accounts for a share similar to that of neighboring countries, substantially higher than the EU average or that of countries such as Germany or France. At the same time, however, one in five employed persons works in the agricultural sector (Government of Romania, 2023).

Figure 1 reveals notable differences in the dynamics of the two series, reflecting both the particular features of Romania's economic transition and the structural trends observed at the European level.

Between 1991 and 2000, Romania recorded a sharp decline in industrial employment, from over 33% to approximately 25%. This abrupt contraction can be explained by the process of deindustrialization associated with the post-communist transition, marked by the restructuring or closure of state-owned enterprises, the loss of international competitiveness in certain traditional industrial branches, and the migration of a significant share of the labor force toward subsistence agriculture or the informal economy (Ciutacu et al., 2015).

Figure 1. Industrial employment evolution in Romania vs. the EU average (%)



Source: Author's calculations based on World Bank data, (World Bank, 2025).

The period 2000–2008 marks an industrial recovery in Romania, reflected in a slight increase and stabilization of the industrial employment share at around 30–32%. This development was driven by the massive inflow of foreign direct investment, particularly in the automotive industry and related sectors, as well as by Romania's integration into European value chains in the context of its preparation for and accession to the European Union. Unlike Romania, the European average continued to decline slowly, thereby widening the structural gap between the two series.

The global economic crisis of 2008–2009 also had negative effects on industrial employment in Romania, which temporarily declined to 28–29%. Nevertheless, the level remained consistently above the EU average, confirming that the structure of the Romanian economy continued to be more dependent on industry compared with the more developed Member States, where the tertiary sector had already become the main source of employment (INS, 2025).

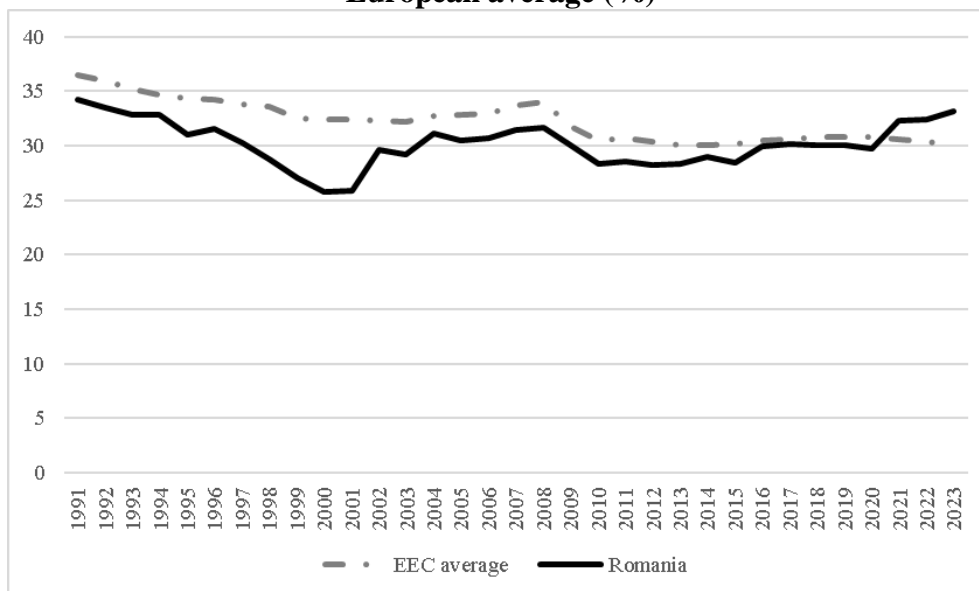
Between 2014 and 2023, Romania recorded a consolidation of industrial employment, once again reaching levels close to 33% in 2023. This contrasting trend, compared with the EU average—which continued to decline to approximately 24%—highlights a structural divergence: Romania remains more industrialized in terms of employment than the European average. This situation may represent a competitive advantage in the short and medium term, through industrial specialization and the attraction of investment in production, but also a structural vulnerability in the long run, given the transition toward a green and digital economy, which implies a reorientation of employment toward sectors with higher value added.

In conclusion, the comparative analysis reveals a complex process: Romania went through a phase of accelerated deindustrialization in the 1990s, followed by a partial reindustrialization and a consolidation of industrial employment after joining the European Union, while the European Member States followed a trajectory of steadily reducing the share of industry in the employment structure.

Romania vs. the average of Eastern European countries

Compared with the average of Eastern European countries (EEC)—a region that includes economies such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Bulgaria—the analysis highlights differences in the pace and depth of structural transformation, determined by the national specificities of transition, industrial policies, and the capacity to attract foreign investment.

Figure 2. Industrial employment evolution in Romania vs. the Eastern European average (%)



Source: Author's calculations based on World Bank data, (World Bank, 2025).

Throughout the entire period under review, a general downward trend in industrial employment can be observed, both in Romania and in the EEC average. This decline reflects the structural transformation of the economies in the region, characterized by the large-scale restructuring and privatization of state-owned enterprises after 1990; the transition to a market economy, which reduced the role of the traditional industrial sector; the growing share of services and sectors based on technology and trade; and the gradual integration into European production chains, with significant effects on employment dynamics.

In Romania, the curve indicates a sharp decline in industrial employment during the period 1990–2000, followed by a phase of relative stability. By the 2000s, the share of employment in industry had fallen from approximately 34% to nearly 25%, against the backdrop of the mass closure of non-competitive state-owned enterprises, the loss of industrial jobs, and the migration of labor toward other sectors or abroad. This process coincided with the profound restructuring of heavy industry, particularly in the steel, chemical, and mining sectors. During the period 2001–2008, a modest recovery in industrial employment can be observed, driven by foreign direct investment and the revival of export-oriented industries, especially in the automotive and electronics sectors. Unfortunately, the global economic crisis led to a new decline in industrial employment as a result of reduced external demand and layoffs in large enterprises. The post-crisis period marks a stabilization of employment at around 29–31%, followed by a slight increase in recent years, driven by a shift toward industries with higher value added and the relocation of certain European production capacities to Romania. Overall, Romanian industry has undergone a slow process of structural rebalancing, in which the loss of employment in traditional industries has been partially offset by the expansion of modern sectors and export-oriented manufacturing.

For the Eastern European countries average, a similar but less abrupt trajectory can be observed. In the 1990s, industrial employment stood at approximately 36–37%, gradually declining to around 30% after 2010. This more balanced evolution can be explained by the more gradual pace of industrial reforms in some Central European states, the early attraction of Western investment, which contributed to the modernization of production capacities, and the preservation of a diversified industrial base, particularly in the Czech Republic and Poland, where industry continued to serve as a central pillar of the economy. Thus, the Eastern European average recorded a controlled decline in employment, followed by stabilization after 2010 at around 30–31%.

A comparative analysis of industrial employment in Romania and the Eastern European average shows that Romania experienced a sharper decline in the early years of transition, reflecting a more difficult and delayed restructuring process compared with its Central European neighbors. After the 2000s, however, the gap relative to the Eastern average gradually narrowed, reaching similar levels in the last decade, a sign that Romania's industrial structure has partially aligned with regional trends. Nevertheless, the share of industrial employment remains slightly above the Eastern European average, suggesting a continued reliance on the manufacturing sector and a productive structure more oriented toward medium-technology industries. Looking ahead, the maintenance and expansion of industrial employment will depend on investment in technology, technical education, and digitalization—factors that are essential for strengthening economic competitiveness and achieving sustainable convergence with the average of Eastern European countries.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the evolution of industrial employment shows that, over the period 1991–2023, Romania followed a distinct trajectory in comparison with both the EU average and the average of Eastern European countries. The structural transformations that took place after 1990 were profound, and their effects on the industrial labor market reflected the specific features of Romania's transition to a market economy: pronounced deindustrialization in the initial phase, difficult restructuring, and subsequently a partial reconstruction of the productive base, especially under the impact of European integration and foreign investment.

The findings of the paper indicate that the decline in industrial employment during the 1990s was not merely a natural economic adjustment, but rather a severe process with broad economic, social, and territorial implications. The reduction in industrial jobs was accompanied

by the loss of significant productive capacities, the weakening of local industrial ecosystems, and the widening of regional imbalances. In this respect, Romania's experience confirms that premature deindustrialization can affect not only the structure of the economy, but also long-term development prospects, especially when it is not rapidly offset by the expansion of modern, high-productivity sectors.

At the same time, unlike many Western European countries, where the decline in industrial employment accompanied the consolidation of service-based economies dominated by advanced activities, in Romania industry has continued to occupy a relatively important place in the employment structure. This suggests that the industrial sector remains a relevant pillar of the national economy, both through its contribution to exports and productivity and through its role in maintaining a productive base capable of supporting economic convergence. From this perspective, the still relatively high level of industrial employment may be interpreted both as a competitive advantage and as a sign of structural vulnerabilities, insofar as part of Romania's industrial specialization remains concentrated in medium-value-added segments that are highly sensitive to external shocks.

The comparison with the EU average and with the average of Eastern European countries shows that Romania has gradually moved closer to regional trends while preserving a more strongly industrialized profile in terms of employment. This positioning confirms the existence of a partial reindustrialization process, understood not as a return to the old industrial model, but as a reconfiguration of the productive structure through the development of more competitive sectors better integrated into European value chains. Even so, the reindustrialization observed in Romania remains incomplete, since it has not translated evenly into higher domestic value added, the expansion of high-technology activities, or the consolidation of a sufficiently robust innovation base.

Another conclusion emerging from the analysis is that the relationship between reindustrialization and employment should not be viewed exclusively in quantitative terms. In the current context, shaped by digitalization, automation, and the green transition, the relevance of industry can no longer be assessed solely by the number of jobs it generates, but also by their quality, the level of skills they require, and their capacity to support productivity and innovation. Consequently, the future of industrial employment in Romania will depend not only on maintaining a solid manufacturing base, but also on modernizing it through investment in technology, research, digitalization, and vocational training.

Overall, the paper confirms that reindustrialization can represent a viable direction for Romania's economic development, but only insofar as it is supported by coherent and strategically oriented public policies. The strengthening of industry must be aligned with the broader objectives of competitiveness, strategic autonomy, sustainability, and territorial cohesion. Romania has the opportunity to capitalize on the advantages of a still significant industrial base, but this opportunity can be transformed into lasting economic progress only by shifting toward higher value-added sectors, encouraging innovation, and adapting human capital to new technological requirements.

Therefore, the main conclusion of the research is that industry continues to play an essential role in the Romanian economy, and employment in this sector remains a relevant indicator for understanding the country's development trajectory. Romania is not faced with a choice between industry and services, but rather with the need to build a more balanced economic structure in which modern industry functions as a foundation for sustainable growth, resilience, and European convergence. From this perspective, reindustrialization is an important component of a more robust development model, better aligned with the demands of the contemporary economy.

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