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Bodies on Edge and Bodies in Transit: Romanian Contemporary Dance in an Age of Uncertainty, a Fragile Present, and a Contested Future

Camelia Lenart

Department of History, State University of New York at Albany, Albany, NY 12222, USA; ilenart@albany.edu

Abstract

On 24 February 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine intensified a broader sense of precarity across Eastern Europe, including Romania, and longstanding anxieties related to threat, instability, and loss—rooted in the Cold War past—resurfaced with renewed urgency. This article examines how, since 1989, Romanian contemporary dance has responded to these conditions, functioning as a site for expressing and processing the physical and emotional "edginess" of the body and psyche in the post-socialist present. Drawing on archival research, audiovisual materials, and interviews, the study argues that Romanian contemporary dance operates across multiple temporalities. Looking to the past, it preserves and reactivates the memory of bodies that shaped its history, resisting their erasure amid shifting national and transnational identities. Rooted in the present, dancers and institutions navigate a fragile social terrain marked by regional conflict, migration, economic instability, and ongoing debates surrounding diversity and gender. At the same time, they confront the resurgence of nationalist, xenophobic, and exclusionary discourses within Romanian society. Through performance, pedagogy, institutional initiatives, and collaborative projects, contemporary dance in Romania emerges as a critical space of reflection and intervention, actively engaging social tensions while contributing to the reimagining of political and cultural futures.

Keywords: contemporary dance; Romania; eastern Europe; post-socialist studies; embodiment; dance and politics; migration; borders; cultural memory

1. Introduction

This article examines the development of Romanian dance after 1989, the year that marked the fall of the Iron Curtain. It focuses on how Romanian dancing bodies "on edge" confronted the destabilizing social, political, and cultural changes taking place both within the country and beyond its borders, and how these transformations shaped their personal and artistic responses as members of a society transitioning from a dictatorial regime to a democratic one, as well as emerging European and global citizens.

The study focuses primarily on contemporary dance for two reasons. First, it builds on previous research on Romanian modern dance, which has examined the form's resistance and survival under two Romanian dictatorships—the pro-Nazi regime (1940–1944) and the communist regime (1944–1989)—and explored how totalitarian systems objectified and instrumentalized the art form and the dancers' bodies and minds for political purposes, while also highlighting the capacity of art and artists to endure political and social trauma.[1]

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Second, modern dance-referred to in Romania as contemporary dance-most clearly articulates the power of the social body and embodied resistance, not only through its techniques and forms, but also through its aesthetics and social philosophy, in response to the political, social, and cultural constraints that followed the end of communism.

The analysis begins with the transitional period following the end of communism, when dancers explored uncensored forms of expression through movement, revealing how political change reshaped and expanded the kinesthetic relationship between dancers and Romanian society. It also examines how established dancers from the communist period reconfigured their careers, bridging the pre- and post-1989 eras, and how previously interdicted choreographic works became available to the public.

The article then considers how contemporary dance increasingly became a force within Romanian society, particularly during the first decade after 1989, when practitioners pushed beyond previously confining political and personal boundaries. They began to travel and collaborate with international artists, established their own companies, explored personal histories of resistance and adaptation, and turned to social issues as sources for new choreographies. Attention is given to works addressing disability, a taboo subject during the communist period. The analysis of the decades following 2000 shows how contemporary dance embodied the tensions Romanians experienced in relation to both the physical and mental dimensions of borders as the country became part of the European Union and NATO. While changing borders were liberating, they also brought new pressures on society, particularly through migration to the West—dynamics reflected in contemporary dance in Romania. Through collaborative projects, including the organization of international festivals, contemporary dance also engaged with questions of diversity and feminism, topics often perceived as problematic and tense within Romanian society.

At the same time, the article reflects on the increasingly precarious position of contemporary dance within Romanian society. Ongoing economic difficulties, wars in Romania's near and wider proximity, and a polarized society—parts of which are becoming increasingly nationalistic and anti-democratic—have contributed to this instability. For some, contemporary dance appears as a destabilizing force. Yet, despite these challenges, it continues to adapt and resist, transforming the tensions of Romanian bodies and psyches into a creative and generative force.

2. Courageous Citizens and Bodies on Edge: History, Society, and Change in Post-1989 Romania

On 15 May 2025, the National Center for Dance in Bucharest recommended on its Facebook page the book *Courageous Citizens: How Culture Contributes to Social Change*. The volume highlights individuals whose contributions help shape a collective future, and for whom culture and democracy form the foundations of vision and action, while also examining the potential of culture to foster positive social transformation. For the readers unaware of the broader context, this recommendation may have appeared innocuous. For others, however, it resonated strongly with a pivotal moment then unfolding: just three days later, Romanians were preparing to elect their president following the annulment of the 2024 presidential election amid allegations of Russian interference. Although barred from the May 2025 election, the pro-Russian candidate endorsed an extremist Romanian party leader in the new race, who was eventually defeated—though by a relatively narrow margin—by Nicușor Dan, an independent politician and former mayor of Bucharest. Dan received support from members of the Romanian artistic community, including the dancer and choreographer Cosmin Manolescu, who appeared in a video supporting his 2012 mayoral campaign. The campaign's slogan, "against their system," signaled a stance

opposing corruption, communist nostalgia, and entrenched political structures, aligning civic activism with broader societal concerns.[2]

Taking place just a few years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the turbulent elections had a very powerful impact on the Romanians, making them reflect anxiously on the fragility as well as the safety of national and personal borders. Combined with the unstable internal milieu which characterized Romania's post-1989 developments following the end of the Cold War, these complex circumstances acted as socio-cultural stressors, negatively impacting the Romanians, their bodies, and emotional lives. Drawing on Randy Martin's conceptualization of the body as socially constructed through practice, and emerging as a potential site of opposition, the article explores how, over more than three decades and through a range of artistic strategies, Romanian dance—its creation, performance, critical reflection, and social engagement—has acted as a catalyst for expressing and processing the physical and emotional edginess of the Romanian body and psyche (Martin 1990). Under communism, Romanian bodies were not outside politics but constituted through it, disciplined and regulated within a tightly controlled social choreography, as well as silenced. In post-1989 Romanian society, dance sought to restage the visibility and significance of Romanian bodies, asserting the legitimacy of their concerns and their capacity for action, while entering the broader political arena and unsettling inherited hierarchies of center and margin. The article analyzes how Romanian dancing bodies confronted the destabilizing social, political, and cultural changes unfolding both within the country and beyond its borders, and how these transformations shaped their personal and artistic responses as members of a society transitioning from dictatorship to democracy, as well as emerging European and global citizens.

The article employs historical analysis, performance analysis, and approaches drawn from dance studies and body studies. It considers dance as an embodied practice shaped by social, political, and cultural contexts, and examines how choreographic works engage with issues such as memory, migration, disability, and post-socialist transformation. Crossing the former East–West imaginary border and reconstructing the history of Romanian (post)socialist dance,[3] as yet unanalyzed, the article contributes primarily to the field of dance studies, particularly to scholarship focusing on Eastern Europe. A growing body of work by dance historians has addressed dance practices in this area, providing an important scholarly context for this study. Among the most relevant contributions are a couple of edited collections. *European Dance since 1989: Communitas and the Other* analyses the development of dance in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, emphasizing various aesthetic and ideological responses that emerged after the collapse of established cultural and institutional structures (Szymajda 2014). *Post-Socialist Dance: A Search for Hidden Legacies* makes a critical intervention in global dance studies (Assche et al. 2024), arguing for the recognition of overlooked or marginalized practices shaped by socialist and post-socialist histories (Nikulina 2025). *Bodies of Dance: Aspects of Dance as Cultural, Political, and Art Work in Yugoslavia and After* focuses only on one former Eastern European country but provides insightful perspectives on the development of dance in former Eastern bloc, as well as in the years which following its dissolution (Arhar and Založnik 2024).

The author proposes to contribute to the emerging literature regarding the post-socialist cultural and social history of Eastern Europe, demonstrating how the developments of Romanian contemporary dance intermingled with the broader political, social and cultural framework surrounding it. As the silenced bodies of people who lived under communism received scholarly attention, fewer studies focused on the bodies in the post-socialist context (Giersdorf 2013). The present work contributes to this emerging field within body studies, particularly by addressing issues such as disability, economic instability, and the precarity of the body within a still deeply gendered Romanian society. David A.

Kideckel's study *Getting By in Postsocialist Romania: Labor, the Body, and Working-Class Culture* enriches the understanding of the relationship between body and the post-socialist economies and consumerism (Kideckel 2008). The scholarly contributions from the edited collection *Disability and Labour in the Twentieth Century: Historical and Comparative Perspectives* offer dance historians valuable models of analysis of disability in post-1989 Eastern Europe, with a significant part of the collection being devoted to Romania (Dinu and Bengtsson 2023). The *Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women and Power in Modern Romania*, by Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu presents a pivotal insight into another complex issue in Romania: the role and importance of women in today's political, societal and civic developments of the country, as well as the challenges they continue to face (Bucur and Miroiu 2018). Cristina Modreanu's *Performing Womanhood in Eastern Europe: The Other White Woman* engages contemporary issues that continue to resonate within Eastern Europe's patriarchal landscape, exploring how the stage has emerged as a vital space for critical reflection and introspection, in which women's previously silenced voices are brought to the forefront (Modreanu 2021). The topic of gender, fragile institutions and difficulties of the post-1989 transition towards a democratic society was also discussed in *East Central Europe since 1989: Politics, Culture, and Society*, whose authors offer a model to the historian analyzing the complexity of the power plays between people and political power (Ramet and Stan 2017). The author's perspectives on Romanian emotional and embodied responses to the fluidity of physical and affective borders—shaped by migration, political transformations, and regional conflict—have been informed by the work of Joanna Szymajda and Anton Ovchinnikov, whose article analyzes dance in Ukraine since the beginning of the war, as well as by Dumitru Sandu, whose research reconceptualizes Romanian migration as a life strategy that reshapes social networks and generates transnational ties sustaining mobility and globalization (Sandu 2000, 2006).

This study combines archival research, analysis of audiovisual materials, and interviews to examine the development of Romanian (post)socialist dance. Primary sources include materials from the archive and audiovisual collection of the National Center for Dance Bucharest (Centrul Național al Dansului București, CNDB), which provided access to previously unexplored documents that shed new light on the dancers discussed in this article, including Miriam Răducanu, Ioan Tugearu, Sergiu Anghel, Adina Cezar, and artists who continued the Romanian dance tradition after 1989, particularly in the field of contemporary dance. The audiovisual collections of the National Library of Romania and the University Library of Bucharest were also essential to this research. Additional sources were consulted in international archives, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.[4]

Qualitative interviews with dancers, choreographers, critics, and scholars also inform the analysis. These include practitioners active both before and after 1989, such as Adina Cezar, Miriam Răducanu, and Ioan Tugearu, as well as figures who became prominent after 1989, including Cosmin Manolescu and Lorette Enache. The analysis also draws on an interview with the Nigerian-British dance researcher and practitioner Funmi Adewole Elliott, who has taught in Romania. Email correspondence with the Romanian dance critic Liana Tugearu, along with interviews with the curator of the CNDB archive, Corina Cimpoieru, provided additional perspectives and opened new avenues for research. Further insights were drawn from online interviews with contemporary dancers Mihai Mihalcea, Manuel Pelmuș, and Vava Ștefănescu, as well as from discussions with the Romanian theatre and music scholars Cristina Modreanu and Claudiu Oancea. The analysis also benefited from earlier collaborations with scholars Ioana Petcu-Pădurean and Sandra Mavhima, and from exchanges with the Polish scholar Joanna Szymajda and the Slovenian scholar Jasmina Založnik.

In addition to traditional historical methods, this study employs introspection to unpack personal memories and those of close interlocutors, incorporating reflexive engagement into the research process. The author trained at one of Romania's three state-sponsored *Licee de Coregrafie* (Schools of Choreography) and, for a period, worked as a dance practitioner in the country. Following relocation to the United States in 2000, the author remained engaged with the Romanian dance scene through professional networks, closely following its developments and, on visits to Romania, attending performances. More recently, the research has been informed by an extended period of residence in Romania in 2026, which enabled participant observation of post-1989 Romanian dance. Engagement with local media and cultural events further informed the analysis presented in this article.

2.1. Unbending Bodies: Romanian Dance from Socialist Stage to Free Expression

Just weeks after the violent 1989 Romanian Revolution, which ended the communist dictatorship, *Dance Magazine* interviewed Aglaie Gheorghe, principal dancer of the Romanian Opera in Bucharest. Gheorghe remembered the days and nights of the revolution, "with gunfire, helicopters drones, and heavy military," which were for her and the other Romanians a traumatic experience. When asked about the obstacles she had faced in the preceding years, Gheorghe characterized her professional experience largely in positive terms. But, at the same time, she emphasized that she had "never realized (her) full capacity" as a dancer, a limitation she implicitly attributed to the institutional and ideological constraints shaping artistic practice under the regime.

Gheorghe links the communist regime's years with a profound sense of isolation, noting that "we (Romanian dancers) were expelled from the international circuit, we felt the expulsion deeply." She voiced the hope of the Romanian dancers to "reenter the world of dance" and "to have access" to its opportunities, thus expressing professional aspiration and also a corporeal need for mobility and recognition. Her account points to disciplined and technically accomplished dancers working within tightly regulated systems that restricted artistic mobility, visibility, and exchange (Gheorghe 1990, p. 33). Memories of those years remain diffuse yet powerful. Training at one of the state-sponsored schools for choreography before 1989 was shaped by an acute awareness—rarely articulated but deeply felt—of the limitations the regime imposed on future careers, both physically and mentally. This awareness was carried in the body, persistently on edge.

Gheorghe often performed with Ioan Tugearu. A fascinating personality, Tugearu's body is one of the most important carriers of Romanian dance memory, encoding six decades of activity as a dancer, choreographer, and pedagogue.[5] Transiting the edges of recent Romanian history, Tugearu is a living archive, who also bridges Romania's pre-1989 ballet tradition with the contemporary dance landscape in which he remains very active. Reminding us of Angelin Preljocaj's perspective on dancers as "the scientists of the human body," (Preljocaj 2024), Tugearu sees his creative abilities from the perspective of science—"I am an inventor, like a physicist or a mathematician." He understands the twenty-first century as lived and "owned" history, sensed kinesthetically and articulated through movement. He describes himself as a man of "this" century, which he "feels in his body," embracing its exceptional velocity and intensity: "It's another world; this world moves in a mad, frenzied way." Rather than a rupture, he sees historical and political change as a source of momentum, describing himself as "choreographing a different movement" (Tugearu 2024).

In fact, Romanian dance practitioners and choreographers associated with what is often described as Romania's "golden age of ballet" do not express either a feeling of personal or professional displacement due to the change of regime, nor a strong sense of nostalgia for the communist period in which their careers unfolded. Instead, they articulate an understandable pride in their artistic trajectories and in their role as the

dancing bodies of Romania, as they were the cultural representatives of Romania abroad through international exchange.[6] They stress that the positive developments in dance stopped in the 1980s, when the darkest period in Romania's recent history began (Bachman 1989, p. 56). Social spending declined, healthcare cuts raised infant mortality rates, food shortages intensified, and Ceaușescu fostered an intense cult of personality (Deletant 2022, p. 212). Intellectuals and artists were expected to praise him, cultural exchange was very limited, and repression peaked, leaving Romanian dancers working within a tightly controlled cultural system shaped by enforced political kinesthetics.[7] However, rather than framing communism solely as a period of constraint, their narratives foreground resilience and heightened adaptability. Rather than viewing the fall of communism as an interruption to their personal histories and careers, they describe it as empowering, opening new avenues for artistic and professional development.

A "neo-classical modern" dancer, Tugearu continued performing after 1989. He founded the contemporary dance company Orion Balet, which functioned as a platform for a new generation of dancers, including Cosmin Manolescu and Mihai Mihalcea (Institutul Prezentului 2017), whose careers I discuss below. Ileana Iliescu, a leading ballerina before 1989, took over as director of the National Opera Ballet in Bucharest and, embodying a positive spirit, remarked, "For me, the curtain of life remains open."[8] More recently, she staged Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* for the National Opera in Iași, in collaboration with the "Maria Bieșu" National Opera and Ballet Theatre of Chișinău, Republic of Moldova, featuring an international cast that signaled the globalizing direction of Romanian dance (Adevărul 2016). The collaboration with the Chișinău Ballet Theatre also carried deep emotional weight, given Moldova's historical ties to Romania, its separation under Soviet rule in 1940, and subsequent independence at the end of the Cold War.[9] Reflecting on post-communist challenges, Iliescu affirms the power of dance to address this struggle: "We are losing our identity; we can find it again through ballet."[10]

The idea of rediscovering their identity through the arts became a centerpiece of the Romanian society post 1989, but rebuilding through the traditions of ballet was not the only option. Even if limited, before 1989 Romanian dance explored the modern and was tolerated by the regime, particularly during the short period retrospectively described as Romanian "trendy Communism."[11] Miriam Răducanu and her disciple Gigi Căciuleanu performed their series of *Nocturnes*, which opened the road for the rest of the Romanian non-ballet dancers of that time. The "intimate dialogues of music, verse, and movement-modern dance, jazz, and stylized Romanian folk dance" survived the axes of Communist censors, who perceived the works as "theatrical-dance" and thus acceptable.[12] Foreign dance companies also performed in Romania, including Alwin Nikolais in 1973, as well as companies led by Alvin Ailey in 1974 and 1979, Judith Jamison in 1977, Lar Lubovitch, the Rambert Company, and the Murray Louis Dance Company.[13]

Still, even during brief periods of relative relaxation, modern dance was viewed with suspicion, as the free movement of bodies was perceived as a threat to the regime. Choreographers and performers who engaged with it tested limits, contested norms, and embodied forms of freedom within a suppressed society, the body becoming a site of expression, experimentation, and resistance. These explorations impacted the audiences, attracting a committed public and laying the foundation for the further development of modern dance after 1989. A revealing example of how the bodies who experimented outside of ballet canons were perceived as problematic is the short film *În marea trecere* (*The Great Passage*). Filmed in 1970, and choreographed and performed by Miriam Raducanu, the work was banned by the communist regime.[14] It has recently become accessible to viewers and scholars, both in its original filmed version and through the 2019 reinterpretation by Mădălina Dan, presented in the exhibition *24 Arguments. Early Encounters in Romanian*

Neo-Avant-Garde 1969–1971, at the Romanian Institute of the Present.[15] Structured around Răducanu's work *Bocet*, the film interweaves readings from Lucian Blaga's poem of the same title with music performed by the Madrigal Choir, alongside the dancers. The film was created two years after a documentary about the ensemble received the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1968.

Striking in its visual impact and hauntingly beautiful, *În marea trecere* (*The Great Passage*) functions as an interdisciplinary synthesis of dance, poetry, and music, in which movement is rearticulated through cinematic form and can be read, both literally and metaphorically, as staging bodies on edge. The dancers, including Răducanu, wear white, black, and deep blue dresses and perform across two primary spaces. One is filmed in the studio, an imagined, abstract space, evoking the passage of time, where Răducanu, with only her palms and feet visible, performs *Bocet (Lament).* The second space is an abandoned industrial site, marked by concrete slabs, twisted metal, and dead trees, functioning as a stark performing ground. Here, her blue-clad body continues performing *Bocet* alongside the choir singers, whose presence evokes the *bocitoare* (the women who lament at funerals in the Romanian countryside), and moves along the edges of metal and stone, generating a vocabulary that is contorted, angular, and deliberately fractured. The choreography conveys intense corporeal and emotional precariousness through strained physicality unfolding within a stark, broken space. Loss becomes palpable as the bodies appear constrained by their surroundings, suggesting a profound helplessness in the face of political restriction and historical confinement. As mentioned, sensing its broader symbolic charge, *The Great Passage* was banned by communist censorship. Its contemporary recovery therefore functions not only as an artistic gesture and a reactivation of a once-silenced corporeal archive, but also as evidence of the body's capacity to internalize political constraint at a kinesthetic level and to rearticulate it as embodied dissent under political repression.

2.2. Modern Times and Modern Bodies: Opened Gates, Marginal(ity), and Disability

The Romanian dance luminaries discussed above shaped post-socialist dance practices and influenced the trajectories of a new generation of dancers and choreographers emerging after 1989. This "new wave" of artists embraced the opportunities brought by the regime change while working within a transformed political and socio-cultural context, marked by limited professional stability and the challenges of Romania's transition to democracy. At the same time, this period was imbued with vibrant energy. As they recalled, "We wanted to feel and express the new century's energy and rhythm," viewing artistic creation as an exchange of ideas, among themselves, with the public, and within the broader artistic community.[16] As Vava Ștefănescu, dancer, choreographer, and director of today's National Center for Dance in Bucharest (hereafter CNDB), noted, the 1990s saw the emergence of social kinesthetics through intense collaboration among young Romanian dancers, who shared a sense of responsibility toward their audiences and a solidarity she considers unique within the post-1989 dance scene (Ieri–Azi–Mâine 2016).

Post-1989 Romania opened to Europe and the wider world, while also attracting increased international engagement. Beginning in 1990, *La danse en voyage*, a French Romanian cultural exchange project, brought French choreographers, such as Angelin Preljocaj, Karine Saporta, Joseph Nadj, Mathilde Monnier, and Christine Bastin, to Romania to teach, perform, and lead workshops. Bastin, as Cosmin Manolescu recalled, helped him "unedge" the body, freeing movement. At the same time, Manolescu and his peers began working with the young French choreographer Christian Trouillas and traveled to Paris (Ieri–Azi–Mâine 2016). Other Romanian dancers increasingly traveled abroad to study, especially to the United States. In the early 1990s, dancer and choreographer Sergiu Anghel and ballerina Corina Dumitrescu studied at the American Dance Festival. Charles Reinhart,

the festival's director, also visited Romania and invited the contemporary troupe Marginalii (The Marginals) to perform there in 1994. That same year, the American choreographer Amy Pivar presented *Requiem* in Romania, depicting the horrors of communism from an outsider's perspective.[17] Gigi Căciuleanu, a prominent Romanian dancer and choreographer, active abroad, returned to Romania and began collaborating with local dancers. For his work *Hohotind în ritm (Laughing in Rhythm)*, he collaborated with Simona Șomăcescu, Răzvan Mazilu, and Florin Fieroiu, reflecting the emerging dialogue between classical training and contemporary performance practices in Romania.[18]

However, immediately following the December 1989 Revolution, the sense of danger and insecurity did not disappear from Romanian society. The provisional government, installed to lead the country until the first free elections in decades, faced intense criticism, ushering in what soon became known as the "decade of discontent" of the 1990s. Protests marked the first months of democratic Romania, as people demanded the removal of so-called "neo-communists" and former members of the secret police (Securitate) from the new government. As anti-government protests intensified in Bucharest's University Square, the government brought thousands of miners from the Jiu Valley to confront the protesters, leading to violent clashes repeated throughout 1990, while the rest of Romania, as well as international audiences, watched broadcasts on state television. The 1990s were also marked by the absence of profound economic reforms, endemic corruption, and the lack of transparency, while a strident discourse, combining anti-Semitic, anti-Western, anti-market and anti-establishment themes, resurfaced in Romanian politics and society (Tismăneanu 2011).

Romanian dancers experienced these realities organically, resisting the specter of neo-communism while embracing new artistic freedoms and exploring the kinesthetic dimensions of social challenges. Cosmin Manolescu, present at the protests in University Square, co-founded in 1992 the contemporary group Marginalii (The Marginals) with Irina Costea, Florin Fieroiu, and Mihai Mihalcea, after graduating from the Choreographic High School in Bucharest. One of their first works, *Wingless Butterflies*, evoked the post-socialist uncertainties of bodies negotiating new freedoms amid institutional absence, social uncertainty, and economic precarity (Ieri–Azi–Mâine 2016). Through collaborative exploration, the group Marginalii developed movement vocabularies that translated these uncertainties into corporeal inquiry, functioning as a kinesthetic laboratory in which its members combined physical experimentation, interdisciplinary performance, and techniques associated with contact work. Characterized by fluid partnering, weight sharing, physical responsiveness, and an expanded exploration of the body's relationship to space and other bodies, this choreographic language departed from the codified aesthetics of socialist-era dance. The body's continual negotiation of balance, support, and vulnerability echoed the instability and uncertainty of the post-socialist condition, while the rejection of prescribed movement conventions articulated new possibilities for freedom, agency, and resistance. In this sense, the body became both the medium and the site through which social and political transformation was explored.

As the group recalled, their work was deeply rewarding, "opening and connecting the dance with people," despite mentors' concerns that "they were destroying the audiences."[19] Their explorations also fostered self-discovery.[20] Costea later noted, "I was not a swan," signaling a move away from classical dance toward a more authentic self. Mihalcea emphasized that the group enabled free expression within a "non-hierarchical, no-pressure" structure; Fieroiu found authenticity in non-traditional dance, while Manolescu valued the freedom of unrestricted movement. For all of them, movement became a means of negotiating identity through the body. It signified not only expanded physical possibilities but also emancipation from prescribed movement vocabularies and political expectations. It further enabled choreographic innovation, engagement with international contemporary

dance practices, and the rejection of aesthetic conventions shaped by decades of state cultural policy. The dancing body thus became a space for experimentation, agency, and self-definition (Institutul Prezentului 2023).

Beyond Marginalii, Romanian dancers reassessed creative and bodily tensions, engaging them in broader artistic and social transformations. Manuel Pelmus, a former dancer with Hamburg Opera and currently a research associate at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, praised the Romanian dancers' efforts "to continue expanding and rethinking the field of choreography, and [. . .] what choreography can mean, both politically and aesthetically."(Șerbănescu 2018). Vava Ștefănescu explored corporeality as a site of personal and collective experience in her solo *Despre tine* (*About You*, 1997), which examines identity, memory, and the body's relation to the world. *Despre tine* toured internationally in the late 1990s, increasing the visibility of Romanian contemporary dance. The piece was revisited in 2020 as an intergenerational dialogue emphasizing process, transmission, and the body's expressive potential.[21]

Despite the discontents, setbacks, and ongoing struggles, Romanian society in the 1990s was evolving, though more slowly than desired by many. In this context of change, after decades of controlled choreographies and movement, dancers turned to society as a source of new themes for their work, shaped both by the legacy of communism and by the challenges of transition.

One of the most sensitive issues concerned disabled and differently abled bodies. Under communism, which sought to produce the healthy "New Man," such bodies were marginalized, erased, and often labeled as "useless." The regime avoided the term disability, using "invalidity" and "handicap," (Diac 2023) while thousands were institutionalized and denied access to education, employment, and representation.[22]

By the early 1990s, Romania's social policies began aligning with European standards, yet reports by organizations such as Human Rights Watch (Human Rights Watch 1990) and scientific studies (Johnson 1992, pp. 39–43) revealed that many people with mental or physical disabilities remained neglected. Unlearning the communist perspective on "defective bodies" (the official term used to describe people with disabilities) was further complicated by international media coverage after the Romanian Revolution, which often sensationalized institutional conditions (Stets 1990). Widely seen as a legacy of communism—and a source of national shame—this reality was often avoided rather than confronted by many Romanians. However, in their kinesthetic and reflective engagement with a society in transition, choreographers embraced fraught, precarious bodies, transforming corporeal limitations into sites of inquiry and expression, and establishing the "body on edge" of disabled people as both a material and an aesthetic principle in post-communist performance.

In 1998, the performance *Incursiune II* (*Incursion II)* premiered, choreographed by Cosmin Manolescu and performed by Manuel Pelmuș and Nicolae Chiosu, a person with disabilities who had never danced before. As Manolescu recalled, the idea for the piece emerged after organizing the DansAccess program in Bucharest, Romania's first initiative aiming at developing audiences through and for dance. One of the workshops, Able and Disabled Bodies, was led by the Austrian choreographer Daniel Aschwaden, who worked with both professional dancers and people with disabilities. The workshop culminated in a performance which challenged conventional perceptions of physicality and embodiment in Romania, particularly as it extended beyond formal performance venues into more informal settings, such as Herăstrău Park in Bucharest. For Chiosu, who participated in this event, the experience was an emotional and self-reflective journey. After the performance, Chiosu exclaimed, "What am I going to do now?" signaling the significance of this moment for him, who had experienced a liberating transformation through dance while simultaneously

confronting the uncertainties that continued to shape his social and artistic future (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Incursiune II. Reproduced with permission from Cosmin Manolescu; published by Scena no. 7, 1998.

By casting him in *Incursiune II,* Manolescu offered a partial answer to this question. Echoing Randy Martin's notion of social kinesthetics—that movement, perception, and bodily responsiveness are socially produced and historically situated—the experience proved enlightening for both dancers, as Pelmuș also recalled that performing in this piece was "an extraordinary experience." (Șerbănescu 2018). He also reflected on how post-communist Romania's shifting social and political environment shaped the performance, describing it as evidence of a "new body," and noting that "the way people relate to the body, to movement, to presence on stage, to choreographic performance has considerably changed. The body just moves differently. It has other sensitivities." (Ciurescu 2002). *Incursion II* also pushed the limits of the audience's emerging kinesthetic response, though not all reactions were positive. As Pelmuș recalled, "Many people wondered at the time whether that was dancing," reflecting the post-socialist audience's curiosity and discomfort when confronted with disabled bodies. After decades of their absence from public space, the performance invited audiences to "rethink" the body: "It's a body without a leg, without an arm, a body whose one arm cannot move, but that is a body as well—a body that contains information, a body that can express itself, a body containing emotion."[23] The work was also presented in Romania and abroad, though not without difficulty; during air travel Chiosu sometimes had to be carried to his seat due to the lack of accessible equipment.[24]

Manolescu continued this line with *Egal* (*Equal*), a work dedicated to and inspired by people with disabilities.[25] Its title gestures toward equality, while carrying a subtle irony directed at Romanian society, which is only gradually accepting diverse bodies. Developed by three dancers in wheelchairs alongside three professional dancers, the work brought together disabled and non-disabled bodies in direct relation through shared movement. During performances, the dancers foregrounded the motto "To be free, to not be afraid or embarrassed that you might look ridiculous," inviting performers and audiences to confront assumptions about the body, ability, and artistic expression. Presented in 2014 at the Gala

of Persons with Disabilities in Romania, the work asserted visibility while encouraging spectators to reconsider the limits of performance, embodiment, and social inclusion.

2.3. Movements on the Edge: Borders, Belonging and Inclusion

Following a decade of transition, the early 2000s marked significant change for Romania. The country joined NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007, developments welcomed by a large majority of the population, who embraced the long-sought political visibility, and sense of belonging to Europe and the wider world. However, both memberships also entailed profound structural changes that unsettled parts of society. They generated discomfort, resistance, and new tensions in the Romanian bodies and psyches, as well as in their relationship with themselves, one another, and the rest of the world. EU accession brought freedom of movement and access to European funds, but also required Romania's alignment with broader continental standards, which some perceived as restrictive or challenging the national identity. NATO membership, meanwhile, positioned Romania as a key defender on the alliance's eastern border, reactivating historical insecurities and traumas. Romanians particularly regard Bessarabia, today's Republic of Moldova, as emblematic of the country's position between empires—once the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian, and later in proximity to the Soviet Union. Russia's unfavorable view of Romania's accession further strained relations. As Romanians became more attuned to the shifting international landscape, dancers and choreographers increasingly engaged these tensions, articulating evolving political and social perspectives.

One of the most effective ways Romanian dancers made their bodies and stories visible, and connected them to the wider world, was through the organization of dance festivals. In May 2001, the BucurESTi.VEST International Dance Festival was "courageously" held in Bucharest with limited funds, reflecting the artists' preoccupation with the lingering psychological divide between Eastern and Western Europe and its impact on both sides of the former Iron Curtain (Binder 2001; Manolescu 2017, p. 31).

The festival's workshop, *Movements on the Edge*, open to young Eastern European dancers, evoked both a geopolitical margin and a choreographic inquiry into bodies positioned at the intersections between systems, histories, and aesthetic paradigms (Modreanu 2001). The festival's title itself played on the "EST" (East) embedded within "Bucure*ș*ti" (Buchar*est*), underscoring the city's Eastern European identity while signaling a deliberate engagement with East–West exchange. The festival also functioned as a microcosm of collaborations between national and international institutions, offering Romanian artists and audiences access to high-quality international work (Manolescu 2017, p. 13).

Over three weeks, it presented performances by invited companies and Romanian artists, ranging from new works to pieces engaging familiar themes such as disability. Helping with the process of (de)constructing the Romanian perception of "the body," The UK-based Candoco Dance Company performances, known for integrating dancers with and without physical disabilities, continued to challenge prevailing assumptions about able-bodied performance. These directions continued in 2003, at its second edition,[26] when the American disabled dancer Homer Avila, performed on one leg, at a time when he was creating a solo for Cleveland's Dancing Wheels dance company (Brooklyn Arts Exchange 2003).

Other works, this time by Romanian artists, explored the idea of physical and psychological frontiers, as well as shifting perceptions of imaginary and physical, personal and political borders. *The Old Man at the Border* (*Bătrânul la graniță*) created and danced by Eduard Gabia, framed the body at a border that functioned not only as a literal territorial boundary, but also as a threshold between political systems and psychological frontiers. Romulus Neagu's *If I. . . But I Am Here* explored embodied presence as a negotiation between fragility and assertion. Mihai Mihalcea's *You Come to the Show and You'll Get an*

Extra Burger! (*Vii la spectacol și primești un extra burger!*) offered a self-reflexive challenge to conventional performance through a collage of movement, text, and conversational fragments that engaged artistic struggle, identity, and contemporary pressures.[27]

Outside of festivals, dancers and choreographers continued their exploration of the Romanian social and political landscape of the early 2000s. Cosmin Manolescu's choreographic essay *Paradis Serial (Serial Paradise)* (Manolescu 2003, p. 19), premiered in 2003 and presented on stage until 2007, reflects the Romanians' embodied tensions vis-à-vis their country's place and role within geopolitical alliances and tensions. It opens with three dancers wearing boxers emblazoned with the flags of the United States, the European Union, and Romania, the work merging performance with social and political commentary and challenging spectators' perceptions of "paradise" by interrogating contemporary society, cultural influence, and the political and social pressures exerted on individuals. At the same time, the piece conveys a broader discomfort with belonging to a society in which "heaven" becomes a standardized, consumable product—"serial paradises"—shaped by the commercialization and homogenization of collective dreams and modern utopias (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Paradis Serial. Reproduced with permission from Cosmin Manolescu.

Paradis Serial was very successful in Romania and received positive response from critics, who considered it to have masterfully captured the anxieties of the Romanians navigating the post-communist transition towards democracy.[28] It was also presented internationally in over thirty cities, including New-York, Paris, and Rome, as at the Biennale de la Danse de Lyon (Manolescu 2017). Demonstrating the dancers' ability to render visible the social and political uncertainties of the time, to capture the tensions of the Romanian bodies, and to reflect their agency within a changing and often destabilizing reality (Ieri–Azi–Mâine 2016), the piece has remained relevant, with audiences noting that its political and social critique still resonates (Michailov 2007). Its continued circulation on Romanian television underscores its relevance for today's audiences.[29]

The "frontier" remained a major theme in Romanian choreographic exploration throughout the decade, as during the 2000s, mobility came to be understood in Romania not merely as a geographic condition but as an embodied, historical experience. The East–West migration, including to the USA, became a reality that reshaped social structures, reconfigured family dynamics and parenting, and contributed to the gradual dismantling of the traditional nuclear family. Particularly significant in this regard is *The Migrant Body*, a collaborative European choreographic research project featuring dancers, dance critics, and media artists. The participation of Romanian dancers in the project carried multilayered significance within their own exploration of the body as formed by personal and political temporalities, while also fostering a heightened sense of belonging to the international dance scene.[30]

The artists engaged in this project approached the "migrant body" as a body in flux, understanding migration as a complex phenomenon, as expressed by the Romanian dancer Andreea Novac, who stated: "we are migrant bodies." (Pascal 2006). They also framed it as

an experience that transports psycho-somatic bodily details across border(s), carrying a sense of "being here, but not here" in a continuous yet fluctuating process of change and adaptation, shaped by the pressures and erasures the body undergoes. The five Romanian artists engaged in the project, together with their colleagues, asked whether the migrant body is a flexible one, and what risks and gains this process entails for a body shaped by migration. The work, which addressed these questions in embodied form, unfolded through filmed sequences shot at the Village Museum in Bucharest and incorporated material developed at the newly created National Center for Dance Bucharest (Centrul Național al Dansului București, hereafter CNDB) (Pascal 2006).

Examining the creation of CNDB in 2004 and its role in the development of Romanian dance after 1989 is essential, as the institution functioned both as a product and a producer of social change at the intersection of embodied practice and institutional formation. Its activities reflected the shifting dynamics of Romanian society while simultaneously exposing, through its institutional precarity and ongoing challenges, policymakers' limited commitment to liberal reform in cultural policy. CNDB, which was housed in a cramped studio within the National Theatre in Bucharest, was designed as a public institution devoted to contemporary dance and performance, providing production support, developing archival and educational programs, and increasing visibility for artists, in Bucharest and across Romania's major cultural cities. It was established by government decision, with operations beginning in 2005. Its foundations, however, had been laid earlier. In 1999, Vava Ștefănescu, currently CNDB's manager, together with Mihai Mihalcea and Andreea Mincic, founded the Multi Art Dans Center (MAD), a nongovernmental organization active until 2003.

The founders' statements suggest an awareness that CNDB was linking the bodies and minds of dancers to the shifting edges of Romanian society. Recognizing the significance of this connection, they stressed that the institution was a "flexible" one, capable of adapting and evolving within an ongoing process of social and cultural transformation (FRAME10 2024a). Interviewed by Mihai Mihalcea for the platform *FRAME10—Disobedient Bodies and Solidarity in the Performing Arts After the 90s*, and reflecting on the CNDB's early years, Vava Ștefănescu described that period as particularly intense and formative, with an unparalleled sense of communication and exchange, both among artists and between artists and society, an engagement that was made visible through their works (FRAME10 2024b). For instance, in *After All* (2006), Ștefănescu presents a body that transforms by drawing on the residues of the worlds it has traversed on stage, while in *Quartet for a Lavalier* (2008), a work she described "as never truly ending," she explores tensions—personal, political and the social—as inscribed on the body.[31]

In *Quartet for a Lavalier*, three bodies perform, breathe, and at times remain suspended in stillness inside a glass-walled phone booth, an installation now exhibited in one of the CNDB's rooms.[32] Distinct yet functioning as a composite organism, the bodies negotiate proximity and distance within a confined architectural frame. They press against one another, yield space, withdraw, collide, and support one another. The choreography treats space as something neither given nor stable, but constantly contested, and the bodies performing inside are bodies on edge: bodies compressed, exposed, mutually dependent, struggling for visibility and survival within a structure that both contains and displays them. The work's enduring power lies precisely in this embodied tension between confinement and resistance. The claustrophobic spatial dynamics have invited audiences to read the work through multiple historical and social lenses, from the communist gulag to the Revolution, from economic precarity to the isolation of COVID-19, while also reflecting the precarious position of Romanian contemporary dance itself, fighting for institutional acknowledgment (Michailov 2001, p. 198).

By the end of the 2000s, Romania was undergoing acute economic strain and political polarization, generating a contentious institutional climate. The global financial crisis, austerity measures, and large-scale labor migration deepened insecurity and reshaped the social fabric. Combined with the post-communist legacies and the tensions of European integration, these dynamics produced a society marked by instability alongside emerging civic awareness and institutional reconfiguration. Within this context, the CNDB quickly became, as Ștefănescu noted, "the space where conventions break apart or where we choose to abandon them," (Bogzaru 2017) but it also came to be perceived as a "foreign" space by segments of Romanian society (FRAME10 2024b). Contemporary dance was increasingly seen by some, including certain policymakers, as "inconvenient" or lacking cultural priority. The discontent directed toward the institution can be read as symptomatic of enduring post-communist structures that continued to regulate and marginalize non-conservative bodies—contemporary dancers and their audiences—often framed as problematic or unnecessary within a fragile society in transition toward democratic values.

In 2009, CNDB had to leave the National Theatre building, stripped of its physical space without a viable alternative. Trying to plead their cause Ștefănescu and Mihalcea attended a meeting with the Ministry of Culture and felt unheard and sidelined. "We were cut out," they said, as decisions were made above their heads, without substantive dialogue. Despite losing its permanent venue, CNDB continued to function under precarious conditions, relocating to temporary spaces and sustaining its programs with limited resources. The crisis ultimately reinforced solidarity within the contemporary dance community, which understood the struggle not only as a professional necessity but as a broader commitment to securing, for Romanian contemporary dance and for Romanian society at large, a space where bodies could perform not only dance but also acts of resistance.[33]

2.4. Romanian Bodies Between Inside and Outside: Resistance, Recovery, and Representation

In 2010, in the wake of the global economic crisis, Romania entered a decade marked by economic strain, uneven recovery, and political volatility. Society navigated a tension between democratic consolidation and institutional fragility, increasingly shaped by polarization and declining confidence in state structures. At the same time, post-2010 migration generated not only large-scale mobility, but also political subjectivities shaped by precarity, dislocation, and renegotiated belonging. Many migrants, employed in low-status sectors across Western Europe, experienced both opportunity and marginalization, fostering skepticism toward political elites at home and abroad. In this context, attachments to national, cultural, and religious identity—often sustained by the Romanian Orthodox Church—intensified, at times taking the form of defensive conservatism.[34] Public debates around identity, European belonging, diversity, feminism, and nationalism intensified, particularly after the failed 2018 constitutional referendum. Initiated by Coaliția pentru Familie and supported by Parliament and the Romanian Orthodox Church, it sought to redefine marriage as a union between "a man and a woman," replacing the existing gender-neutral language. Promoting conservative values, the initiative revealed that significant segments of Romanian society, along with key institutions, did not fully share the broader embrace of European values (Hitchins 2014). Although the vote failed due to low turnout, the strong support among participants exposed deep societal divisions and highlighted tensions between religious conservatism, European liberal-democratic frameworks, and an increasingly mobilized civil society.[35]

The country became a site of intense and sustained public protest, while liberal forces, particularly among the younger generation and a limited number of progressive institutions, such as CNDB, worked to sustain and advance democratic practices. More than at any previous moment after 1989, the body emerged as a site of resistance in response

to post-communist political coercion. In this context, CNDB's position as both insider and outsider became even more visible: situated at the cultural center, it absorbed and staged social tensions, yet was pushed to the margins by policymakers uneasy with its critical force. In line with Randy Martin's argument that performance operates as a political act, Romanian contemporary dance bodies contested the hierarchies that had long confined certain subjects to institutional or symbolic margins. The shift was at once spatial and political: the margin became legible as presence, the apparent stability of the center was unsettled, and vulnerability was rearticulated not as a deficit but as a relational force (Martin 1990). During the 2010s, the institution came to be perceived as even more disruptive, as its critical and experimental practices were often singled out by more conservative segments of society and by policymakers as unsettling the sense of order and cohesion authorities sought to maintain.

The ways in which underfunded or unsupported institutions worked to sustain the country's democratic trajectory were both innovative and productive. In 2018, CNDB was in the process of organizing an archive of invaluable materials—fragments of performances, documents, photographs, and testimonies that might otherwise have been lost. In the view of archivist Corina Cimpoieru, archiving was not a neutral administrative act but a form of resistance to the pressures of the present; by safeguarding embodied histories, the archive itself operates as a body on edge—vulnerable to erasure, yet persistently asserting its presence within a cultural landscape that has often relegated contemporary dance to the margins.[36] During the 2010s, dance programs at major Romanian universities expanded and consolidated, actively countering the political marginalization of culture by sustaining embodied knowledge and artistic practice. Training moved decisively beyond classical ballet to embrace contemporary techniques and performance-based approaches. Alongside the National University of Theatre and Film I.L. Caragiale in Bucharest, additional choreography programs—including contemporary dance training—were established at four other universities in major Romanian cities, extending this shift beyond the capital. Demonstrating sustained commitment to the development of the field, faculty members regularly commute from Bucharest to support these programs, contributing to the growth of contemporary dance across a more decentralized landscape.[37]

Romanian dancers' responses to the complex socio-political challenges they faced as citizens of their country, Europe, and the wider world have continued to take shape in recent dance festivals organized in the country. Working within limited but strategically used organizational autonomy, these festivals performed two key functions: they operated as sites where artistic practice intersected with civic engagement, sustaining democratic values while sharpening critical reflection; and, by fostering international participation, they amplified the global visibility of Romanian contemporary dance while exposing local audiences to diverse perspectives on inclusive democratic values (National Opera Bucharest 2017).

Festivals began to be organized outside of Bucharest, articulating an expansive vision for dance beyond the capital, such as Festivalul D.A.M. (Dance, Art, Multidisciplinarity Festival), held annually in Iași. Emerging in a city traditionally associated with academic and theatrical institutions rather than with a strong contemporary dance infrastructure, the festival has functioned as a platform for independent choreographic practices and interdisciplinary experimentation. Through performances, workshops, and critical discussions, often staged in alternative venues, it has foregrounded embodied practices and contributed to a broader reconfiguration of Romanian "dancing awareness."[38] In 2022, CNDB launched the *Iridescent—International Festival of Contemporary Dance and Other Reconfigurations of the Sensible*. The festival, held annually, continues the institution's critical engagement with the relationship between dance and society, while also consolidating CNDB's role as a "safe

space" for dance practitioners and audiences who embrace ideas outside traditional paths. Most importantly, the festival courageously embraced two key topics that have remained marginalized and largely dismissed, both within society and by policymakers, even three decades after the end of communism: diversity and feminism (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Iridescent Festival 2024; Gaitless, Concept and Direction: Uroš Krčadinac & Marko Milić × MIREVI; Iridescent Festival 2025. Photo: Claudiu Popescu. Reproduced with permission from CNDB. In the **left-hand image**, the Romanian text reads, "Idei pentru Planeta Pământ. Maraton de declarații, mesaje și idei," translated as "Ideas for Planet Earth. A Marathon of Statements, Messages, and Ideas".

In a country whose population is largely white and predominantly Christian, the idea of diversity was mostly absent from public discourse before 1989. Romanians were largely unfamiliar with diversity, as travel to Western countries—where more heterogenous populations were visible—was limited, while Romania itself received relatively few visitors from those regions. Cultural exchanges were also largely confined to other communist countries. A notable exception was the tour of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in Romania during the 1970s.[39] And yet, the presence of diverse bodies became increasingly visible, as Romanian institutions began hiring foreign employees, including international dancers, and with the arrival of Syrian asylum seekers during the 2015–2016 crisis. More recently, the country has become home to migrant workers arriving from distant regions, particularly from Asia. These new embodied realities have reconfigured the field of visibility in which bodies interact and are interpreted, stimulating national debates about migration, cultural identity and homogeneity. They revealed that diversity in Romania has emerged not only as a demographic fact but as an embodied condition, which is present, yet not fully integrated into the national discourse.

The narrative of diversity in Romania, and its continuously shifting dynamics, received little to no sustained scholarly attention from either Romanian or foreign authors. In this context, embodied knowledge is essential and much needed; thus, CNDB's initiative to invite Oulouy, a choreographer, dancer, and educator, originally from Ivory Coast and based in Spain, to the Iridescent Festival emerges as both a visionary and necessary intervention (Aerowaves 2025). The artist performed *Black*, a piece which is a visual and musical chronicle narrated through street dance styles from the African continent and its diaspora in the United States, rethinks the Black African body within the Western world, while alluding to recent history, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement and the killing of George Floyd. It offers the audience a "reflection on violence and emancipation through Blackness in today's world, expressed through a body that provokes and unsettles—a body that is both wounded and celebrated."[40]

Black produced a sustained cognitive impact on the audience, as evidenced by the public discussion that followed. As several participants noted, "it must be seen again and again, because it makes you feel, understand, and not forget." Their aim "to feel, to understand, and not forget" suggests that the post-1989 rupture with the communist mechanisms of control over perception, emotion, and inclusiveness is being carried forward and amplified

by the younger generation. They refuse to comply with the pre-1989 dehumanizing social and ideological expectations imposed on citizens—namely, to see without understanding, to listen without hearing, and to continuously forget, personally, socially, and as part of the wider human community.

The openness, inclusiveness, and artistic and intellectual curiosity of Romanians, especially the younger generation, toward non-Western dance were noted by the Nigerian-British artist and researcher Funmi Adewole Elliott. She was invited to participate in CNDB's program, *The Academy of Dance and Performance Laboratories*, now in its third edition. The program "takes the form of laboratories through a consistent program of practices that focus on the body, the production of knowledge, and contemporary creation," offering students "the opportunity to explore techniques, methods, and directions of creation related to relevant artistic themes or acute issues of the contemporary world." (Adewole Elliott 2026a, 2026b).

Adewole's collaboration with CNDB is also indicative of how a new wave of Romanian dancers, through professional mobility, expands both individual knowledge and collaborative networks. CNDB contacted her at the initiative of a Romanian student who had taken her classes abroad and introduced her work to the institution. The dancers she met at CNDB in February 2026 came from diverse backgrounds—including acting, singing, hip-hop, and musical theater—with some trained in Western Europe. She described them as warm, enthusiastic, talented, and resilient, noting their innovation in forging careers despite financial constraints. She also praised CNDB's support of the dance scene and its role in sustaining a small but "engaged" community that is becoming increasingly influential within society.[41] She gave a presentation to students in the master's program in Dramatic Writing at the National Academy for the Dramatic Arts on her experience in choreographic dramaturgy. Titled "Narrative in Motion: Exploring Dance, Storytelling, and Creativity," it focused on the intersections of dramatic writing, choreographic composition, communication theory, and cultural and performance studies. She also presented brief analyses of the work of three contemporary artists of African origin with whom she has collaborated.[42] At the end of her two-week stay in Bucharest, students reported that they had been positively impacted by her teaching and the embodied knowledge she shared, noting in particular that they had gained a "toolkit" in African dance, which they greatly appreciated;[43] the author's subsequent conversations with students and dance practitioners confirmed the success of her work.[44] The positive responses point to a reconfiguration of the field of visibility in Romanian dance, as encounters with non-Western embodied practices activate new forms of social kinesthetics that unsettle established hierarchies of knowledge and reshape the conditions under which bodies are read and valued.

Alongside diversity, the contested question of women's place and role in society has also polarized Romanian society and sparked strong responses. On one hand, conservative currents, frequently aligned with the Romanian Orthodox Church, frame feminism as a foreign and Western value, destabilizing the "traditional values." Public debates around sex education, reproductive rights, and same-sex partnerships clearly reveal these tensions. On the other hand, an emerging generation of activists, scholars, and artists engages intersectional perspectives that connect gender to ethnicity, labor precarity, migration, and LGBTQ+ rights, making Romanian feminism more visible and evolving. Nevertheless, it continues to negotiate its legitimacy within a social context shaped by persistent patriarchal norms, economic inequality, and influential nationalist narratives.[45]

The struggles of women to be visible and heard remain evident, and unmistakably present, across multiple domains. Notably, these tensions extend to the performing arts, where works that ridicule and treat women with contempt continue to be presented to audiences.[46] The Romanian theater critic and feminist writer Cristina Modreanu challenges the framework proposed by Colette Dowling's "Cinderella complex," which suggests that women raised

within conservative environments may be prepared to fulfill prescribed roles yet remain unable to achieve independence on their own.[47] Modreanu maintains that this model does not apply to all women from Eastern Europe, including Romania, arguing that after 1989 "Eastern European women were more prepared than their men to face new realities, bringing even more work along with the new opportunities." (Modreanu 2021, p. 99).

Her claims find support in the progress regarding women's position in Romanian society, against the odds, and driven by women, including contemporary dancers. In a telling, if understated, coincidence, *Maybe by 2301, We Won't Need Another Feminist Show* premiered at CNDB exactly one year before the Romanian Parliament adopted the Femicide Prevention Law. Drawing on the troubling social realities surrounding women's safety in Romania, the choreographers translate these tensions into an embodied register. The performance was not only necessary, but also courageous, bringing into view the space women inhabit, often absurd, oppressive, and unjust, yet one in which solidarity, courage, and empathy continue to emerge as modes of response and resistance. While engaging critically with patriarchy in Romania, the work evoked a normative script in which "women support, serve, listen, help, and protect," while being expected "not to impose themselves, not to protest, not to demand, not to take risks, and not to take up space." (Centrul Național al Dansului București 2026). Through a combination of movement, spoken text, and documentary references, the work addresses normalized everyday experiences alongside statistics that appear almost unreal, revealing contradictory roles and intangible norms within Romanian society (Centrul Național al Dansului București 2026). Significantly, just three months after the premiere, approximately one thousand people—women and men—gathered in front of the government headquarters to protest the twenty-sixth case of femicide in Romania in the past six months.[48]

Over more than three decades, Romanian contemporary dance has engaged with a far broader range of themes and practices than this article can fully address, and the scope of its activity exceeds the limits of a single study. Taken together, these practices constitute a microcosm of inclusiveness and an ongoing engagement with questions of social justice in diverse forms and at multiple levels. Moreover, the number of contemporary dance practitioners is expanding, as are the locations in which they are active and the range of topics they engage.[49]

3. Conclusions

In a study on Romanian modern dance prior to 1989, which highlighted how modern dancers sustained the form through the pro-Nazi and communist dictatorships of the twentieth century, the author argued that their resilience made it possible for contemporary dancers not to begin anew after the end of communism, but to continue and develop this artistic tradition. Recent developments confirm this assessment. As this article shows, over the past three decades, contemporary dancers have enriched the field while also becoming a significant force for change within Romania's evolving democracy and international artistic solidarity.

When the war in Ukraine erupted, Romania became a temporary home—and a stage—for displaced Ukrainian dancers confronting trauma, dislocation, and alienation. Their collaborative work, which deserves an article of its own, demonstrated that art produced under conditions of disruption remains inseparable from forms of hope and utopian projection that sustain creative processes.[50] In January 2026, an online meeting between representatives of the National Center for Dance Bucharest and the Minister of Culture revealed a new blow to contemporary dance, which, as this article shows, has been repeatedly challenged and interrupted.[51] The National Center for Dance Bucharest has once again been pushed into uncertainty. Omnia Hall, allocated to CNDB in 2016 as the future House of Dance, has

been transferred, without clear justification, to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. After years of sustained effort—technical assessments, planning, public presentations, and guided tours—the project was removed from the Ministry of Culture's funding list, underscoring how the priorities of the Ministry of Internal Affairs outweigh those of an already fragile cultural sector.[52] These concluding remarks are written in March 2026, as the Romanian government introduced a program of fiscal consolidation centered on spending cuts, wage and benefit freezes, and delayed state payments, reflecting the pressures of reducing one of the EU's largest deficits while navigating economic slowdown and political instability. These measures have had a dramatic impact on the cultural sector, increasing the precarity of cultural institutions and independent artists, particularly in fields such as contemporary dance (Government of Romania 2026).

However, contemporary dance practitioners have actively contributed to the making of a Romanian democratic society, navigating not only its constant transformations but also its place at the geographical and ideological intersections of East and West. This reality is further complicated by proximity to countries marked by conflict, such as Ukraine, as well as to Hungary, where far-right policies have shaped the political climate, and by ongoing concerns about Russia's expansionist ambitions. And yet, they transformed contemporary dance into a critical space, positioning it as an active site for negotiating the tensions of a society under strain. Within it, Romanian contemporary dancers became agents of social change, using embodied practices to unsettle and challenge the uncomfortable memory of communism while confronting and reconfiguring the country's evolving social realities. In light of present challenges, Romanian contemporary dance appears to be entering a new chapter—one in which its practitioners will need to draw on the resilience, adaptability, and capacity for survival they have already demonstrated. Also, they will need the agency to continue choosing hope and action, thus transforming, again, the condition of being on edge into a dynamic terrain, and the bodies on edge into bodies of power.

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Notes

1 Camelia Lenart, "Resisting Trauma and Keeping Hope Alive: Romanian Modern Dance during the Complicated Twentieth Century," *Dance Chronicle* 42, no. 3 (2019): 342–372.
2 (Dansez pentru București 2014); courtesy of the dancer Cosmin Manolescu.
3 The term was coined in (Assche et al. 2024).
4 All translations from Romanian are by the author.
5 Ioan and Liana Tugearu, interview with the author, 2021.

6 *Memories from the Golden Years of Romanian Ballet*, documentary by Cleopatra Lorințiu, YouTube video, 1:23:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5kUM5DEAMI (accessed on 25 February 2026).
7 (See note 1 above).
8 Ileana Iliescu, interview by Revista Tango, *Revista Tango*, https://revistatango.ro/ileana-iliescu-mi-am-pus-sentimentele-la-picioarele-barbatilor-pe-care-i-am-iubit-6795 (accessed on 7 December 2025).
9 Costin Popa, "*Lacul lebedelor* în România," (*Swan Lake* in Romania), (CIMEC 2016); Iliescu also danced the role of Queen Mother in Act III. When told that Margot Fonteyn had performed the same role at Covent Garden, she modestly replied, "I am not Dame Margot Fonteyn," though she admitted she appreciated the comparison.
10 *Memories from the Golden Years of Romanian Ballet*, directed by Cleopatra Lorințiu, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5kUM5DEAMI (accessed on 5 February 2026).
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14 Miriam Raducanu, Interview with the author, July 2021.
15 *Genesis. Presence, Ritual, Affect*, performed 7, 9, 10, 15, 16 November and 8 December 2019, and 25 January 2020, National Museum of Art of Romania, within the exhibition *24 Arguments. Early Encounters in Romanian Neo-Avant-Garde 1969–1971*, organized by the Institute of the Present.
16 *Incursiuni—Interviu cu Grupul Marginalii (Incursions—Interview with the Marginalii Group)*, 1995, https://vimeo.com/438486719; (accessed on 29 January 2026). Courtesy of Cosmin Manolescu.
17 *Ieri-Azi-Mâine* (*Yesterday-Today-Tomorrow*), TV program hosted by Corina Dănilă, featuring Simona Șomăcescu and Vava Ștefănescu, TVR, 15 November 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uF92m6ldMHQ&t=3343s (accessed on 12 November 2025).
18 (See note 17 above).
19 Cosmin Manolescu, Interview with the author, 26 March 2026.
20 Manolescu recalled that Ioan Tugearu was concerned that Marginalii's approach was too far removed from established choreographic conventions.
21 (See note 17 above).
22 For more on this topic, see (Dinu and Bengtsson 2023).
23 Silvia Ciurescu, "Manuel Pelmuș—Interview," in *If I Don't Move, I Die! The World of Romanian Dance*, *Plural Magazine*, no. 15–16 (2002), (Institutul Cultural Român n.d.).
24 (See note 17 above).
25 Cosmin Manolescu, *Egal-making off*, choreography by Cosmin Manolescu, film by Ciprian Gheorghe, March 2014, produced at ZonaD-Studio Paradis Serial. p. 30.
26 (See note 25 above).
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30 (See note 19 above).
31 (See note 17 above).
32 Author's visit to the archives of Centrul Național al Dansului București, Bucharest, 28 February 2026.
33 (See note 32 above).
34 For more on this topic, see (Sandu 2016).
35 I am grateful to Diana Popa, sociologist, for insightful discussions that helped clarify this topic.
36 Corina Cimpoieru, Interviews with the author, 12 August 2018; 28 February 2026.
37 Lorette Enache, Interview with the author, 14 February 2026.
38 Enache, interview with the author; Universitatea Națională de Arte "George Enescu" Iași, *Festivalul "Dans, Artă, Multidisciplinaritate-DAM" poster/announcement*, accessed on 2 March 2026. https://www.arteiasi.ro/festivalul-dans-arta-multidisciplinaritate-dam/#post/0 (accessed on 3 March 2026).
39 (See note 1 above).
40 Centrul Național al Dansului București, Facebook post, 8 November 2025, accessed 18 November 2025.
41 Funmi Adewole Elliott, Interview with the author, 2 April 2026.

[42] Funmi Adewole Elliott, "Narrative in Motion: Exploring Dance, Storytelling, and Creativity," presentation at the National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale," Bucharest, 5 February 2026, https://cndb.ro/en/presentation-by-funmi-adewolle-elliott-at-unatc/ (accessed on 2 April 2026).

[43] (See note 42 above).

[44] Informal conversations with dance practitioners in Bucharest (February–April 2026); these exchanges were not conducted as formal interviews but provided valuable contextual insight.

[45] I am indebted to the scholarship of Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu (Bucur and Miroiu 2018), for shaping the author's understanding of this topic.

[46] Cristina Modreanu, interview with the author, 4 April 2026. Dr. Modrenu, theatre critic and curator, noted that plays such as *Micul Infern* (*Little Inferno*, 1927), by Ion Minulescu, are still performed on major stages in Bucharest, pointing to the persistence of theatrical conventions that confine women to reductive roles.

[47] (Dowling 1981), discussed in (Modreanu 2021, p. 99).

[48] Dora Vulcan and Andreea Ofițeru, "Protest in Piața Victoriei after the 26th Case of Femicide in Romania in Only Six Months" (Protest in Piața Victoriei after the 26th Femicide in Romania in Just Six Months), *Europa Liberă România (Free Europe Romania*), 18 June 2025.

[49] This observation is further supported by participant observation during extended periods of research in Romania, including attendance at contemporary dance performances and related cultural events.

[50] "Performing Utopias," part of the *What's Next* project, Gabriela Tudor Foundation, Bucharest, co-funded by the European Union's Creative Europe program, 25 January 2024.

[51] Author's participation in an online meeting between representatives of the National Center for Dance Bucharest and the Ministry of Culture, 13 January 2026.

[52] Bogdan Stănescu, "Jurnal Cultural," ("Cultural Journal"), TVR Cultural, 13 January 2026, video, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtXWqROypx4 (accessed on 14 January 2026).

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