

Quality of life in Romania

Sergiu Băltăţescu
University of Oradea
bsergiu@socio.uoradea.ro

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Abstract

In a typology of social reporting systems elaborated by Romania can be included (along with Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands and Austria) in the “American” Quality of Life researches tradition, which – following the same author – has as main traits: a combination between objective and subjective indicators, thus emphasizes both dimensions; subjective quality of life is assessed not only by using also a summary measure as the overall life satisfaction, satisfaction indicators regarding specific living domains, as the income, family or health; by combining the subjective and objective dimension, a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of well-being is enhanced.

The first quality of life researches in Romania, started early, at the end of the seventies, in a very difficult time for sociologists. But only in the nineties systematic surveys on quality of life and living conditions were conducted. The research program “Diagnosis of Quality of Life”, introduced by the Romanian Institute for Quality of Life Research and the Public Opinion Barometer (financed by Open Society Foundation Romania), provided the researchers with a high amount of empirical data on life satisfaction, indicator that shows the subject’s evaluation of his or her life. Integrating the results of these empirical researches, we tried to assess the evolution of life satisfaction in the last twelve years. The both data series of life satisfaction indicators in the survey programs show great compatibility, proving that the measurements of life satisfaction are highly reliable. Finally, some models international comparisons are made.

Introduction

The first quality of life researches in Romania begun at the end of the seventies, in a very difficult time for sociologists: very few surveys were conducted, and sociology could not stand as an autonomous specialism. A survey was designed and applied on a non-random sample of 3000 urban individuals. The questionnaire consisted in about 250 items of objective and subjective quality of life, evidently inspired by the similar researches in USA conducted in United States by Andrews and Whitney. The analysis of these data took some years and was published in some Romanian journals. In 1984, a first book was printed, under the direction of Prof. Cătălin Zamfir. Named “Indicators and variation sources of quality of life”, the book contained a wide presentation of quality of life issues and an analysis of the data collected, using advanced statistical tools. The book was followed by two collections of contributions of more than 15 researches that performed analysis of relations between quality of life and contemporary lifestyles. The books, published in 1986 and 1989, contained also some theoretical treatises.

These were the premises for the beginning of the year 1990 was the research on quality of life. The institute for quality of life was created in January 1990 (note that the Romanian Revolution took place in 22 December 1989!), under the aegis of Romanian Academy and reunited some of the former contributors of the 1979 research.

Starting with 1990, the institute conducts empirical research on local or sectorial national

samples. The institute publishes books, studies, reviews, brochures, and research reports. Romanian Institute for quality of life publishes the Romanian “Quality of life” journal, in which results are presented and QOL researches publish their analysis. From 1996, its full name is “Quality of life. A social policies journal”. This show that the institute is now more oriented towards social policies research. Indeed, the Institute conducts also comparative analyses and evaluations on the social policy and releases prognosis of the effects of adopting certain acts of social policy; it monitors the laws, the decisions and decrees of the empowered bodies that have impact on the social-economic area. It studies the consequences of the social policies concerning the family, children and youth of Romania, etc.

Diagnosis of Quality of Life

The research program “Diagnosis of Quality of Life”, introduced by the Romanian Institute for Quality of Life Research was the first that assessed the quality of life in post-communist Romania. Inspired by previous research, the program begun with a large survey on a national sample over 2000 subjects. All in all, this research helped the Romanian researches to develop a genuine Quality of Life Index. The scheme was published in 1991 in Romanian “Quality of life” journal by Prof. Ioan Marginean. The author selected exactly a hundred indicators of quality of life, in an attempt to “take into account not only the global elements but also the aspects related to family, own life, the satisfaction/insatisfaction degree of life, the subjective dimensions of the existent situation perception” (Mărginean, 1991) The Quality of life Diagnosis instrument, constructed after this design, consist in a about 100 item-questionnaire. This instrument was used in 1991-1999 with very little changes. Is not my intention to analyze here this instrument, but I should mention that it present all characteristics required by Committee for Societal QOL Indexes, ISQOLS (Hagerty et al., 2001), except two: the point 6 in this document (*The index should be reported as a single number*), and the fact that this index is not cited in this report... It should be mentioned that about a half of Euromodule items are already included in Romanian index. But the evaluation of these indexes will need further efforts. The results of the Diagnosis of Quality of Life Surveys have been published in Press, and also on a separate report. Analyses performed are published regularly in Quality of Life Journal.

On the basis of the six years program of researches a panel was designed (1996-1998) consisting in 700 subjects.

The obvious decline of this program is shown by the size of the sample, varying from over 2000 subjects in 1990, to 1500 subjects between 1991 and 1996, and finally to 1200 between 1997 and 1999.

The program was discontinued in 2000, partly by lack of financing, partly because of the need to analyze in more detail the data accumulated and to rethink the instrument. A collective volume is programmed to appear, analyzing the data accumulated. It is also the lack of international comparison that contributes to the necessity of renewal of the instrument.

Public Opinion Barometer

Four years after the fall of communism, another survey program was introduced by the Open Society Foundation Romania. The Public Opinion Barometer was designed as an independent social research, conducted regularly to monitor social transformations in Romania. The first researches were oriented mainly towards measurement of attitudes towards reform, but included some quality of life satisfaction indicators (like general life satisfaction, satisfaction with family, work, leisure, political system, etc.)

Beginning with 1997 new topics on specific themes has been added and from 1998 the

whole questionnaire was centered on a main issue (Human Resources for the reform, life style and social structure). Some items are present in all questionnaires in order to assure comparativity. The final selection of the items is settled by a jury.

The sampling scheme has been standardized since 1995, comparisons of data across surveys being made possible. The standardized sampling scheme was set up by Prof. Dumitru Sandu.

Data are gathered by Romanian public opinion survey institutes selected each year by the POB jury. The accuracy of data gathering is analyzed by a different survey institute selected by open bid. A second examination of data quality is realized by the jury by comparing the sample structure with National Commission of Statistics data and by analyzing the consistency of data.

The number of surveys varies each year from 4 (in 1994-1995 and 1997) to 3 (1996) respectively 2 (1998-2000). Until 1997 the duration for the application of the questionnaire was of around 30 minutes and the sample volume was 1200 individuals. Beginning with 1998 the sample and the questionnaire length were extended (1800-2000 individuals and 60 minutes). The purpose of using an increased sample volume was to obtain representative sub-samples on each of the 8 historical Romanian regions

The Open Society Foundation has launched in 2000 a new formula for the Public Opinion Barometer - "Way of living and Social Structure in Romania". The main themes of new Barometer include, along with the same quality of life, social structure and life styles items, other items about: social and economic policies evaluation, institutions' evaluation, institutional capital, social capital and sociability resources, human and physical capital, health, leisure, religion and faith and labor ethics.

I should note that the access to POB data is free. A presentation of the main results on the main topics for the research in comparative perspective is also available (even in English)

Life satisfaction in Romania in comparative perspective

To give an illustration of the quality of life in Romania, I have tried to perform some analysis on life satisfaction in post-communist Romania.

Standard measures of life satisfaction were included in both surveys cited. We have also some (though little) data on life satisfaction measures included in other independent surveys.

Diagnosis of quality of life used a 5-step verbal life satisfaction measure. The scale consists in a single direct question:

"Considering the whole situation, how satisfied are you about your daily life?"

- a. Very unsatisfied
- b. Unsatisfied
- c. Neither unsatisfied, nor satisfied
- d. Satisfied
- e. Very satisfied"

Public Opinion Barometer use a 4-step verbal life satisfaction scale, which consist in a single direct question:

Generally, how satisfied are you with the way you live?

- a. Not satisfied at all
- b. Not so satisfied
- c. Quite satisfied
- d. Very satisfied

Following the procedures indicated by (Veenhoven, 1993), I've homogenized the data variables transforming aggregate means on a 0-10 scale. The results are shown in

Figure 1. At a general look, we can remark that the mean of the two measures shows great similarity between until November 1998.

Figure 1 about here

I have selected the closest in time variable in both time series and represented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 about here

A general rule that explain the slight negative difference in the means in the direction of the Public Opinion Barometer is the tendency of the subjects to concentrate around median point of the scale. Because life satisfaction scale used by Diagnosis of Quality of Life surveys has a central point, and taking into account that the means are under the median line, it seems reasonable to think that this was the explanation.

A totally different situation appears when we look at the two data series beginning from 1999. Firstly, we see an abrupt declining of life satisfaction, measured by the Public Opinion Barometer. Actually, the life satisfaction lost almost two points on 11 points scale ! I don't know if is not unique in annals of life satisfaction measures ! Secondly, the life satisfaction score measured by the diagnosis of quality of life in 1999 shows only a slight decreasing comparing to 1998. It is obvious that the second survey does not "capture" the abrupt declining. But why ?

I must warn that is only a partial explanation which require some information about socio-political situation of that moment in Romania.

The level of living decreased in Romania decreased almost continuously beginning from 1990, as shown in figures 3 & 4. As a result, the poverty rate grows sharply (see figure 8).

Figure 3 about here

Figure 4 about here

Figure 8 about here

The evolution of indicators of life satisfaction is consistent with this decline. But there were some variations in socio-economic indicators of well being associated with the performance of different governments and to the electoral cycle. Thus, at the end of the Left government in 1996 appears to have a relative stagnation of the decreasing of these indicators, and also slight increasing in optimism caused presumably by the general election process. But from the beginning of the new electoral cycle, economic indicators showed a sharp decline, and also social indicators like trust in government, societal optimism, and satisfaction with political system showed a similar negative evolution. The result of the political action that the former President has not even participated in elections and the government party has not entered in Parliament tells us much about the climate of opinion. But why the two measures "captured" in different measure this climate. The explication resides, in my opinion, in the methodology of the surveys. The Diagnosis of Quality of life included the general life satisfaction indicator after a long array of almost 40 satisfaction indicators, and the question begins with "Considering the whole situation...", which is an invitation for the subject to look also at the individual side of satisfaction. Contrarily, in the Public Opinion Barometer, the life satisfaction question is one of the first questions, is preceded by a general societal question: "Do you think things go in a right or a wrong direction in Romania?" and it is not introduced by a phrase like "Considering the whole situation..." Thus, in my opinion, it is more the social self involved in this kind of life satisfaction appraisal. And in a time of very bad public mood, the measure of the personal self and public self life satisfaction may differ. But this hypothesis must be further explored.

Another topic of the analysis is the time series for the different categories of the life satisfaction indicator. Figures 6 & 7 shows the time series for the two researches.

Figure 6 about here
Figure 7 about here

A general pattern here is:

- the percentage of the “very unsatisfied” persons increases slightly, while the “very satisfied” persons remain constant in number.
- The “unsatisfied” percentage increase concomitantly with the decreasing of the percentage of “quite satisfied” subjects.

Finally, I’ve tried to represent the life satisfaction series in Romania in the context of other European countries. The data were extracted from World Database of Happiness (Veenhoven, 1996), and included only life satisfaction measures cited by the same author (from 3-step single satisfaction scale to 11-step single satisfaction scale). In cases where several measures were available for some years, I took the mean of all measures. The results are presented in Figure 5. (For Romania I took the data from Diagnosis of Quality of Life)

Figure 5 about here

As we can see, Romania is included in the Former Eastern Block, with life satisfaction scores significantly lower than those of Western Europe (I took for illustration Germany and Italy – Eurobarometer 4-step satisfaction scale) are.

Comparing to the former socialist countries, life satisfaction in Romania is higher than in Russia or Bulgaria, but lower than in Hungary and Slovenia. The result looks similar with Lithuania, but the data available to me at the moment of the analysis were weak and this figure shows only general trends.

Conclusions

In a typology of social reporting systems elaborated by Rothenbacher (1999), Romania can be included (along with Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands and Austria) in the “American” Quality of Life researches tradition, which – following the same author – has as main traits: a combination between objective and subjective indicators, thus emphasizes both dimensions; subjective quality of life is assessed not only by using also a summary measure as the overall life satisfaction, satisfaction indicators regarding specific living domains, as the income, family or health; by combining the subjective and objective dimension, a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of well-being is enhanced: and, finally, a certain division of labour between official statistics and university research evolved, with the former concentrating on objective living conditions, while the latter predominantly dealing with subjective well-being or the perception of objective living conditions.

All the main characteristics of the degree of institutionalizing of social reporting (Social report or socio-statistical compendium, Comprehensive level of living or quality of life survey, Journal on well-being, Social indicator system), are present in Romania beginning with 1990.

In the same time, there are courses on quality of life research at least in three Universities (including Bucharest and Cluj Universities), and there is a powerful Institute dedicated entirely to quality of life and social policy research. Other quality of life researches at

regional level are conducted. Department of sociology of the University of Oradea, for example, conducted several surveys on these topics.

But there are a lot of weak points: the financing of quality of life researches is more and more problematic: the diagnosis of quality of life is discontinued and the Public Opinion Barometer program has also some difficulties in financing. There is a lack of international comparison on these topics. Although a lot of quality of life items are highly compatible with other researches, no such analyses have been performed. As a result, the Romanian index is not well known, the international cooperation is very poor and the local interest (of the specialists and public) on these topics is decreasing.

But despite of this backlash, there are a lot of opportunities for international cooperation and we must take profit.

Reference List

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7. Veenhoven, R., 1996, *World database of happiness*, Erasmus University Rotterdam
8. Zamfir,C. (coord.), *Poverty in Romania*, Report 2001

Figure 1. Life satisfaction in Romania (1990-2001) (means transformed to 0-10 scale).
 Sources: Public Opinion Barometer Report, Diagnosis of Quality of Life Reports, personal calculation

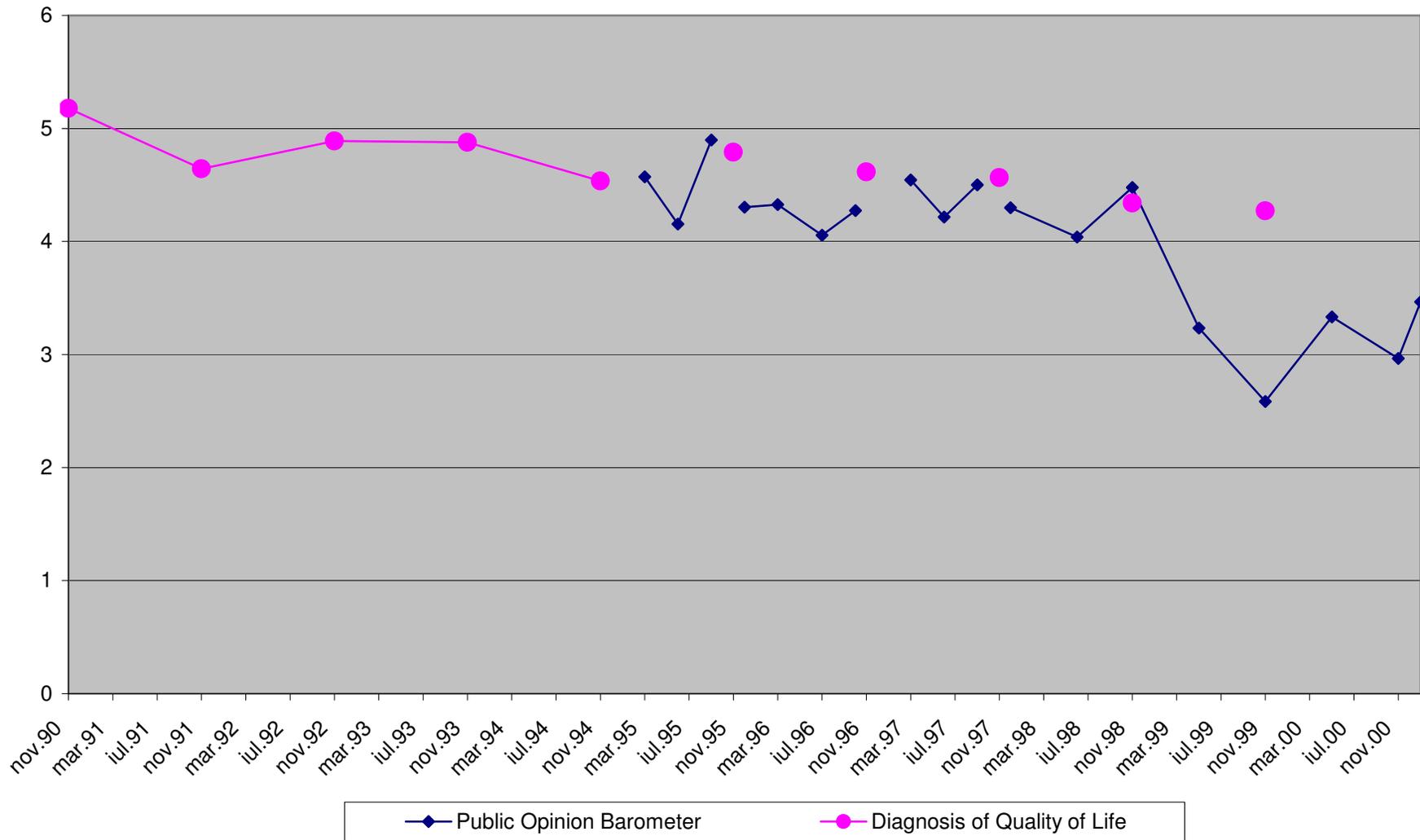


Figure 2. Comparative life satisfaction scores in Romania (1995-1998)
Selection of closest surveys in time, means transformed to 0-10 scale).

Sources: Public Opinion Barometer Report, Diagnosis of Quality of Life Reports, personal calculation

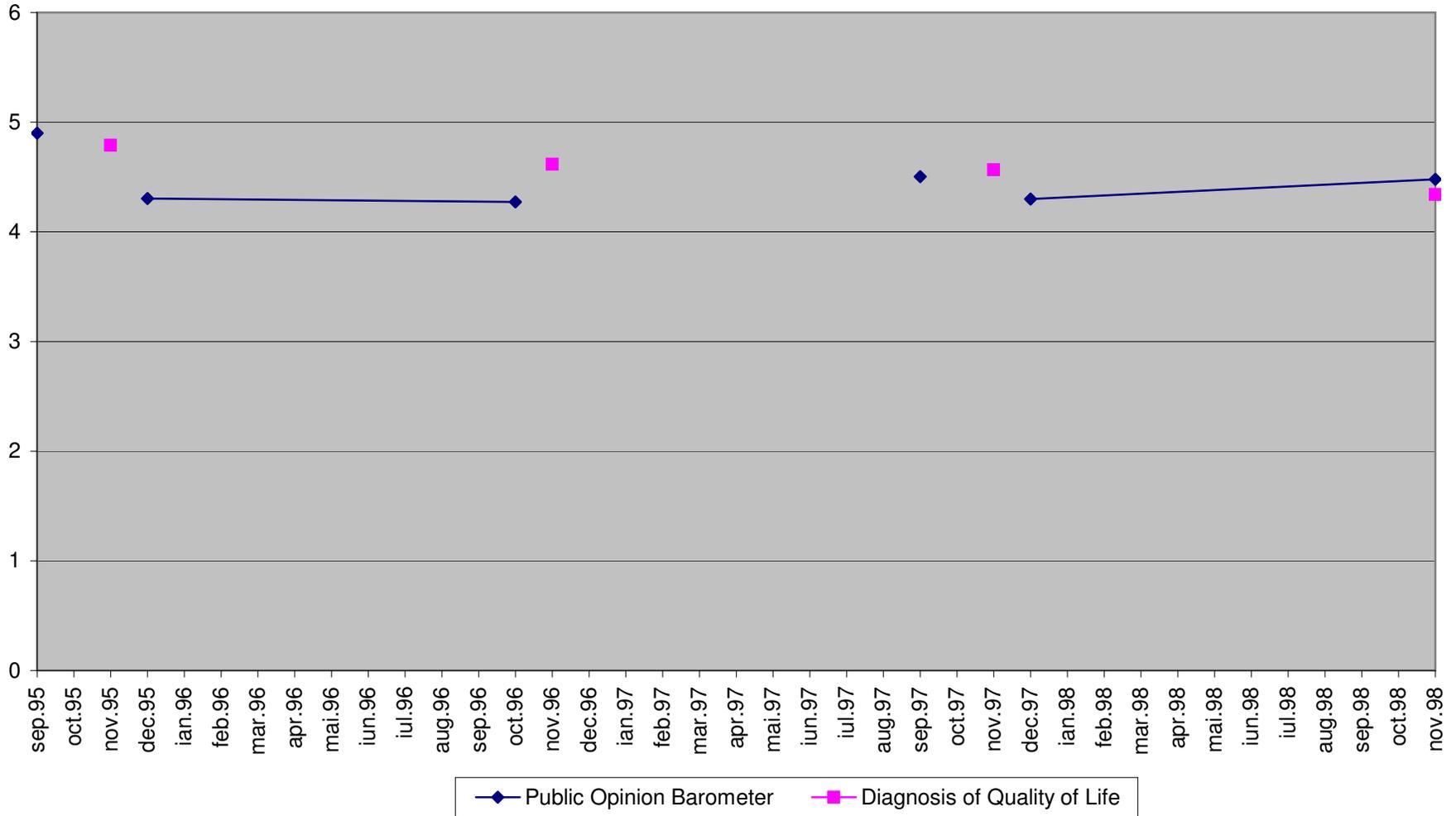


Figure 3. Real GDP (1989=100)
Source (RIQL database)

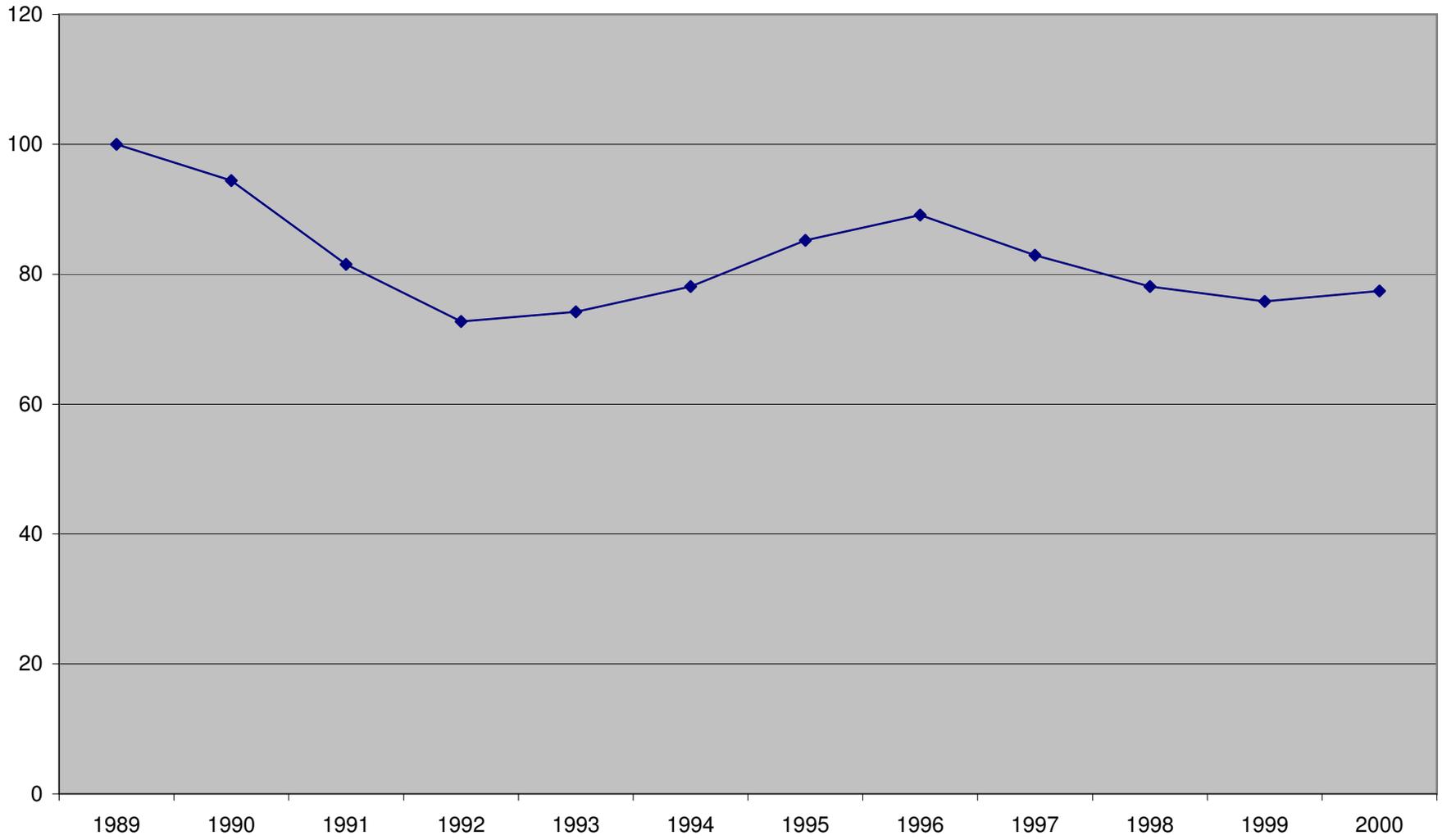


Figure 4. Annual variation of net real average earning in Romania.
(Source: RIQL database)

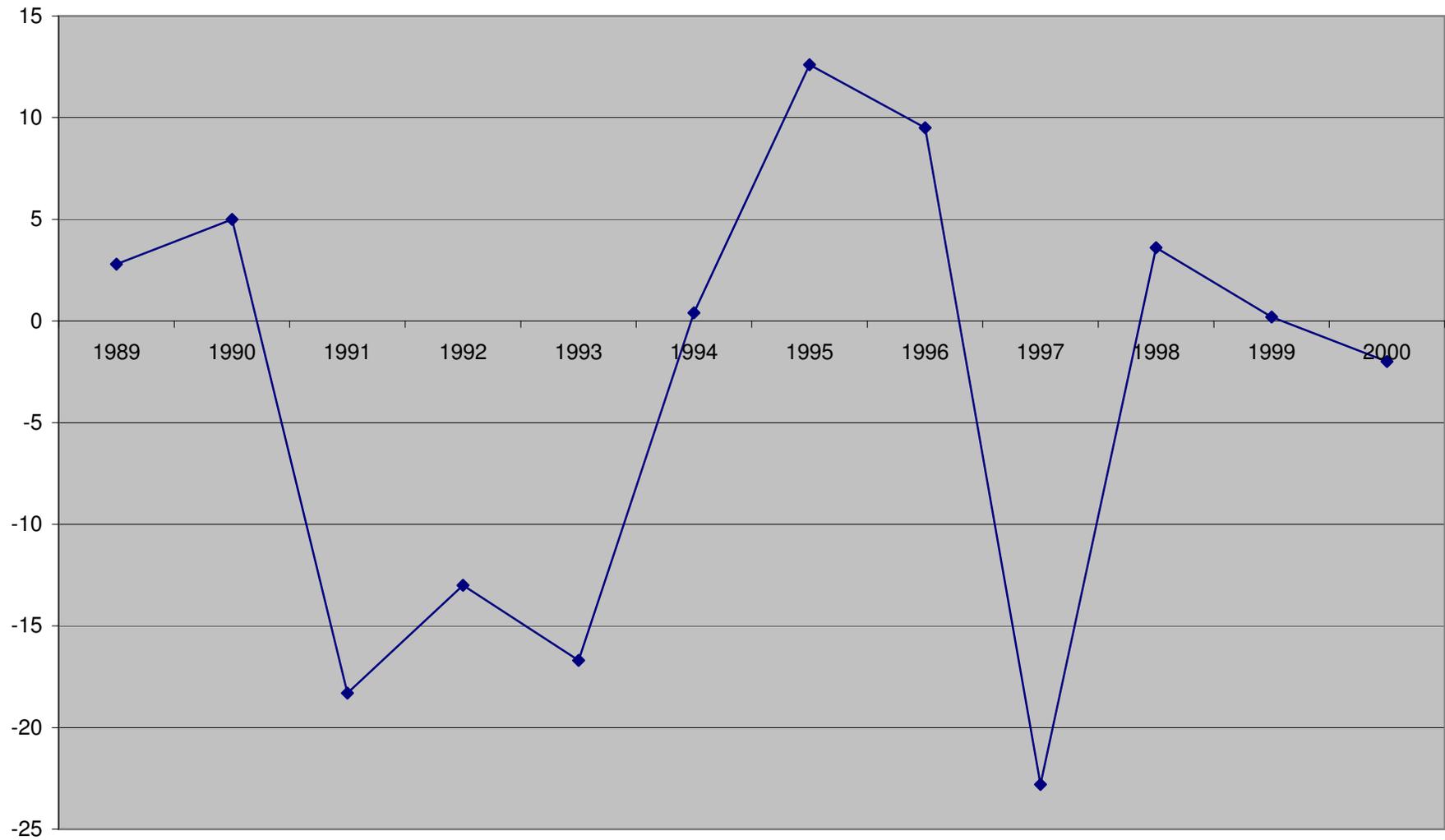


Figure 5. Poverty rate in Romania (1995-2000)
(Source: Zamfir,C.(coord.), 2001)

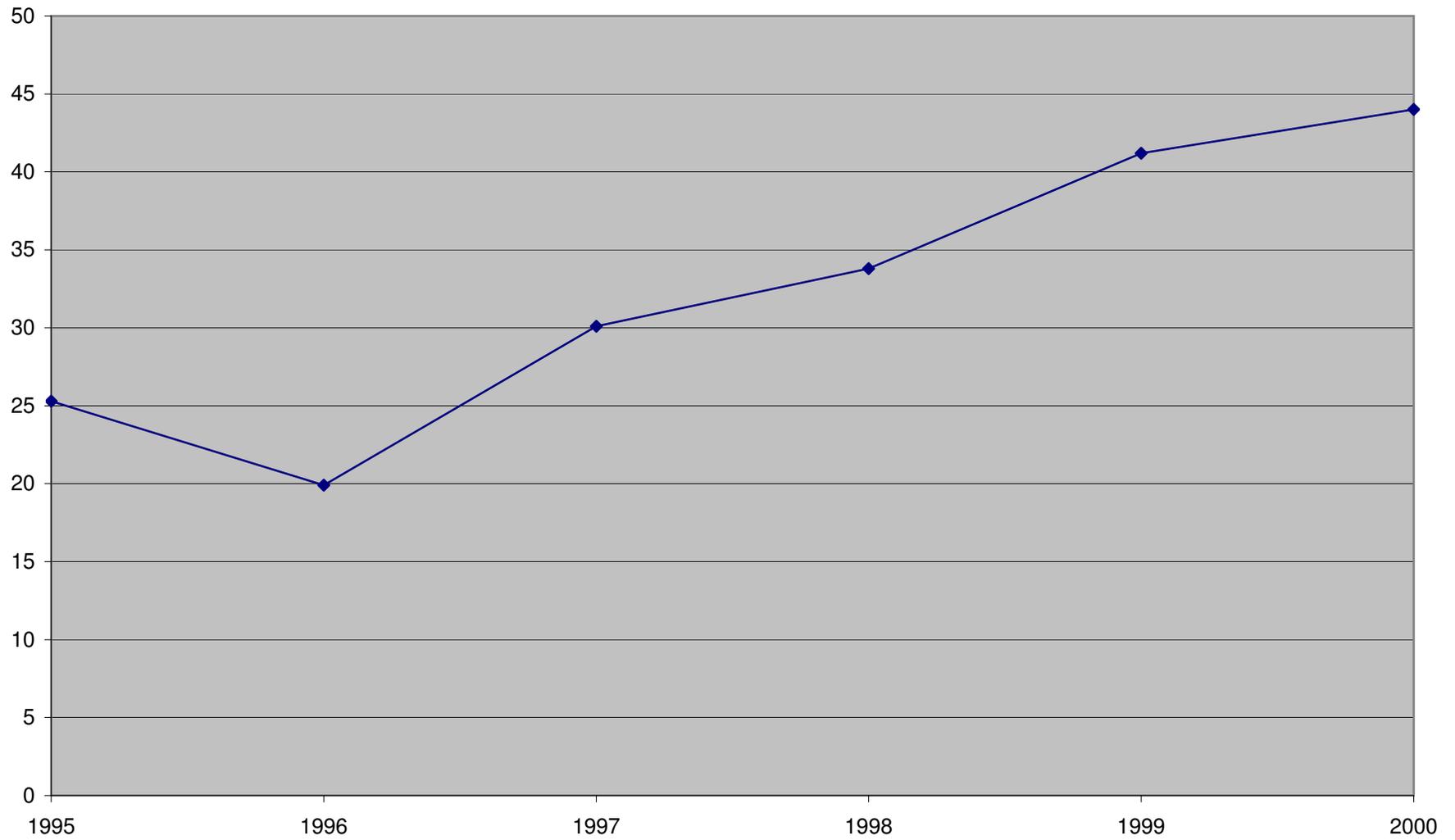


Figure 6. Trends in life satisfaction answers in Romania (1990-1999)

Sources: Diagnosis of Quality of Life Reports, personal calculation

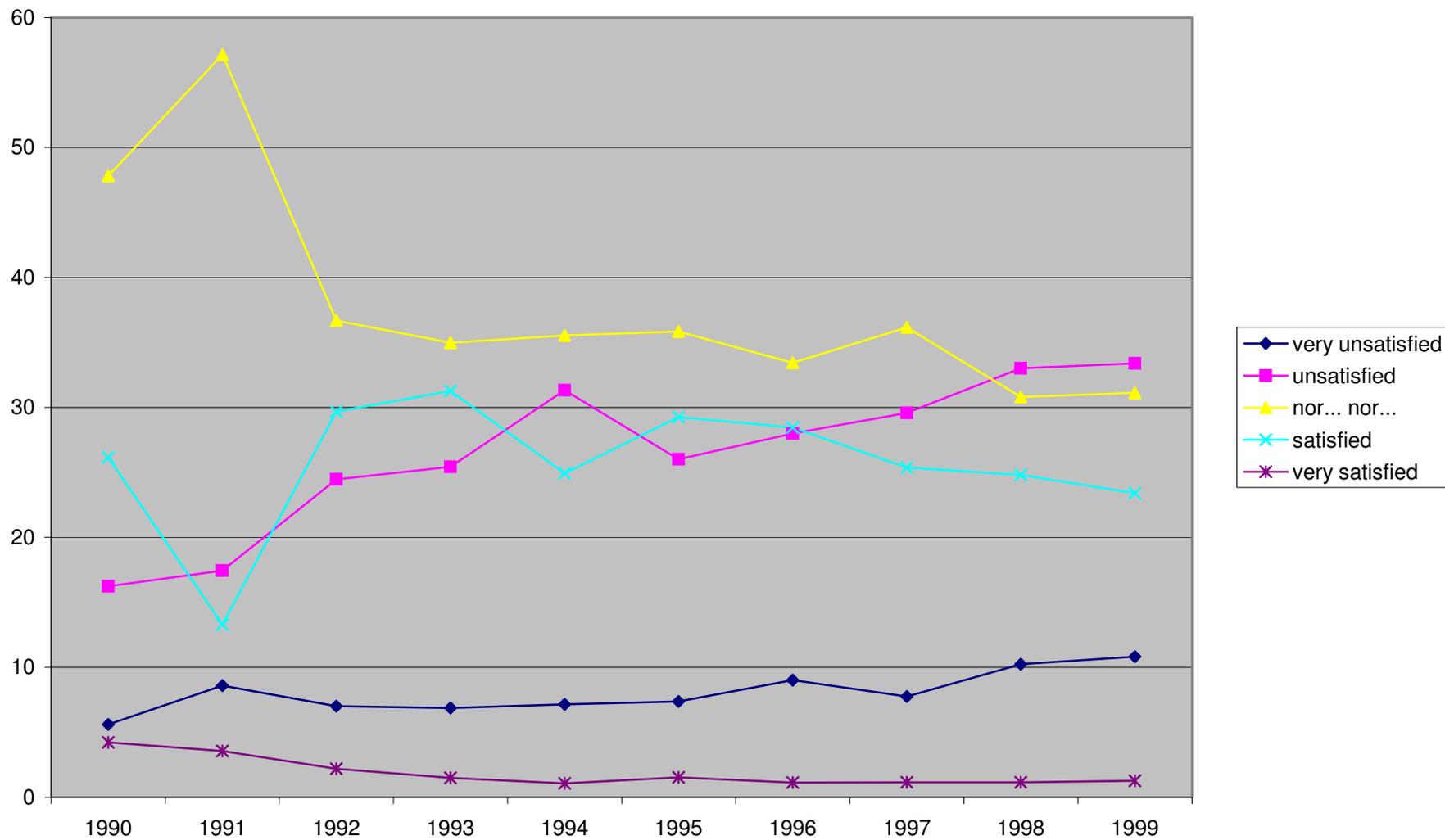
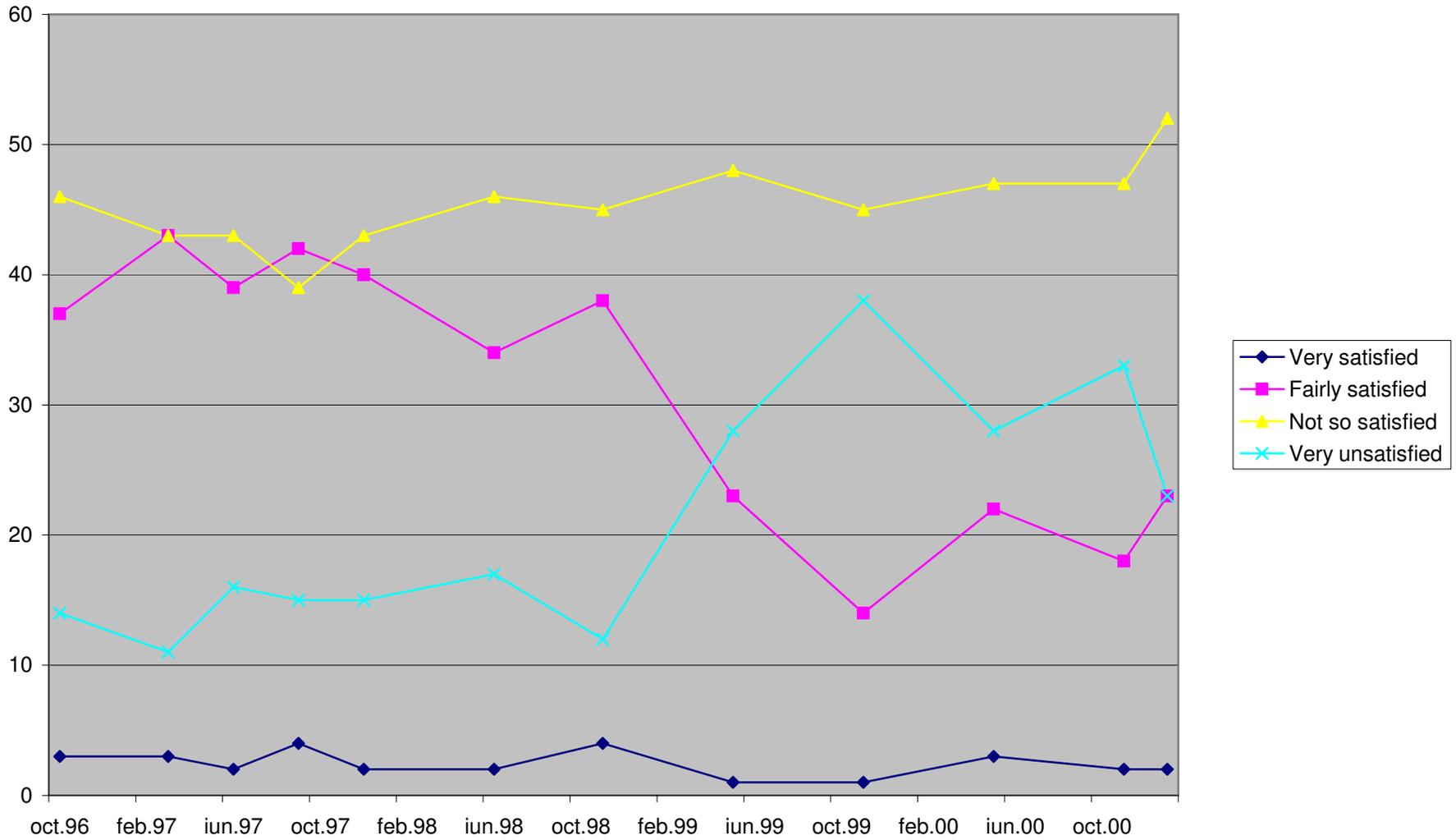


Figure 7. Trends in life satisfaction answers in Romania (1996-2001)
Sources: POB Reports, personal calculation



**Figure 8. Comparative life satisfaction scores in 5 European countries (1990-1999)
(means transformed to 0-10 scale)**

Sources: WORLD DATABASE OF HAPPINESS, Diagnosis of Quality of Life Reports,
personal calculation

