

# “Steaua Română” Refinery: The Landmark Without a Community

Ștefana Pascu

MArch, member of the Romanian Order of Architects  
stefana\_pascu@yahoo.com

**Keywords:** industrial heritage; “Steaua Română” refinery; Câmpina; post-industrial development

## Introduction

The oil refining industry has played a crucial role in Romania’s economic development and in shaping its European reputation since the 19th century. Romanian society widely appreciated the petroleum industry in its early years, as it brought wealth, modernization and stability for the local communities. “Steaua Română” refinery was founded in 1897 and operated continuously for 122 years. It is located in the central area of Câmpina and occupies a total surface of 17.3 hectares. The complex comprises nearly 400 structures, out of which about 180 possess historical or architectural value.<sup>1</sup> (Fig. 1) The entire ensemble is privately owned.

The Câmpina refinery is a complete and authentic oil-refining industrial complex that preserves structures dating from the 19th to the 21st century. The ensemble includes constructions from all historical periods since its foundation and encompasses the full range of technological processes used in the refinement of petroleum-based products.<sup>2</sup> The site also holds a rich collection of movable heritage, including installations, reservoirs and machinery specific to the industry – notable for their age, rarity, technologies used, provenance,<sup>3</sup> some of which are preserved in complete and functional condition.

It is the oldest existing refinery in Romania and the only one that has largely maintained its physical integrity and authenticity. Today, “Steaua Română” refinery remains Romania’s only complete historical industrial unit in the oil industry, both relevant and representative for the local and national identity.

Its historical role in Europe is notable. In the early 1900s it was the largest refinery in Europe and amongst the most modern in the world, playing a pivotal role in establishing Romania as a major oil-producing country. (Fig. 2) During key-moments such as the World Wars, “Steaua Română” refinery was a strategic objective. It was set on fire by the retreating allied armies during World War 1, then heavily bombed During World War 2,<sup>4</sup> causing production to halt several times, only to be promptly restored. In 1948, the refinery was taken over by the communist regime as part of its nationalization policy,<sup>5</sup> and its output supplied the USSR for a decade, until the end of the Soviet occupation.

1 Șerban Sturdza (coord.), “Rafinăria ‘Steaua Română’ din Câmpina – Studiu istorico-arhitectural de fundamentare pentru evaluarea resursei culturale” [Historical and Architectural Study for the Evaluation of the Cultural Resource in the case of “Steaua Română” Refinery in Câmpina], paper submitted to the attention of the National Commission of Historical Monuments (Bucharest, July 2024).

2 Gasoline, diesel, petroleum, paraffin, oils, greases, bitumen.

3 Famous Western brands, like Craig, Dubbs, Stratford, Allannor, White Spirit, Foamite, Gray, Reforming, McKee.

4 Campina refinery was identified as the “Red Target” during the famous American “Tidal Wave” raid, when 272 bombs dropped inside its perimeter and many more in the town.

5 Mădălin-Cristian Focșa, “Rafinăria ‘Steaua Română’, peisaj industrial unicat” [“Steaua Română” Refinery, a Unique Industrial Landscape], *Anuarul Societății de Științe Istorice din România – filiala Câmpina* 12 (2021): 262-63.

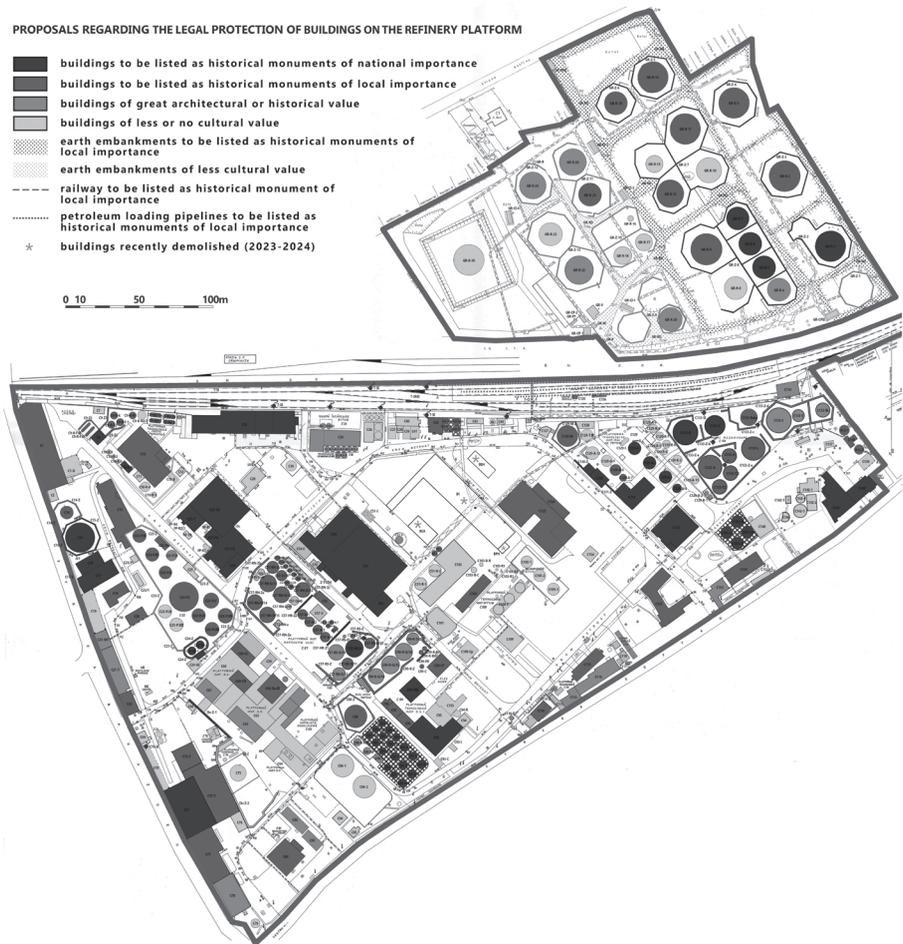


Fig. 1: Proposals regarding the legal protection of buildings

Fig. 2: “Steaua Română” refinery during the 1904-1905 expansion (facing page, up)

Fig. 3: General view of “Steaua Română” refinery (facing page, down)

“Steaua Română” refinery is unique worldwide, constituting a tangible testimony to the entire history of the Romanian oil industry, with echoes in global history. The ensemble illustrates the evolution of technology, science, and construction systems, as well as the development stages of the oil industry. Throughout its operational history, modernization processes consistently incorporated state-of-the-art equipment, often integrated without dismantling earlier installations, whose high technical quality enabled their productive use over extended periods. The refinery’s exceptional character is further reinforced by its complete functional autonomy, as it was fully self-sufficient in all essential utilities required for independent operation. These included on-site electricity generation, water supply, sewage networks, wastewater treatment facilities, and dedicated fire-fighting infrastructure.

Moreover, “Steaua Română” refinery constitutes the nucleus of a highly significant industrial cultural landscape. This landscape encompasses the activities and infrastructures associated with oil extraction (including both historic and contemporary operational drilling installations),



processing (the refinery complex itself), and transportation (the technological railway system and pipeline networks connecting the refinery to extraction areas and to the ports of Giurgiu and Constanța). It also includes the infrastructures and activities of related industries located in Câmpina and its surrounding areas, such as factories producing specialized equipment and spare parts, as well as institutions dedicated to research and education, notably the Oil and Gas Research and Design Institute and the Oil and Gas Technological High School in Câmpina.

After the refinery ceased operating in 2019, it became an important resource for the post-industrial development of Câmpina and Prahova Valley. "Steaua Română" refinery holds significant potential for urban reconfiguration and architectural conversion, owing to its scale, the richness of its textures and architectural forms, the versatility of its buildings and its impressive history. Redevelopment of the complex, along with its extensive immovable and movable heritage, calls for substantial urban interventions, including functional conversion projects designed in accordance with the principles of sustainable development. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 4: The paraffin plant, a building of great memorial value, which the main owner intends to demolish  
 Fig. 5: Plan of Câmpina that highlights the extent of the refinery in relation to the town's nucleus (facing page)

The conservation and adaptive reuse of industrial sites entail multiple technical and planning-related challenges: structural rehabilitation of buildings in order to get them up to code, reconfiguration of buildings for new uses and functions, conservation of historical structures, decontamination of polluted perimeters, urban planning for reconnecting the industrial site to the adjacent built areas and for reconfiguring the site to accommodate new construction in the existing ensembles. It requires long-term effort,<sup>6</sup> even when legislation, authorities, owners, local communities, and specialists collaborate to transform former industrial sites into modern complexes for living, working and leisure. But the fact of the matter is that in Romania industrial sites are currently undergoing a “post-industrial revolution,” which, much alike the industrial revolution, fails to value their architecture, whether for reasons similar to, or entirely different from, those that prevailed 150 years ago. Unfortunately, “Steaua Română” refinery is no exception. Its post-industrial journey has been, and still is, a roller-coaster of challenges. (Fig. 4)

The company that operated the refinery after 1990 went bankrupt in February 2021.<sup>7</sup> The same year, the refinery changed owners twice, drew the attention of the local civil society and became the subject of both a historical site listing procedure<sup>8</sup> and two lawsuits contesting that procedure. Although civil society called for dialogue between all the stakeholders, the discussions remained too general to initiate action, let alone coordinated or planned operations. The local community’s response was limited to minimal engagement, despite awareness-raising activities undertaken by local NGOs.<sup>9</sup>

6 Cristina Purcar (coord.), *The Art of Urban Design – A critical catalogue of post-industrial regeneration in the work of Marcel Smets* (Cluj-Napoca, 2024).

7 S.C. Rafinăria Steaua Română S.A.

8 The listing procedure for “Steaua Română” refinery as a historical ensemble was opened on December 9th, 2021, following notification registered on April 14th, 2021, by the local NGO Asociația Cultural-Educativă pentru Protejarea și Promovarea Patrimoniului Tehnic, Științific și Istoric “Suntem România!”. The railroad used for transporting raw and processed materials is also a subject of a listing procedure, opened on November 4th, 2021, following the request of the same NGO.

9 In 2021, “Rafinaria la prezent” (Refinery Now! Civic Initiative Group) started a petition requesting the stakeholders to protect the refinery’s industrial heritage. In 2022, Refinery Now! co-hosted alongside the main owner of the platform the “Open refinery” event, which welcomed inside the complex approximately 3,000 visitors in 2 days.



### The Appeal of the Former Industrial Platform

Oil industry pioneering. Authentic architectural heritage. Historic installations. Specific textures. Famous events and personalities. Unique landmarks. Central location. Profit. Is “Steaua Română” refinery more profitable as a combined conversion and new building ensemble preserving its *spiritus loci* or is it more profitable to demolish the entire platform and replace it with a completely modern complex? The question is still to be answered. The facts show that, since 2023, following the request of the main owner,<sup>10</sup> the municipality issued thirteen urban planning certificates for the demolition of the entire complex, except three production halls. There are no studies, proposals or timelines regarding the future development plans of the ensemble that literally encloses roughly 20% of the town’s nucleus. Thus, Câmpina continues to struggle with connectivity disfunctions, the blockage of urban regeneration, economic stagnation and the potential loss of its landmark heritage and social identity. The only perspective is that of a massive bare land in the center of the town, probably destined for a massive construction operation that would generate a massive profit. (Fig. 5)

### Law and Governance

In the case of “Steaua Română” refinery, the authorities, both central and local, failed to take action. Although Romania has been having for centuries an intense industrial activity, there are no state or regional policies regarding the protection, funding, conservation, conversion or reconfiguration of its industrial platforms.

In Romania, only about 2% of the listed historical monuments are modern and contemporary industrial structures,<sup>11</sup> including different types of plants, production halls, hydrotechnical structures, warehouses, furnaces, mining sites, but no refineries. Unless an industrial complex is a historical monument or it is located in a built protected area, it can legally be demolished or transformed regardless of its potential cultural value. The regular and emergency listing procedures are difficult to apply for industrial sites which usually comprise tens or hundreds of structures spread over large areas. Law no. 6/2008 on the legal regime of technical and industrial heritage consists of 8 articles of fairly general provisions. There are no methodological implementation guidelines for this law and no specific assessment criteria for the mobile and immobile elements characteristic to various industries. In order to include an industrial site or building in the List of Historical Monuments, Romanian professionals use the guidelines elaborated for Law no. 422/2001 on the preservation of historical monuments, which aren’t entirely applicable to this architectural program. Moreover, certain provisions of the law are ambiguous or incomplete. There are no timelines regarding how soon the authorities have to open the regular listing procedure after being officially notified.<sup>12</sup> For the emergency listing procedure, the law specifies a 3-day timeline<sup>13</sup> for the authorities to open the procedure after they have been officially notified about the urgency *or* after the date they have documented the emergency situation. The time difference between being notified and eventually documenting the situation creates the possibility for the endangered objectives to suffer permanent damage or to be completely destroyed. Also, the emergency is defined in terms of physical degradation, not taking into consideration the legal actions taken with the intent to demolish the objectives in question.<sup>14</sup> As for the penalties appli-

10 Who holds about 98% of the refinery.

11 Ioana-Irina Iamandescu, “Patrimoniul industrial în România – despre stadiul inventarierii specializate” [Industrial Heritage in Romania – About the Stage of the Specialized Inventory], *Arhitectura* 4-5 (2017), <https://arhitectura-1906.ro/2018/10/patrimoniul-industrial-in-romania-despre-stadiul-inventarierii-specializate/>.

12 Order of the Ministry of Culture 2260/2008 on the listing and inventorying of historical monuments.

13 *Ibid.*, art. 23, (3).

14 *Ibid.*, art. 23, (1).

cable for crimes against historical monuments, Law no. 6/2008 has no provisions, while no. Law 422/2001 has only warning provisions<sup>15</sup> that need to be correlated with provision of laws that don't regulate specifically the cultural heritage domain. Thus, in the Romanian legislation there are only three articles that establish indirectly the penalties for crimes against built heritage.<sup>16</sup>

### Professionals Have a Say

While having to navigate the underfunded and underregulated field of the industrial built heritage, Romanian professionals often collaborate with the already overwhelmed civil society in order to research, valorize, lobby for and safeguard these sites.

In the case of "Steaua Română" refinery, NGOs and heritage specialists<sup>17</sup> conducted extended research, completely pro bono, and presented it to the highest decisional authority in the field, the National Commission for Historical Monuments, whose resolution stated:

"An industrial complex that has evolved coherently for 125 years cannot be the subject of punctual demolitions. Therefore, it is necessary for it to be listed as a historical ensemble with precisely identifiable components and only then the elimination of the unlisted components can be considered, as they will be proven to be devoid of any cultural value."<sup>18</sup>

To this date, the regional authorities did not complete the dossier for the listing procedure regarding the refinery. Moreover, in 2024, experienced and highly reputed architects, urban and landscape planners, heritage specialists, historians, geographers, engineers, curators reunited in Câmpina and signed a Memorandum, declaring:

"We consider that 'Steaua Română' refinery in Câmpina is a national priority in terms of the protection of movable and immovable heritage in Romania, as it is the most comprehensive and coherent expression - preserved in situ today - of the importance of the oil industry in the modernization of Romania, and it represents a cultural identitarian heritage for which the national interest requires sustainable valorization."<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, "Steaua Română" industrial site is gradually degrading as it is not being minimally attended. On the contrary, the nature that invaded it is romantically praised by its main owner as refinery's swan song. (Fig. 6)

### Conclusion. A Community Without a Past is a Community Without a Future

Câmpina and its refinery grew and thrived together. "Steaua Română" ensemble was built, put and kept in operation, enlarged, rebuilt, maintained and modernized by local and naturalized<sup>20</sup>

15 Chrisanta-Daniela Nichifor, "Protecția penală a patrimoniului cultural național" [Criminal Protection of National Cultural Heritage] (PhD diss., "Nicolae Titulescu" University, Bucharest, 2009).

16 Art.24, (1), a) in Law no. 50/1991 on the authorization of the execution of construction works that establishes the punishments for crimes related to all types of construction works and documentation and art. 217-218 in the Romanian Penal Code that regulate the punishments in cases of destruction and qualified destruction of goods and property.

17 Pro Patrimonio Romania Foundation endorsed the "Historic and Architectural Study for the Evaluation of the Cultural Resource in the case of 'Steaua Română' Refinery in Câmpina," initiated by local researchers hist. Mădălin Focșa and arch. Ștefana Pascu and coordinated by arch. Serban Sturdza.

18 Order of the Day for July 17th 2024 for the National Commission of Historical Monuments – Registration Committee and Summary of the resolutions adopted on July 19th 2024 by the National Commission of Historical Monuments – Registration Committee (<https://www.cultura.ro/sectiunea-de-evidenta/>).

19 Memorandum on "Steaua Română" Refinery Cultural Value (extract), adopted on July 15th 2024 in Câmpina, <https://www.propatrimonio.org/memorandum-pentru-sustinerea-principiilor-de-actiune-in-vederea-conservarii-si-punerii-in-valoare-a-resursei-culturale-rafinaria-steaua-romana-campina/>.

20 Câmpina had become a cosmopolitan town, with German, Italian, Polish, Dutch, Hungarian and Austrian





Fig. 6: The McKee ensemble, covered in vegetation – in the foreground, the “buried” reservoirs and in the background, the vacuum distillation unit and its pump house

Fig. 7: The cooling tower, a landmark for the community, marking an established meeting point, and assigning the name of the nearby intersection and of the public transport stations in its vicinity (planned for demolition)

oil-men for almost 125 years. Rising proud in the very heart of Cămpina, “Steaua Română” refinery is more isolated than it has ever been. And not because of the 3-meter-high opaque wall surrounding the site for safety reasons. Its symbolism for the local community became limited to those aspects that the collective memory identifies as a source of pride.<sup>21</sup> The connection between past and present seems to be lost, as an entire community overlooks day after day the benefits the refinery could bring to the town’s future, by preserving the local identity according to the concepts of conservation, sustainability and adaptive reuse. (Fig. 7)

Since 2021, the civil society implemented many projects<sup>22</sup> for raising awareness about the symbolic and identitarian value of the refinery in the context of the latest development practices around the world. The locals have been continuously advised on the benefits and wide range of opportunities that historic communities have by using their specificity as a resource for the present and for the future. Still, these efforts had little impact on the local community, which is constantly targeted by manipulative campaigns, the last of which went so far that it involved defamation of heritage specialists and their research.<sup>23</sup> Blunt misinformation accompanied the launch of a petition<sup>24</sup> against heritage protection in Cămpina, strongly depicting historical monuments as the fundamental obstruction of the town’s urban development.

Romania is at a point where the low level of education<sup>25</sup> of the general population, the small number of professionals involved in this niche domain, the great financial value of the land for investors, corruption, the authorities’ lack of vision and the absence of dedicated programs and policies concur to the disadvantage of the already vulnerable industrial ensembles. In spite all these obstacles, the efforts to safeguard “Steaua Română” refinery are ongoing, as it is – still – the key-resource for the post-industrial development of Cămpina and one of the most important oil-related industrial ensembles in Romania, relevant for the domain worldwide.

---

communities congregated here as a result of the jobs available in the oil-refining industry.

21 The largest refinery in Europe in the pre-war period, the only refinery in Romania that produced paraffin, etc.

22 Refinery Now! Civic Initiative Group conducted research, published articles and organized exhibitions and conferences in Cămpina, Bucharest, Braşov, Sibiu, Cluj. Pro Patrimoni Romania Foundation lobbied for the conservation of “Steaua Română” refinery and started a petition requesting the central authorities to complete the listing procedure of the ensemble as a historical site, <https://campaniamea.declic.ro/petitions/clasarea-ansamblului-industrial-al-fostei-rafinarii-steaua-romana-campina>.

23 Disputing the conclusions of the Historical Study elaborated in 2025 as part of Cămpina’s General Local Urban Planning Documentation update [https://campinatv.ro/News/Article/2939f3c6-37e7-4c9d-7355-54d576ab52cd\\_sute-de-familii-din-campina-nu-vor-mai-putea-sa-schimbe-o-tigla-pe-casa-daca-pug-ul-se-aproba-in-forma-actuala](https://campinatv.ro/News/Article/2939f3c6-37e7-4c9d-7355-54d576ab52cd_sute-de-familii-din-campina-nu-vor-mai-putea-sa-schimbe-o-tigla-pe-casa-daca-pug-ul-se-aproba-in-forma-actuala) (accessed on November 1st 2025).

24 [https://www.petitieonline.com/nu\\_blocai\\_oraul\\_lsai\\_campina\\_s\\_se\\_dezvolte](https://www.petitieonline.com/nu_blocai_oraul_lsai_campina_s_se_dezvolte) (accessed on November 1st 2025).

25 In 2023, in Romania, 20.9% of the population aged 25 to 54 had completed tertiary education, while 51.9% had a medium educational attainment level in vocational classes and 7.8% had a medium general education attainment level (2023). In 2022, 89% of the students in elementary and lower secondary school tested “non-functional” or “minimum functional” in literacy.

## REFERENCE LIST:

- Focșa, Mădălin-Cristian. "Rafinăria 'Steaua Română', peisaj industrial unicat." *Anuarul Societății de Științe Istorice din România – filiala Câmpina* 12 (2021): 246-65.
- Iamandescu, Ioana-Irina, "Patrimoniul industrial în România – despre stadiul inventarierii specializate." *Arhitectura* 4-5 (2017). Accessed on April 13th 2025. <https://arhitectura-1906.ro/2018/10/patrimoniul-industrial-in-romania-despre-stadiul-inventarierii-specializate/>
- "Memorandum on 'Steaua Română' Refinery Cultural Value." Câmpina, July 15, 2024. Accessed April 13th, 2025. <https://www.propatrimonio.org/memorandum-pentru-sustinerea-principiilor-de-actiune-in-vederea-conservarii-si-punerii-in-valoare-a-resursei-culturale-rafinaria-steaua-romana-campina/>.
- Nichifor, Chrisanta-Daniela. "Protecția penală a patrimoniului cultural national." PhD dissertation. "Nicolae Titulescu" University, Bucharest, 2009.
- Purcar, Cristina (coord.). *The Art of Urban Design – A critical catalogue of post-industrial regeneration in the work of Marcel Smets*. Cluj-Napoca, 2024.
- Sturdza, Șerban (coord.). "Rafinăria 'Steaua Română' din Câmpina – Studiu istorico-arhitectural de fundamentare pentru evaluarea resursei culturale." Paper submitted to the National Commission of Historical Monuments, Bucharest, July 2024.
- Law no. 50/1991 on the authorization of the execution of construction works. *Monitorul Oficial al României*, Part I, no. 933, October 13, 2004.
- Law no. 422/2001 on the preservation of historical monuments. *Monitorul Oficial al României*, Part I, no. 407, July 24, 2001.
- Law no. 6/2008 on the legal regime of technical and industrial heritage. *Monitorul Oficial al României*, Part I, no. 489, June 14, 2018.
- Order of the Ministry of Culture no. 2260/2008 on the listing and inventorying of historical monuments. *Monitorul Oficial al României*, Part I, no. 926, December 30, 2008.
- The Romanian Penal Code (Law no. 286/2009). *Monitorul Oficial al României*, Part I, no. 510, July 24, 2009.
- [https://portal.just.ro/3/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id\\_dosar=300000000544191&id\\_inst=3](https://portal.just.ro/3/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id_dosar=300000000544191&id_inst=3).  
Last modified May 3, 2022.
- [https://portal.just.ro/64/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id\\_dosar=10500000000173824&id\\_inst=64](https://portal.just.ro/64/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id_dosar=10500000000173824&id_inst=64).  
Last modified June 9, 2023.
- [https://portal.just.ro/105/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id\\_dosar=10500000000176107&id\\_inst=105](https://portal.just.ro/105/SitePages/Dosar.aspx?id_dosar=10500000000176107&id_inst=105). Last modified January 26, 2023.
- <https://www.cultura.ro/sectiunea-de-evidenta> (accessed on April 13th 2025).
- <https://campaniamea.declic.ro/petitions/cere-proprietarilor-rafinariei-campina-sa-protejeze-patrimoniul-industrial>. Accessed April 13, 2025.
- <https://campaniamea.declic.ro/petitions/clasarea-ansamblului-industrial-al-fostei-rafinarii-steaua-romana-campina>. Accessed April 13th, 2025.
- <https://oglindadeazi.ro/breaking-news/in-ultimii-30-de-ani-campina-a-pierdut-30-din-populatie/>. Last modified February 15th, 2024.
- [https://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Tabel-1.03\\_1.3.1-si-1.03.2.xls](https://www.recensamantromania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Tabel-1.03_1.3.1-si-1.03.2.xls). Accessed April 13, 2025.
- [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational\\_attainment\\_statistics#Distribution\\_of\\_the\\_EU\\_population\\_by\\_educational\\_attainment\\_in\\_2023](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Educational_attainment_statistics#Distribution_of_the_EU_population_by_educational_attainment_in_2023). Last modified May 5, 2024.
- <https://www.romania-insider.com/romania-students-literacy-levels-report>. Last modified May 13, 2022.

## ILLUSTRATION CREDITS:

- Fig. 1, 5: Șerban Sturdza (coord.), "Rafinăria 'Steaua Română' din Câmpina – Studiu istorico-arhitectural de fundamentare pentru evaluarea resursei culturale" [Historical and Architectural Study for the Evaluation of the Cultural Resource in the case of "Steaua Română" Refinery in Câmpina], Appendix 7.
- Fig. 2: Mădălin Focșa digital collection (copy of a postcard).
- Fig. 3: Photo: Andrei Giuclea.
- Fig. 4: Photo: Mădălin Focșa.
- Fig. 6: Photo: Daniel Nica.
- Fig. 7: Photo: Ștefana Pascu.