

Moldovan Student Sponsorship Newsletter

Edited by Marcy McHenry
sponsorship@carolinaadoption.org

Social Control

by Angela Arhip

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Even though we are at the end of the school year, between exams and the emotions of change, this quarter's meeting will not be spent discussing graduation. That will be the theme of our next meeting. Instead, we will explore a subject that influences our daily lives, often without us even noticing it. It shapes our behavior, our decisions, and the way we interact with others. The topic of today's discussion is "Social Control", prepared and presented by Kristina and Diana.



Social Control: Between Conformism and the Illusion of Freedom

Although we perceive ourselves as fully autonomous beings, our personality is, to a large extent, shaped by the system of social control. Social control refers to the set of norms, rules, and mechanisms through which a society regulates the behavior of its members, ensuring order, stability, and social cohesion. From the moment we are born, the process of socialization through family, school, friends, and the media teaches us what is considered acceptable and desirable behavior. Over time, these external rules become internalized and transform into what we call conscience, values, and personal principles.

Social control takes three main forms. The first is **formal control**, exercised by institutions such as the police, courts, and other state authorities. It is based on written laws and regulations, and violations may result in sanctions such as fines or imprisonment. The second is **informal control**, carried out by family, friends, colleagues, and the wider community through traditions, customs, praise, criticism, approval, or disapproval. The third form is **self-control**, which develops when individuals internalize social norms and follow them because they genuinely believe they are right, not merely because they fear punishment.

Stereotypes and prejudices play a major role in this equation. They act as ready-made filters provided by society, dictating how we should think, feel, or react based on gender, status, or profession. Out of fear of marginalization or group judgment (informal social control), we often censor our authenticity and mold our personality traits to fit collective standards, turning social labels into our own psychological limits.

In modern society, social control has become far more subtle than in the past. While previous generations were mainly influenced by family, local communities, or state institutions, today digital technologies play an increasingly important role. Every internet search, social media interaction, and GPS-tracked movement leaves digital traces that can be analyzed and used to influence behavior. Social media algorithms personalize content to keep users engaged, creating so-called "filter bubbles" in which people are exposed mainly to information that confirms their existing beliefs. As a result, dialogue between different perspectives decreases, while social polarization increases.

The greatest challenge of modernity remains the illusion of absolute freedom and independence. We are convinced that we make conscious and original choices, yet we ignore the subtle influence of marketing and market products. Modern advertising no longer sells mere objects, but rather identities, lifestyles, and states of mind. By creating artificial needs, the consumer society manipulates our deepest desires and alters our value system, compelling us to act and think in predetermined ways, even though we experience these as deeply personal choices.

At the same time, democratic societies are attempting to limit the risks associated with digital forms of social control. Regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the EU AI Act aim to increase transparency in algorithmic systems and prevent the misuse of artificial intelligence for social manipulation or citizen classification. More broadly, formal social control, exercised through laws, regulations, and state institutions, establishes clear boundaries between what is permitted and what is forbidden, while fostering civic responsibility and respect for social norms.

Social control brings important benefits, including order, security, cooperation, and social solidarity. However, when applied excessively, it can restrict individual freedom, suppress creativity, generate stress, and even become a tool of oppression. The challenge of the 21st century is to find a balance between the advantages of social regulation and the protection of privacy, personal autonomy, and freedom of thought.

The students enjoyed a lively discussion, a delicious lunch and were appreciative of the initiative and time devoted to preparation and facilitation of the discussion by their fellow student leaders.