STUDIA UBB SOCIOLOGIA, 68 (LXVIII), 2, 2023, pp. 17-34
DOI: 10.2478/subbs-2023-0006

PRECARIOUS INDUSTRIAL LABOUR AT THE EDGE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: THE CASE OF BAIA MARE

Raluca PERNEŞ[1]

ABSTRACT: Tens of thousands of labourers work in the factories in and around Baia Mare, a city that is being reindustrialized after an initial industrialization under state socialism. In 2021, most workers were being paid about 280 euro a month, as companies were aiming to achieve the lowest possible production costs while remaining within the European Union. Workers and their families, unable to make do on their low wages alone, constantly scramble for means to supplement their income. Many work overtime systematically; some choose to migrate for work abroad for a few months every year; yet others quit their factory jobs for more lucrative opportunities during the summers, only to return to the factories in the autumn. In this paper, I look at the industrial history of Baia Mare and the work lives of labourers to understand how the workers in the region were impacted by the politics of dispossession. I use two complementary lenses: on the one hand, I understand their position at the junction of global, national, and local forces; on the other hand, I underline the ways in which this specific case speaks to the workings of global capital, not as an exception, but as one of many interconnected stories of human experience.

Keywords*:* labour, dispossession, capitalism, Romania

On a hot summer day, Lia is waiting at the railway station for her partner, who has been away for work for three weeks. She is 32, Roma, pregnant with her fourth child, and holding the hand of her youngest, a feisty six-year-old with a hip dysplasia. Lia is a full-time upholsterer at a furniture factory in Baia Mare. She lives with her son and her partner in a shack with no running water on the outskirts of the city. Her previous partner, the father of her three children, has passed away and her eldest two are with foster families in a nearby village.

[1] *Department of Sociology, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca;* rpernes@yahoo.com.

Lia has bad teeth and a sharp tongue and tells us[2] she also grew up in care, as did her youngest until recently. It might have seemed she was doing well for herself – she graduated high school with a diploma and a trade (unlike many of her now colleagues), was always in employment, loves upholstering and is good at it. Yet, she made so little money she was unable to provide an adequate home for her children and they were removed by the state. With her most recent job, she finally managed to work overtime so much that she was adding another 65% to her base minimum wage, thus qualifying to take one of her children back. She dreams of one day moving to a village nearby, in a house with a proper toilet, from where she would commute to work and where she would raise all her children. Now, she calls her eldest two every day, but only gets to see them on Sundays.

From 2020 to 2023, but mainly in 2021, I conducted field research about work in the factories in and around Baia Mare, doing interviews on my own or in a pair with one of several colleagues in the same project. We interviewed workers, contacting them in the public spaces where they take buses or minibuses to and from work, in the neighbourhoods, settlements or villages where they live, as well as through friends and acquaintances in Baia Mare who knew them directly. We also interviewed middle managers from several factories, most of whom we approached through mutual acquaintances, including other managers. Efforts to speak to top managers, to whom I reached out repeatedly through emails and phone calls at the factories, proved less successful. Finally, we interviewed representatives of the local administration and one of the journalists who is most familiar with the topic of factories and work in the factories in Baia Mare. I base my analysis and arguments below on information collected from these interviews. As an auctorial voice, I use "we" to acknowledge work conducted with colleagues and "I" where I am solely responsible for data collection and analysis.

Baia Mare, a city of about 110,000 in the north-west of Romania and the seat of the county Maramureș, is home to the second largest single-platform employer in Romania, the furniture producer Aramis. Baia Mare and its metropolitan area are also host to several medium-sized factories and workshops, employing approximately 20,000 workers, many on minimum wage, to produce furniture, mattresses, electrical parts, aerospace products, shoes and clothing.

[2] This research has been supported by the Norwegian Grants 2014–2021 (Project no. 22/2020), within the project "Precarious labour and peripheral housing. The socio-economic practices of Roma from Romania in the context of industrial relations and unequal territorial development", conducted between 2020 and 2023. I conducted interviews on my own, as well as in pairs with Andreea Ferenț, Denisa Duma, Ionuț Földes, and Neda Deneva, as part of Work Package 4 – "The Transformation of Labour", coordinated by Neda Deneva.

For most of the counties in the region, the proportion of employees on the minimum wage is about 10% (Guga, 2021). In 2021, more than one third of the employees in Romania were earning only the minimum wage of 2300 lei (about 470 euro) gross, 1386 lei (about 283 euro) net (Reştea 2023) – the second lowest minimum salary in the European Union. This jumped to more than two thirds of all employees in Maramureş, the county of Baia Mare (Şomănescu, 2018), the largest proportion in the country. Adding to this, the purchasing power of the minimum wage in Romania is about half the minimum wages in Western Europe (Guga, 2021).

Baia Mare, thus, is at once the site of several prosperous factories and workshops and one of the poorest urban contexts in the European Union, with many people barely scraping a living, despite working full time on the factory shopfloor. Under state socialism, the city provided a relatively good standard of living for most. In the 1990s, in the context of a hesitant state unable to adapt to the new economic context, Baia Mare underwent deindustrialization and a considerable share of its population slipped into poverty. Romania's economy has picked up considerably in the meanwhile, but this has not been reflected in welfare for most. A large share of Baia Mare's population is still poor, a result of being placed in an unfortunate configuration in relation to global capital and of insufficient social protection from the state.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the continual erosion of living standards over decades and the concerted move of capital to coopt – that is to say, to manufacture consent (Burawoy, 1982) – and disorganise factory workers has left little space for political action from the working class. Carbonella and Kasmir begin their 2014 "Introduction to Blood and Fire" by pointing out that recent mass demonstrations and protests in many parts of the world had brought attention to the social precariousness and political exclusion at work in the underbelly of neoliberal globalization (Carbonella and Kasmir, 2014). By contrast, this article will try to shed light on the very salient lack of manifest resistance surrounding the same phenomena in this part of Romania.

At its core, Baia Mare illustrates dependent development under neoliberalism – most citizens remain precarious, and the state focuses on stimulating foreign investment based on cheap and flexible work, as well as fiscal facilities. It is a condition whereby society at large does not benefit from the redistribution of wealth produced in the country (Ban, 2014). It is an instance of "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2003), to use the concept coined by Harvey to mark the ongoing nature of capital accumulation, beyond the primitive or original capital accumulation. And while analysing capital accumulation involves looking at a range of large-scale economic processes (Harvey, 2003), these are, of course, always embedded in a social context (Polanyi, 2013).

To provide focus in this very type of analysis, Carbonella and Kasmir (2014) propose the concept of "the politics of dispossession", mapping the way capital and the state repeatedly undermine the power of the working classes – a process understood as social and cultural, as well as economic. To understand how the politics of dispossession are enacted and what their impact is on the lives of individuals, I focus the lens on the shopfloor and the everyday lives of labourers in and around Baia Mare to ask, as Burawoy (1982) did: why do workers work as hard as they do?

In what follows, then, I look at the workers in the Baia Mare factories to understand how they became a poster child for the politics of dispossession in the semi-periphery of the European Union and, moreover, how they came to embrace their position with very little political resistance. I use two complementary lenses: on the one hand, I explore their position at the junction of global, national, and local forces; on the other hand, I underline the ways in which this specific case speaks to the workings of global capital, not as an exception, but as one of many interconnected stories of human experience.

I look at the historical, social, and economic processes that led to the development of the industrial site that is contemporary Baia Mare. I begin with the first wave of industrialization and urbanization since the 1950s, bringing decent quality of life and social status to most inhabitants of the city. Then, I look at deindustrialization and precarization in the 1990s. Finally, I focus on the reindustrialization that started around 2000 and the transformations it underwent once Romania joined the EU in 2007 and factories in and around Baia Mare became convenient labour providers for multinationals. Across this period, I show how a population of workers was drawn to the region and then stayed on, through an economic and social climate that gradually narrowed their opportunities. I point out how, as the site of several factories, Baia Mare becomes entangled in the workings of global capital and I also touch upon the role of the state, facilitating foreign investments and providing little protection for workers.

The new industrial, urban life: 1950s to 1989

In choosing a place for research, one commits to looking at it as "formed and transformed by the articulated forces of capital, labour, and the state in the *longue durée* […] but also by the forces of local responsibilities, meanings, and expectations that are part of the historical entanglements of the place" (Narotzky, 2018). In this spirit, I look at the history of Baia Mare since the 1950s to grasp the processes and transformations that laid the groundwork for the contemporary context.

Starting with the 1950s and until 1989, Baia Mare was one of the relatively prosperous industrial cities in Romania, a growing, bustling city attracting labour force from the nearby villages and providing them with a steady, decent income, as well as secure accommodation and a comparatively good living standard. The main industries – mining and metalwork – were soon complemented by those providing jobs for women, mainly in the textile factories. By 1977, the population of the city had already reached 100,000, up from 14,000 in 1930 (Vischi, 2020). The factories and mines in and around Baia Mare provided work for tens of thousands of labourers. Most of them had immigrated from the rural areas – pushed, among others, by the collectivization of agricultural lands, completed in the early 1960s. They were provided with accommodation in the newly built blocks of flats. Some were commuting by public transport from the nearby villages. All were provided with decent incomes and job security. Today, many in Baia Mare are nostalgic of the socialist period, as experienced by themselves or narrated by their parents; this was a recurrent topic with our interviewees. For those who were working under state socialism and their children there is a distinct feeling that the grass was greener, as it were, even though Baia Mare was in fact a hugely polluted city, and work in the mines and metal plant has had a dramatic impact on the health of many.

Under state socialism, the relatively weak, overambitious Romanian state depended on workers to fulfil its agenda (Cucu, 2019; Grama, 2018). And the agenda, as pointed out by Cucu (2019), was consistent with a process of primitive accumulation. The aim of the planned socialist economy was to constantly overfulfill the plan, which in turn led to ever-increasing new targets. The private sector was squeezed in relation to the state sector, and the self-exploitation of the workers was expected to feed the accumulation of resources by the state. Nonetheless, for the precarious, impoverished rural population, the brutal start of industrialization and urbanization was followed by a period of relative stability, and not even the hard work conditions, nor the austerity of the 1980s managed to remove the rose-tinted glasses through which that period is perceived by the next generation of Baia Mare workers.

This was also the period that founded the workforce available in the area. Left without the option of returning to the countryside, the new inhabitants of the city and, later on, their children, stayed on.

Deindustrialization and insecurity: After 1989

After 1989, having rid themselves of socialism, Romanians found themselves open to the possibilities and promises of the free market. The state, however, lacked expertise and was unable to break away immediately from

previous policies. Instead, it opted for a hybrid neo-developmentalist model, whereby the state still aimed to closely control the relationship with global capital. It was a period of rampant inflation and increasing popular frustration. From 1996, pressure from the International Monetary Fund and later on from the European Union led to the full adoption of neoliberal principles (Ban, 2014).

For Baia Mare, this was not the happiest of times. Major factories and plants were privatized and then were mismanaged or proved unable to survive in the new context. Several were sold on to foreign investors, who also failed in keeping them afloat. The city was mired in unemployment and poverty (Deacu, 2016). The life trajectories of our interlocutors and their families took a variety of turns afterwards. For some, the restitution of agricultural lands provided the opportunity to return to the villages and supplement their income by subsistence agriculture. The very resourceful were able to emigrate for work. Those who had no access to land – many of them Roma – and in the absence of any effective social security, were forced to sell their only property, the apartments they had been provided with by the socialist regime. Within a few short years, they had returned to a state of precarity from which few were able to remove themselves in the following decades.

From the 1990s, the Roma informal settlements began to grow and expand in the interstices of the city – nearby the now deserted industrial spaces, in the vicinity of the railroad, or just across the socialist neighbourhoods. Those who had immigrated to the city to work in socialist factories stayed put; they had nothing to return to and, in living in Baia Mare, they still had access to irregular work, if not to full time employment. For the Roma who have fallen through the cracks of the troublesome 1990s, facing abrupt downward mobility, state socialism remains the golden era (Szabó, 2018).

Labouring in/for the EU: After 2007

In 2007, Romania joined the EU. However, as one of the least wealthy nations in the union, it has remained a source of labour migration. A country of 19 million at the latest census (data for 2021), it has close to 6 million migrants, the great majority to countries in Western Europe. While differences in income between Romania and the other countries in the EU have reduced consistently over the last 15 years, they are still enormous for those on the smallest incomes. The purchasing power parity for foodstuffs for those on minimum wage in Romania is about one third that of employees on minimum wage in countries in Western Europe (Guga, 2021). Romania also has the highest rate of in-work at risk of poverty rate – 14.3%, as compared to the EU average of 8.5% (Eurostat).

Working abroad for short or long periods of time is, then, still an attractive option for many. Since 2010, there has been a steady wave of returning migrants as well, but it never outnumbered the new migrants (Sandu and Popa, 2023).

Labour migration has been an important strategy to evade poverty for many in Maramureș county and in Baia Mare, as pointed out by our interlocutors about themselves, as well as their families and colleagues. This has been compounded by the internal migration of the highly skilled, who left the region for higher income cities in Romania and whose absence was deplored in interviews with the management of the factories seeking more complex labour.

Many of those that are left behind are the most vulnerable – people who did not have the connections to migrate or the skills to hold down permanent jobs abroad. Those who feel there are no alternatives for themselves. The poorest of the Roma we spoke to were the most likely to fall into this category.

In Baia Mare, the vulnerability of the poor Roma has been compounded by actions of the local administration. Cătălin Chereches, the mayor of Baia Mare between 2011 and 2023, is openly discriminatory against the Roma and actively contributed to their spatial segregation (Apador-CH, 2012). For years, the racist discourse and practices of the mayor has kept the focus on the "acceptability" of the Roma – even though civil society has always reacted promptly to his position.

Since the early 2000s, reindustrialization began in earnest in Baia Mare and tens of thousands of workers were available to take up its challenges. Branches of multinationals, as well as Romanian-owned businesses, operate in the area and provide jobs for most of the workforce, fostered by the good will of the state, as well as the local administration. How this has worked for the local population is the focus of the analysis below.

Industrial labour in the semiperiphery

When documenting industrial labour in Baia Mare in 2021, it made little sense to separate the statistics for the city from those for the Maramureș county. On the one hand, some of the major factories are located in the villages nearby Baia Mare; on the other, many workers commute from the villages to work at factories in the city. I therefore concentrated the research on the area delineated by the lives and the work trajectories of the people working in factories and workshops in and around Baia Mare.

Oversimplifying, one could place the factories in the area in two major categories. Some require mainly unqualified or semi-qualified work, for which they pay the minimum wage. They have – and expect – a high turnover of employees

and recruit throughout the year. It is not unusual for them to lose an employee, only for them to return later – sometimes several times over. Other factories – and they are careful to distinguish themselves from the first category – aim for a more qualified workforce and are willing to further invest in training, as well as learning on the job. They pay better salaries and focus on retaining their workforce in the long run. While usually on the lookout for new hires, their employee turnover is a lot lower. In what follows, I will focus on the former type of factory, because this is where ongoing precarity for thousands is generated and reproduced throughout the years.

Out of the major employers in and around Baia Mare, some are Romanian-owned factories and produce mainly furniture, but also clothing and shoes for foreign brands. Others are branches of multinationals, with the largest ones producing electrical parts, aerospace products, luxury furniture, and shoes (Vischi, 2022, and data from listafirme.ro).

Over the last years, multinationals have persistently petitioned the local administration for industrial parks, a theme that came up in interviews with both members of the local administration and with managers from the companies. These parks would provide factories with infrastructure, at no cost to them, plus fiscal facilities and opportunities for non-refundable development grants. The first such industrial park is finally planned to be developed near Baia Sprie, not far from Baia Mare. The greenfield factories built in and around Baia Mare, meanwhile, chose their location contingent on the availability of land, access to and by workers (including reasonable commuting routes for the company minibuses) and, significantly, mutually helpful alliances forged with the local administration, either in Baia Mare or in one of the villages in the area. Infrastructure is also crucial for factories – the new branch of Universal Alloy Corporation, for instance, is being built right next to the location of the future new runway at the Baia Mare airport.

We need to zoom out to make sense, yet again, of how this came to be. Global capital is, of course, mired in inequality, produced, and reproduced over centuries. Having joined the neoliberal world in its new status from the 1990s, Romania became dependent on the international financial institutions and bound to their conditionalities. Once incorporated in the EU, it did so in the position of a semi-peripheral economy, inserting itself in the global production and investment chains as an industrialized producer of goods and relying on a constant influx of direct foreign investment (Ban, 2014). As Cornel Ban convincingly shows – and illustrates when comparing the trajectories of various dependent economies – there is, in fact, a generous space for agency from this position, depending on the capacity of the state to establish and implement a development plan. It is also up to the state to put into place mechanisms for the

redistribution of the wealth produced within the country (Ban, 2014). The Romanian state has not managed very well on either front, thus ending up with an ostensibly well to do dependent economy, which, by virtue of its status, is subject to the vagaries of global capital. Moreover, inequalities within the working class are large and expanding.

The Romanian economy, therefore, is intensively invested in continuing to attract foreign investment and relies on exports, most of which are conducted mainly through branches of multinationals. The country is attractive to foreign investors by virtue of having the second lowest wages in the European Union, and incomparably lower than Western Europe (Guga, 2021), while still offering the benefits of a well-regulated market. After the Covid 19 pandemic, physical proximity to Western European countries has become relevant once again.

Within Romania, Baia Mare is particularly attractive to industries and companies looking for the lowest possible costs, which almost invariably involves paying the lowest possible wages. This is precisely because of the considerable workforce in the area that, left in a state of economic vulnerability, are likely to accept the wages and work conditions offered by the factories.

Many of the Romanian-owned factories have a sole customer – or at the most a handful of recurrent customers – thus effectively operating as outsourcing outlets for foreign brands. To look at the most striking example, about 7,000 workers in Maramureş county spend their workday producing Ikea furniture in three of the factories we looked at during our research. Due to these arrangements, as well as the more insidious "lohn" arrangements providing nothing but work – as was the case for two of the smaller factories we researched –, foreign companies manage to use the labour force in Romania without even needing to deal with the difficult work of recruiting, disciplining, and exploiting the labourers – not to mention avoiding to directly face any ethical dilemmas. Moreover, companies that have established production in Romania have made substantial investments in their production sites, even with all the fiscal facilities provided by the state. Recuperating their investment would weigh in their possible decision to move production to a different site in the world. It is not so for companies effectively only purchasing workforce from the factories in the Baia Mare area: they take no risks. If Ikea was to move production to factories elsewhere, it would face no financial losses. The Maramureş factories would however risk everything, losing their entire customer base overnight. Their employees would also face losing their jobs.

The factories are therefore placed in a vulnerable position in relation to capital. Pay might still be too small for workers to be able to make a decent living, but it has increased steadily over the last years. For the multinationals pushing for the lowest possible cost, rising expenses are a trigger to put pressure

on the management of the factories to keep to the lowest pay feasible. This is not in any way in the best interest of the management of the factories. As we learned from interviews with HR managers at the factories, low pay translates into huge personnel turnover, which in turn involves an enormous and ongoing recruitment exercise. The stakes are high; while for workers striving for social reproduction the situation is multifaceted (Deneva, 2024), in their negotiation with the management of Romanian factories multinationals focus on wages and threaten to move production elsewhere in the world, where production costs are cheaper.

In practice, the only external force intervening in this negotiation is the state, through the meek mechanism that is the minimum wage. Over the last years, the proportion of those on minimum wage in Romania has increased constantly (Guga, 2021), which means slightly better protection for those at the bottom of the wage ladder, but an ever-expanding population that is in work and at risk of poverty.

The Romanian state also has very modest policies for wealth redistribution. As shown by Cristina Raț (2019), social assistance policies, based on the recommendations of the EU, express the need to tackle the issue of social inclusion, rather than aim for social justice. This serves to obscure the fact that the main issue of the poor is systematic economic deprivation, rather than simply social marginalization. Overall, the state provides restrictive and ungenerous social assistance benefits and subsidized services, which fail to offer sufficient protection to the most vulnerable but contribute adequately enough to the reproduction of the working class, thus serving the interests of capital. Favouring capital over the needs of the population is the position the state has taken consistently over the last years. Recent changes in the law have also relieved capital of the responsibility to contribute to the social security system, asking instead for the income taxes needed to subsidize labour (Raț, 2019). Problematically, these types of measures facilitate capital being further removed from any direct responsibility to the workers. This is taken on by the state, who is as good a guard of the interests of capital as capital itself would be. In the politics of dispossession mobilized by the state and capital in relation to the workers, the state volunteers to do most of the job. Workers are left with no one in their corner.

On the shopfloor

Aramis is the largest factory in the area, is Romanian-owned and had around 5,000 employees in 2021. It produces furniture exclusively for Ikea but is not formally affiliated with the Swedish giant. Aramis is well-known for

always hiring and giving employment to all those looking for a job, including the Roma – and it is the only factory with a reputation of not hesitating to work with the Roma. Even though most of its workers are employed on the minimum wage, Aramis has developed a sophisticated system of work and benefits that means those who are able and willing can work more to earn more. Workers can take on extra shifts, or even the coveted night shifts or weekend shifts, for which they are paid a better rate. The factory has come up with an extra-benefit in the form of food vouchers, which is paid to those showing up for work without interruption over a month. Work is gamified (Burawoy, 1982), and the young and able-bodied challenge themselves to earn as much as possible under this system, even though that still amounts to very little.

Aramis and the factories with the same profile reinvent the system of pay and benefits repeatedly to achieve their aims. Some benefits are conditioned by working predictably and continuously – no leave, no medical leave, no missing workdays – because hitting the factory targets depends on having complete teams of people working every shift. In a context where they are competing over the workers willing to do this work, factories – paying the minimum wage for most positions – manage to stand out to their potential employees through their list of extra-benefits.

These factories are the preferred employer for those who want and can put in extra-work. Some of those we interviewed had worked at other factories for a better salary, but decided they could still earn more at the end of the month by working overtime for a lower-paying employer, rather than being tied to a fixed income. Even so, to make do over the year, many workers quit their factory jobs over the summer, either for gigs picking wild mushrooms, berries and medicinal herbs in the nearby villages, or for seasonal work in agriculture abroad. So widespread is the practice that the HR departments of factories have come to know and anticipate the phenomenon as part of their yearly planning. This set-up allows workers to live at home, with their families, for most of the year, as opposed to long-term migration to other countries, while also giving them some extra cash to cover heating for the winter and other expenses for their families. At the end of the summer, they return and take a job at a factory once again. In fact, so large is the need for labour in the factories, that many leave their jobs without even formally quitting, secure in the knowledge there will be no hard feelings – a state of affairs acknowledged by both workers and HR employees. The temporary migration of Baia Mare workers effectively means they subsidize through their own effort and at great personal costs the too low minimum wage in Romania. By earning the minimum wage of Western European countries for three of four months a year, they increase their average income to a level that makes life more bearable. It is a perverse effect that their drive and ingenuity make it possible for the state in alliance with capital to keep wages down.

The actual work was often described by the workers we spoke to as challenging – manipulating extremely voluminous objects, operating heavy machinery, performing very repetitive tasks, working in unbearable heat, being exposed to possibly harmful substances. Nonetheless, these accounts were always matter-of-factly, as if work was supposed to be hard. They placed little value explicitly in learning a new trade, a new skill, or finding variety in one's work.

Many of those working at the factories live precariously. Some of our interviewees pay more than half of their salary on rent alone, barely making do with the rest for the entire month. Some are forced to live with extended families, never able to save any money to get their own accommodation. Life is marginally better for those commuting from the villages, even though they must put in the hours for commuting as well. They have access to better housing and are usually able to grow some of their own food as well. For the relatively poor rural population, the factories provide an opportunity for salaried income, which makes the difference between subsisting and a relatively comfortable life.

The most vulnerable are the Roma, many of whom live in segregated settlements, in makeshift accommodation lacking basic amenities, in pockets of poverty spread throughout the city. In the Roma households, it is rare that all adults have full time jobs at the same time. For households with two adults and three or more children, which was the typical arrangement for Roma families in segregated informal settlements, this translates into living in poverty (Rat, 2019). The situation was even more precarious for the households where only one of the adults was in full time employment. A lot of people overwork themselves when they are young and are unable to continue doing so in the long run, their health affected by brutal work and poor living conditions. Still, having companies that employ them is perceived with gratitude and, for fear of rejection, the Roma usually search jobs with those they know are likely to hire them.

The condition of workers in the factories in Baia Mare is in some respects similar to that in socialism. Workers are drawn to compete against themselves, outwork themselves, self-exploit themselves (Cucu, 2019). But there are major differences as well. The number of hours one works over a month, for once, is considerably higher, taking self-exploitation many steps forward. Another major difference is that under socialism workers were likely to work for the same factory, sometimes over decades. Under the current arrangement, however, they shift from one employer to another. They are not – and are not invited to be – loyal to any one factory. In fact, I would argue that their space of reference in terms of work is the factories in the area, rather than any one particular factory.

The criteria on which one selects one company over another are therefore contingent on seemingly idiosyncratic details. One interviewee told us she wanted to commute with her husband, thus snatching back some time each day to spend in his company. Another went for the factory that provided her easy opportunities to work overtime, as already certified by two cousins. Many followed friends, acquaintances, or family members to a new employer. Spouses or siblings working in the same workplace is a common arrangement.

Factories try to stand apart by advertising their various benefits. However, as many workers have pointed out to us, they have learned from experience that, in practice, the various lists of perks end up amounting to approximately the same monthly income. As such, when not constrained by other criteria, they make their choices for an employer based on the connections to networks of kin, friendship, and sociability. For most people, work does not provide opportunities for socializing. It does, however, provide a mutual space of reference, a collective experience that is part and parcel of sharing an important part of life with their most significant people. One mother-daughter pair we interviewed, who typically work different shifts in the same factory, swap pictures of their cafeteria meal, so that whoever works the first shift of the day can let the other know if there is something to look forward to. Those growing vegetables in the village often find customers for their produce among their colleagues. The cafeteria and commuting bring people together and anchor them, even for a short while. Still, making a living comes first, so people change jobs relatively often to follow new opportunities.

When leaving their factory jobs over the summer, many of the workers did not make their decisions in advance about choosing a new employer or returning to an old one. In providing very similar work conditions and pay, the factories make themselves replaceable. In providing so little to their employees that they are always on the search for workforce, they make themselves disposable. In fact, when fluctuations in demand for their products push factories to let go of part of their workers, it was often the case their initial employer found them new positions – sometimes as soon as the next day.

We asked workers about opportunities to be promoted and it became clear that they perceived their jobs as work only and did not envision a career for themselves. Even when made aware there was a possibility of being promoted in their factory, or when familiar with the stories of others who had been promoted, most of our respondents – and the Roma in particular – felt it was not for them to aim for these positions. When asked about the future, they did not imagine change except within the very limited confines of their own previous experiences or experiences of their close ones. Perhaps one of the most disheartening effects of living in precarity for long periods of time is the belief and expectation this will continue to go on.

Just like the workers themselves, factories relate to the pool of workers available in the area, rather than to their own employees only. Employees come and go, but, as a group, factories need to manage their relationship to the workforce to make sure it will continue to be available year after year. In their exercise of manufacturing consent, factories described by Burawoy (1982) created the illusion that workers had choice by increasing job mobility within the factory. In the case of Baia Mare, factories, collectively, generate the same effect, by making it easy for workers to switch jobs from on factory to another and indeed informally facilitating these moves when they need to let go of part of their employees. This is not a strategy mobilized by capital as such, but rather by the local management of factories, who need to consolidate their position to secure the ongoing presence of foreign capital.

In making decisions for themselves or comparing themselves to others, most interviewees were speaking first and foremost of their monthly income. In fact, hanging out with workers in and around the railway station – a space of socializing for commuters from several factories –, eavesdropping on their conversations in front of blocks of flats in the evenings, or having lunch with them at the factory cafeteria, it was frequent for them to discuss money – making more or less than the previous month, comparing their incomes to their interlocutors or to that of third parties not present in the conversation. Needing to go into so many details suggested to me that their basic wage was not a good enough indicator for their income at the end of the month. Most significantly, it became even more obvious in such circumstances that the only explicit focus and the end result of work is money. Factory work has become more and more deskilled for most workers, due to the use of technology. With less expertise needed, work becomes routine, based mainly on physical effort, and people grow increasingly detached from it (Braverman, 1998). This is even more so in situations of serious economic deprivation, where work provides the means of surviving, however precariously, from one month to another. Its substance and its meaning become secondary.

Looking at how global capital works and at the positioning of the Romanian state in relation to capital and its citizens, one cannot fail to identify the inequality and injustice done to the workers in Baia Mare. People, however, live within the confines of their own lives and their hopes and imagination are shaped by their own experiences. Being coopted by factories and the state into unquestionably accepting the workings of the current economic system, with a lot of work, little pay and very little safety net in hard times, does not mean people become unable to take pride and joy in their lives or the outcome of their work. Their agency might be limited, but small accomplishments are valued and can feel life changing. Being able to rent an apartment of one's own, making

enough money working abroad to renovate the house in the village, getting the first job in one's thirties, when employment did not feel like an option anymore, or earning enough to get one's child back from care, as was the case of Lia, make people feel like they still hold some form of control over their lives. Work relations can also have a big impact on the dignity and self-worth of people. An employee remembered fondly that the owner of a workshop bought and wrapped herself individual Christmas gifts for all her workers. Several workers remarked on being received kindly by HR employees after they had left the factory without notice, only to return a few months later.

The future of work in the factories

What does the future hold for the factories in Baia Mare? It is estimated that at the end of 2023 there will be 340,000 immigrants from outside the EU working in Romania (Dincă, 2023), up from 11,000 in 2013, 63,000 in 2021 and 94,000 in 2022 (Grigorescu, 2023). Most of them get employment in construction, factories, or deliveries. They provide exactly what migrant Romanian workers in the early 2000s provided to their employers: they cope with modest living conditions, have impeccable work ethic, are available to work overtime and, because they migrate alone, are not likely to be distracted by their families.

In 2021, the influx of refugees facilitated the decision of the Baia Mare factories to recruit new employees that were likely to expect and accept lower wages. By the next year, there was already a change of scale in the process of recruiting labourers from outside the EU: in the first six months of 2022, Aramis increased their workforce by 1.000 people, most of them from Sri Lanka. One of the productions halls has been reconverted to house the new arrivals (Vischi, 2022). New arrivals are likely to fall to the bottom of the ethnic employment hierarchy (Friberg and Midtbøen, 2018). Cultural proximity to the locals – by virtue of at least sharing a language and a wealth of cultural references – are likely to place the Roma in a relatively better position to ethnic Romanians.

Conclusion

Why, then, do workers in Baia Mare factories work this hard and resist so (seemingly) little? Placed at the intersection of several sources of vulnerability – impoverishment after the deindustrialization of the 1990s, living in a dependent economy at the edge of the EU, receiving little support from either state or local administration – people make the best of their circumstances. In their particular

context, the only opportunity is work, and a lot of it. Working overtime, changing jobs to make the most of new opportunities, combining work in the factory with work in agriculture at home or abroad are strategies that make the difference between living in poverty and living just above the poverty line. The sum of this effort translates into workers effectively subsidizing the insufficient minimum wage in Romania. They also make it possible for factories in the area to continue paying minimum wage, and for them to continue to operate at a low cost in this part of the world.

Workers find themselves too caught up in the process of working day in, day out, to even consider organized resistance to their position, or even envision themselves as part of a working class. Their trajectory and their struggle are perceived as individual, never collective. Factories create the illusion of labour as a game (Burawoy, 1982) through an intricate system of planning work, paying for overtime, and granting benefits. Job mobility also gives workers the illusion of choice. In the case of Burawoy's workers, mobility happened within the company. For workers in Baia Mare, it takes place between the factories in the region, thus supporting their economic success and facilitating their continued exploitation for profit.

Acknowledgements

The research leading to these results has received funding from the NO Grants 2014-2021, under Project contract no. 22/2020 - Precarious labour and peripheral housing. The socio-economic practices of Romanian Roma in the context of changing industrial relations and uneven territorial development.

REFERENCES

Apador-CH (2012, June 7). *Rasismul din Baia Mare, huiduit la București*. Retrieved from apador.org, https://apador.org/rasismul-din-baia-mare-huiduit-la-bucuresti-2/, 15/Nov/2023.

Ban, Cornel (2014). *Dependență și dezvoltare. Economia politică a capitalismului românesc.* Cluj: Tact.

Braverman, Harry (1998). The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century. In *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 317–25.

Burawoy, Michael (1982). *Manufacturing Consent. Changes in the Labour Process under Monopoly Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Carbonella, August., and Kasmir, Sharryn (2014). Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor. In S. Kasmir and A. Carbonella (eds.) In *Blood and Fire: Toward a Global Anthropology of Labor.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn, pp. 1–29.

Cucu, Alina (2019). *Planning Labour. Time and the Foundations of Industrial Socialism in Romania.* New York and Oxford: Berghahn.

Deacu, Cătălin (2016). The collapse of the state industry in Romania: between political and economic drivers. *Human Geographies* 10(2): 115-127.

Deneva, Neda (2024). "The flexibility and mobility of labor, the temporality of industrial life and the reproduction of poverty under capitalism". In *Manufacturing Poverty for the Romanian Roma: Roots, Mechanisms, Struggles,* edited by Enikő Vincze, Cornel Ban, Sorin Gog, and Jon Horgen Friberg. London: Routledge Press.

Dincă, Cornelia (2023). '140.000 de noi muncitori străini sunt aşteptaţi în România în 2023'. Retrieved from *Termene*, https://termene.ro/articole/140-000-de-noi-muncitori-straini-sunt-asteptati-in-romania-in-2023, 15/Nov/2023.

Friberg, Jon H., and Midtbøen, Arnfinn H. (2018). Ethnicity as Skill: Immigrant Employment Hierarchies in Norwegian Low-Wage Labour Markets. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44(9): 1463–78.

Grama, Adrian (2018). *Laboring Along: Industrial Workers and the Making of Postwar Romania.* Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter.

Grigorescu, Denis (2023, September 21). 'România, El Dorado pentru angajaţii asiatici. De ce îi preferă patronii români: „Cauzele pentru care vin aici sunt clare" '. Retrieved from *Adevărul*, https://adevarul.ro/economie/romania-el-dorado-pentru-angajatii-asiatici-de-2301645.html#google_vignette, 15/Nov/2023.

Guga, Ştefan (2021). *Salariul minim şi traiul minim decent: De la mituri la oportunităţi.* Bucureşti: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Harvey, David (2003). *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Narotzky, Susana (2018). Rethinking the Concept of Labour. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 24(S1): 29–43.

Polanyi, Karl (2013). *Marea Transformare*. Cluj: Tact.

Raţ, Cristina (2019). Social Citizenship at the Margins. In E. Vincze, N. Petrovici, C. Raţ, and G. Picker (eds.), *Racialized Labour in Romania*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 97–121.

Reştea, Kristina (2023, September 4). 'Câţi români trăiesc cu salariul minim în România şi care sunt domeniile în care se câştigă acestea'. Retrieved from *Economedia.ro,* https://economedia.ro/analiza-cati-romani-traiesc-cu-salariul-minim-in-romania-si-care-sunt-domeniile-in-care-se-castiga-acestea.html, 15/Nov/2023.

Sandu, Dumitru, and Popa, Dan (2023, October 5). 'Românii plecaţi în străinătate care au revenit. Motivele invocate şi explicaţiile sociologului Dumitru Sandu'. Retrieved from *Hotnews*: https://economie.hotnews.ro/stiri-finante_banci-26583820-aproape-jumatate-milion-romani-reintors-tara-motivele-invocate-explicatiile-sociologului-dumitru-sandu.htm, 15/Nov/2023.

Şomănescu, Cristina (2018, July 25). 'România profundă: Judeţele în care majoritatea salariaţilor câştigă salariul minim pe economie'. Retrieved from *Economica.net,* https://www.economica.net/judetele-in-care-majoritatea-salariatilor-castiga-in-jurul-salariului-minim-pe-economie_156375.html, 15/Nov/2023.

Szabó, Árpád Töhötöm (2018). Local and Global Contexts, Individual Experiences in Labour: Poor Roma at Home and Abroad. A Case from Transylvania, Romania. *Local Economy* 33(2): 207–23.

Vischi, Cătălin (2022, September 11). 'Cel mai mare angajator din Maramureș, producătorul de mobilă Aramis Invest, a depășit 6000 de angajați'. Retrieved from *2mnews*, https://2mnews.ro/analiza-2mnews-cel-mai-mare-angajator-din-maramures-producatorul-de-mobila-aramis-invest-a-depasit-6-000-de-angajati-si-se-situeaza-pe-locul-18-in-topul-national/, 15/Nov/2023.

Vischi, C. (2022, August 9). 'Top 25 de firme cu cele mai mari afaceri din județul Maramureș și identitățile proprietarilor'. Retrieved from *2mnews*, https://2mnews.ro/exclusiv-top-25-de-firme-cu-cele-mai-mari-afaceri-din-judetul-maramures-si-identitatile-proprietarilor-doua-firme-trec-peste-1-miliard-de-lei-an/, 15/Nov/2023.

Vischi, C. (2020, May 28). 'Cum a crescut în ultimii 200 de ani populația din Baia Mare'. Retrieved from *2mnews*: https://2mnews.ro/analiza-grafica-cum-a-crescut-in-ultimii-200-de-ani-populatia-din-baia-mare/, 15/Nov/2023.