

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION FROM A SEMI-PERIPHERY CITY: THE CASE OF BAIJA MARE

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ABSTRACT: Many post-socialist cities in Romania experience population decline caused by both negative natural growth and large-scale international migration. This study seeks to advance an understanding of post-socialist migratory flows from the city of Baia Mare to Western labour markets in terms of its mode of incorporation into the global economy. Using a historical structural lens, the study traces the critical economic transformations, political moments or institutions that influenced migratory flows from Baia Mare. It argues that from its semi-peripheral position, the city's role, after the regime change, became that of a supplier of cheap labour to Western Europe and a location for low added value industries. Despite its rapid economic growth due to reindustrialisation and its success in attracting relatively large shares of immigrants, its native urban population continues to decrease. The developing manufacturing industry specialised in intensive, low-paid, manual labour automatically excludes more educated and qualified labourers who continue to resort to international migration in order to survive or to improve the quality of their lives.

Keywords: international migration, post-socialism, deindustrialisation, reindustrialisation, Baia Mare, Romania

In 2022, Baia Mare had 141,704 inhabitants, approximately the same population it had at the end of 1986 (National Institute of Statistics). The statistical data shows that after a slight increase in population numbers between 1990 and 2000, the number of residents continued to drop. The decrease in the population itself is a worrying phenomenon, more so if we take into consideration that this evolution is associated with a continuous degradation of the structure by age due to population ageing and the external migration of young persons.

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This means that the active population is diminishing, a process that might affect the economy of Baia Mare in the long term. The largest cause of population loss is internal and external migration which affects young people with a higher degree of professionalisation. The city's migration index is 88, a number far above the country's average value.² The survey conducted inside the PRECWORK project confirms this statistic: one in four respondents had an international migration experience.³ Internally, the young, active population is moving towards more economically developed and multi-specialized cities, such as Cluj-Napoca, for both education and work purposes. Externally, they join the shares of Eastern emigrants in a Western dual labour market, filling in the lower levels of the occupational hierarchy.

Meanwhile, in keeping with Romania's rise as a "new immigrant destination" (Winders 2014), Baia Mare began drawing labour from South-Asian nations. In one year alone, over 1,600 permits for foreign workers were issued at the county level.⁴ In terms of internal migration, Baia Mare is among the cities with the largest share of urban immigrants in Romania, alongside Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, and Târgu Mureș. Between 2001 and 2011, the city managed to attract over 6,000 migrants from nearby localities (Cristea et al., 2017). Despite these recent inflows, the overall population is still decreasing. The recent immigrants are not only insufficient in number to replace the ones who left externally, but they are also less qualified. Consequently, the city faces an increasingly significant labour shortage.

The present study aims to provide some insights into this apparent contradiction and explores how capitalist expansion after the fall of communism and the particular variants of capitalism tested in Romania affected population mobility. Since the period covers mainly the post-socialist period, the focal point is on how deindustrialisation and reindustrialisation generated different paths and rationales for external migration. More specifically, it addresses the following questions: How did the deindustrialisation and reindustrialisation cycles shape migratory flows from and to Baia Mare in post-communism? How did the local

² The migration index realized by the sociologist Dumitru Sandu indicates the locality's dependence on international migration: <https://panorama.ro/obsesie/alta-harta-romania-diaspora-europa/> (accessed: 12/11/2023)

³ This study is part of the 'Precarious labour and peripheral housing. The socio-economic practices of Romanian Roma in the context of changing industrial relations and uneven territorial development' research project (PRECWORK). The quantitative research conducted inside the project shows that almost a quarter of all respondents (23%) went to work abroad. Based on ethnicity, the situation of external migrants is as follows: 24% Roma, 23% Romanians and 22% Hungarians.

⁴ <http://www.graiul.ro/2023/04/01/maramuresul-trambulina-muncitorilor-asiatici-spre-alte-tari/> (accessed 12/11/2023)

population experience the economic changes in terms of their labour situation at home and abroad? Although the study is strongly focused on economy and labour, it does not take a purely economic angle. As Hollifield (2004:885) states, “economic and sociological forces are the necessary conditions for migration to occur, but the sufficient conditions are legal and political.” As the case of Baia Mare shows, despite the demand for cheap labour in Western markets and the surplus labour age population of Romania in the deindustrialisation period, migration flows exploded only once EU border control decreased. Therefore, this historical analysis points to crucial economic transformations, political moments or institutions that influenced migratory flows from Baia Mare.

The city’s out-migration and, more recently, its in-migration must be understood as emerging from its historical industrial trajectory, a specific location within Romania and the European economic system, and its respective demographic composition. During communism, Baia Mare experienced an accelerated rate of growth, as the industry was dominated by the mining and metallurgy sectors. The town had clear strategic value for the country, as it was one of the most important suppliers of non-ferrous metals for the national economy and a booming urban centre. At the end of socialism, Romania’s entire electrolytic copper production was realised here, 75% of its converter copper production, plus important gold, silver, lead quantities, and 43 other chemical-metallurgical products (Pantea, 2015).

As the industry grew and became more complex, the town attracted an important rural population from the surrounding regions, which were turned into factory workers and city dwellers in a rather short period. At the same time, strong restrictions regarding external migration and abortion and birth control prohibition further augmented the number of inhabitants. The population increased from 36,000 in 1956 to 149,000 in 1992.

Industrial development needed more skilled workers, so the education system expanded, and by 1985, the town counted: 1 university, 4 schools for foremen, 9 technical high schools, and 8 vocational schools. The housing sector grew in order to accommodate industrial workers (Vincze, 2023), health and transportation investments followed accordingly. In fact, except for its neighbouring Baia Sprie, the town was the only urban settlement in the region that had urban features (Filip & Gavra, 2006).

After the 1989 regime change, Romania first experimented with neo-developmental policies as the state maintained ownership of the largest parts of the industry and tried to re-launch investments in strategic sectors. However, many of these enterprises were dependent on state support, especially for salary payments, in order to function. Starting from the late ‘90s, the mines in the region gradually closed, and soon the complementary urban industries

were either privatised or were shut down. The deindustrialisation generated long-time unemployment, especially among men. Once the European borders opened, the new “urban poor” in Baia Mare resorted to migration as a survival strategy.

After a period of economic stagnation caused by deindustrialisation, Baia Mare became integrated into the European production networks, its medium complexity companies producing mainly furniture. Many Western companies moving away from the massive, vertically integrated, Fordist organisational principles “downsized” to exploit semi-periphery economies, forming network corporations (Knox & Taylor, 1995). Transnational corporations were encouraged by the local and national governments to invest directly by promoting policies aimed at financial deregulation, trade reforms, less restrictive labour markets, and even subsidies for certain economic fields. The export-led economic growth model implemented in Romania and illustrated by the Baia Mare case relied on low and medium-skilled labour, whose wages are below or at least in sync with productivity (Ban & Adăscăliței, 2022). Low-qualified workers, mostly from rural areas (Cristea et al., 2017), Roma residing on the outskirts of cities (Perneș, 2022), or, more recently, immigrants from South Asian nations, were drawn into flexible labour arrangements by the corporations.

Educated and qualified urban residents resisted these labour arrangements. The solid communist education infrastructure continued to produce effects in terms of human capital. In 2011, Baia Mare occupied the 16th position in the country in terms of the number of people with higher education (Cristea et al., 2017). The relatively high level of educational development in some parts of the population drove skilled workers away from the manufacturing sector toward the service sector or to Western labour markets. Increasingly attuned to the consumption values of the Western world, they became more aware of the economic imbalances and, in consequence, decided to migrate (Anghel & Horvath, 2009). As more young people opted for external migration, the inequality between migrant and non-migrant households increased in time which further augmented the numbers of those who decided to leave, causing the city to specialise in migration. Migration thus became a self-perpetuating phenomenon (Massey, 2001).

Contrary to the neoliberal narrative promoted by the World Bank, the case of Baia Mare shows that a city’s economic success should not be measured based only on its capacity to attract migrants and commuters but also on its ability to retain the native population. In fact, the extraordinarily high levels of internal and external mobility the town has recently experienced testify to the precariousness of the local labour market based on low-skill manufacturing and services sectors.

The case I investigated is of qualified young individuals who migrated from Baia Mare to capital-intensive countries (Western Europe and the USA) between 2002 and 2020. The study analyses a category of “successful” migrants born in the urban environment in a heavily industrialised town. I employ the term “successful migrants” to refer to those persons who have engaged in migration, thrived in the destination and chose to return to the country of origin, where they make long-term use of the resources that resulted from migration. The most important marker of success in this case is acquiring a house in Baia Mare.

Conceptual framework

The focus of this study is the relation between different economic development regimes and international labour mobility in the city of Baia Mare. This study emerges, therefore, at the intersection between political economy and urban sociology/human geography. Concepts and frames for interpreting migration were drawn from all these disciplines and are discussed below.

From a political economy perspective, international labour migration is one component of the interdependent, asymmetrical core-periphery connections, which also include capital, commodities, and knowledge. For this paper, an adequate and useful approach to understand migration in these terms is the World System Theory (Wallerstein, 1974, 2004). The theory emphasises the unequal distribution and exchange of resources, including labour force, between the developed world and the less developed countries and regions. Capitalist accumulation in the developed world is predicated on the incorporation and exploitation of developing economies. In this dialectical relation, migrant-receiving countries represent the core, while emigration areas are associated with the periphery. International labour migration reinforces the unequal distribution of resources. Those who leave generally have a higher level of skills and motivation for success, which is used to generate higher levels of productivity and, thus, capital accumulation in core countries. Consequently, peripheral countries lose an important share of the population and thus experience a decrease in productivity, labour and skill shortages, accompanied by a deterioration of working-class cohesion. Cultural globalisation also plays a part in developing migration flows from the periphery to the centre, as “mediascapes” (Appadurai, 1990) affect people’s perception of economic imbalances and shape consumption expectations, which in turn lead to migration.

Although there is serious disagreement between scholars as to where do countries precisely fit into the core-periphery categories (or even if a classification of this sort is useful), as a former socialist, industrialised country and a new EU

member, Romania is considered a semi-periphery, i.e. it functions as a specific connection node between the global centre and the periphery. This status is reflected in its capital and commodities, labour and technology, discourse and knowledge exchanges. In the field of economy, the European-centred transnational capital has imposed its dominance over large sectors of CEE's productive, consumer and financial sectors (Shields 2009, Rae 2011, Nagy & Timár 2017). Low- and medium-skilled industrial operations produce manufactured goods designed mainly for export in Romania. Reduced labour costs are used, therefore, to increase the competitiveness of West European firms in global value chains (Ban & Adăscăliței, 2022). In migration, similar to other CEE countries, its large outflows to Western Europe and its recent inflows from further Eastern areas might signal its intermediate role in global migrations (Stola 2001, Horváth & Kiss 2015, Török 2017, Żołędowski 2020). Yet, as Horváth & Kiss (2015) show, not all semi-peripheries will follow similar developmental patterns and the fact that Romania did not manage to attract large amounts of immigrants from further Eastern European regions, such as Moldova or Ukraine, points to the fact that Romania remains, at least partially, the symbol of periphery.

Although the merits of the world system theory are multiple, it leaves out questions related to agency, contingency and local context. More relevant to our case, the approach has little to say about the roles of cities in global production, consumption and labour chains or how unequal economic relations are reproduced, transformed, resisted, or accommodated by various agents. In an attempt to overcome this homogenous totality, Knox and Taylor (1995) focus on "world cities". This framework helps us locate "city-ness" at several different scales, from the global urban system to the social worlds of their inhabitants. Cities are seen as "centres through which flow money, workers, information, commodities, and other economically relevant variables. As centres, they extend their influence into a surrounding 'field' or region whose economic relations they 'articulate' into the global economy or space of global accumulation." (Knox & Taylor, 1995:22).

From this perspective, Baia Mare is a global city. It has active relations with global production, which generates both capital and labour mobility. Its space includes specific production sites (e.g. wood processing and furniture manufacturing), service markets and, of course, spatial concentrations of labourers and consumers.

The "city" and its development, including population mobility, under different economic cycles, is the main focus of various urban sociology and human geography studies. We are witnessing today an emerging body of research into urban shrinkage as a problem of post-socialist transformation (Rink et al., 2014).

Romania is in the top tier of countries with the highest number of declining cities and is predicted to lose about a quarter of its current population by 2050 (Constantinescu, 2012). This unfortunate scenario has impelled Romanian scholars to investigate the relation between deindustrialisation and urban decline (Constantinescu 2012, Schoenberg & Constantin 2014, Popescu 2014, Dumitrache et al., 2016, Mihail, Cehan & Lazăr 2021, Petrovici & Bejinariu 2021). Generally, these studies look at international migration as just one of the demographic changes which affected post-socialist, post-industrial Romanian cities. Population decline is understood as a combination of extremely low birth rates, internal migration due to suburbanisation, external labour migration losses, high or moderate mortality, and a rapidly ageing population (Rink et al., 2014).

However, the process of urban shrinkage is a complex one, having a multitude of causes that determine peculiar trajectories. The way Romanian cities experienced post-socialist shrinkages depended on several factors, including their historical legacies, their recent reindustrialisation around manufacture or logistics, human development level, and political decisions at the national and European level (Petrovici & Bejinariu 2021). Baia Mare experienced a medium-term urban depopulation as the city was slowly integrated into the EU economy, increasing again the number of industrial workers.

Methodology

This study is based on data collected from the PRECWORK research project, which aimed to investigate the socio-economic practices of the Romanian Roma in the context of changing industrial relations and uneven territorial development in the city of Baia Mare. It uses a mixed methodology, as it combines qualitative and quantitative data from various sources.

In order to map the migration patterns of the Roma and non-Roma and their perception of the labour market at home and abroad, we used data from a survey conducted in 2020. The survey interviewees were recruited from three groups of labour migrants: Romanians, Roma and Hungarians. There were 800 responses in the sample, which is indicative of Baia Mare's population. The statistical data was mainly used to supplement or reinforce the observations and conclusions drawn from the primary type of research design, which was on-site ethnography.

I conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with current or former migrants from the city of Baia Mare to Western labour markets. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face during 2021-2022, with a few being held online. In terms of the socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, most of them

are young people of Romanian ethnicity born in the 1980s, with a medium or university level of education, coming from working-class or middle-class families. Therefore, it is a category of educated and qualified people who mastered the host country's language and came from an industrialised urban environment. In terms of gender representation, 11 interviews were conducted with women and 17 with men. The questions concerned the professional and personal path before, during, and after migration (if applicable). The interview transcripts, together with the field observations, were coded in MAXQDA with descriptive labels, which were further organised into themes and larger concepts drawn from theory. Finally, a third cycle of coding was applied in which the initial codes were refined and further analysed. I used *in vivo* coding (creating codes using direct quotes and phrases from informants) as titles for different sections of this paper in order to define and delimit critical historical junctures that influenced migration.

For triangulation purposes, other data sources, such as local archives, newspaper articles, economic reports, and urban policies, were analysed and introduced in the present study.

Deindustrialisation and international migration in Baia Mare

“Those were the hardest years. With Constantinescu in the lead”

Numerous studies have documented the different waves of Romanian migration after 1990, taking into consideration the volume of migration, the types of migration, the destinations reached or the social categories involved (Sandu et al., 2006; Diminescu, 2009; Sandu, 2010, 2018; Anghel et al., 2016, Horvath & Kiss, 2015). For the scope of this article, it is sufficient to review the most critical periods and key junctures to understand better the current situation and see what the case of Baia Mare can add to the overall picture. Since each one of these stages has the meaning of a “social world” (Sandu, 2010), a temporal perspective allows, by comparison, to understand the contemporary social world of migration.

The first significant waves of mass international migration emerged shortly after communism fell. The Hungarians and Germans from Baia Mare responded to the political imperatives of national unity elaborated by the elites in their “mother countries” but also reacted to the economic pressures faced by society in post-communism (Fox, 2009) and decided to migrate. Statistical data provided by the National Institute of Statistics record this ethnic migration. Censuses show that 25,944 Hungarians lived in Baia Mare in 1992, which

accounted for 17.4% of the total population. However, their number decreased constantly to 21,128 (14.8% of the total population) in 2002 and 12,750 (11.32%) in 2011. Practically, the Hungarian population of Baia Mare halved in just two decades.

The ethnic Roma, on the other hand, applied for political asylum in countries such as Germany or Great Britain (Diminescu, 2009) as a result of the inter-ethnic conflicts that arose in the first part of the '90s, but they also practised international trade and some seasonal activities.⁵ The ones who were successful later acted as migration brokers for Romanians and Roma alike.

Romanians were not so fast to migrate on a large scale, at least not in the first post-communist decade. As in other parts of the country, economic restructuring through the privatisation of state-owned companies was taking place in stages, depending on the political-economic agendas of those in power. The Văcăroiu Cabinet (1992-1996) showed an explicit concern for saving the industrial workforce through public investments in industry, the purchase of internal industrial goods, price control considered strategic for industrial policy such as energy, and automatic indexation of the minimum wage (Ban, 2015). For example, from 1990 to 1995, investments were systematically made in the modernisation of the Cuprom factory, which became Societatea Comercială Phoenix SA (Csoma, 2001): the modernisation of the dosing and batch formation installation for smelting in suspension (1990), the completion of the gas purification system (1990), the modernisation of the sewage treatment plant (1991), the modernisation of the liquefied sulphur dioxide factory (1991), the commissioning of a new fuel and liquid storage facility (1992), the commissioning of a new rectifier (1992), the construction of a station for checking and repairing sulphur dioxide cylinders (1992), putting into operation a new technological gas filtration installation by installing indigenous production filters (1993), attempts to recover copper from diluted solutions and from the spent electrolyte, together with IMNR Bucharest (1993), the installation of fog filters at the sulfuric acid factory (1994). All these efforts culminated in 1995 with the commissioning of a new dispersion chimney, the highest in the country, to reduce urban pollution.

⁵ At the beginning of the 1990s, a series of conflicts took place in Romania between the most representative ethnic groups in the country. The most violent and, at the same time, the most publicized inter-ethnic conflict was in Târgu Mures, between Romanians and Hungarians. However, the violence cases against the Roma were more significant in number. In total, 36 violent attacks against the Roma were documented, resulting in burned houses and human victims. In the context of the collapse of communism and the Yugoslav War, several Western countries offered political asylum to Romanian citizens. Many who applied for political asylum during that period were ethnic Roma. Diminescu (2009) states that these waves of refugees have alarmed Western governments and have provided arguments for a very restrictive policy regarding the free movement of Romanians.

However, most of the region's mines and their complementary urban factories operated on loss. Numerous causes contributed to the decline in production capacity, including obsolete technology, rising production costs, the closure of low-quality ore mines (e.g. Băiuț and Borșa-Măgura), modifications to the labour laws, and a reduction in the labour force. The Baia Mare Lead and Zinc Autonomous Authority-RAPZ, in charge of supervising the activity of 18 mines and ore processing plants, reported the following indicators of economic efficiency for the first years after the change of regime:

Table 1. Economic efficiency indicators reported by Regia Autonomă a Plumbului și Zincului Baia Mare. Value: thousands of lei

	1992	1993
Production value	14.190.000	15.885.000
Total costs	43.141.000	45.635.000
Total state subsidy	28.551.000	29.750.000

Source: Bălănescu et al. (2002)

Labour was restructured in order to increase returns by cutting down costs. There were several strategies to reduce the existing labour force: labour rationing, layoffs, and redistribution. The miners were the first affected. Between 1990 and 1992, the mines in the region lost 3.9% of their workforce (Bălănescu et al., 2002). The underground working regime changed, and the extraction time was shortened.⁶ Mine production output decreased and consequently, so did the activity of ore processing and extraction plants. At the same time, following union demands, the retirement age in heavy industry was reduced. At the national level, this governmental measure led to doubling the number of retirees in just a few years (Iliescu, 1994). This measure backlashed, in some cases, as too many employees decided to retire. Consequently, many young people who migrated to the city for professionalisation were employed

⁶ During communism, the underground work regime was: 8 hours per day, 3 shifts a day, and 6 days a week. Starting from 1990 miners worked 6 hours underground, in 4 shifts, 5 days a week and had from a short Friday.

in the early '90s at non-ferrous processing plants. One of the respondents, who joined the Cuprom factory immediately after graduating from the technical school in 1995, explains:

A law was passed that if you were 45 years old and you had, I don't know how many years of working experience, of the 1st working group, you could retire. [...] And they [the workers] retired in mass. (48, M, Baia Mare 2021)

Despite these early signs of deindustrialisation, as result of the neo-developmental (Ban, 2015) policies adopted, both the rate of natural increase and the rate of migration remained positive, leading to a slight increase in the population residing in Baia Mare. In 1992, the city's total population was 152.953 and grew steadily, reaching 156.870 in 2000.

Table 2. The ethnic composition of Baia Mare municipality

Ethnicity	1992		2002		2011		2021	
	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%	Population	%
Romanians	119,713	80,2%	118,357	82,8%	96,105	85,4%	77,785	87,6%
Hungarians	25,940	17,4%	21,128	14,8%	12,750	11,3%	8,713	9,8%
Roma	1,969	1,3%	2,142	1,6%	3,107	2,7%	1,772	1,9%

Data source: Institute of National Statistics, census years 1992, 2002, 2011, 2021.

Whereas heavy industry benefited from a slow pace of restructuring and privatisation, the manufacturing industries that employed the city's female population, such as the textile and food industries, did not. For example, Maratex, the textile factory which employed over 7,000 people during communism, 90% of which were women, dismissed more than half of its workforce in just three years after the regime changed (Bălănescu et al., 2002). In 1999, the factory was privatised and, just four years later, was shut down. Many women were laid off and became (often informal) employees of the newly developing service sector, or they returned to their villages of origin and worked the land in order to supplement the family income. For example, one woman describes her experience in the emerging urban economy:

I went to a pastry, but we were just two women employed, we were making 700 pieces of everything! Two women in one night! It wasn't easy to make 700 pieces! Kneaded, made, baked, removed! [...] I worked there for a year for 100.000 lei. (61, F, Baia Mare 2021)

In the second half of the 90s, the Romanian version of the neoliberal “shock therapy” characterized by the dramatic restriction of credit to state companies, fiscal austerity measures, and neoliberal tax reforms began. Much of the industrial base in Baia Mare was privatised or liquidated in this second wave of neo-liberalization. The economic restructuring created real tragedies in the social field: high unemployment rates, high poverty rates, and urban ghettos. Between 1997 and 2000, Remin (the National Company of Precious and Non-ferrous Metals REMIN, previously RAPZ) cut down more than half of the mining and industrial labour force, the numbers going down from 34,713 employers in 1990 to 12,128 in 2000 (Bălănescu et al., 2002). In 2004, only 7,173 persons were still Remin employees. Consequently, the urban population started to decrease; the critical drops coincided with changes in the external migratory flows in 2004, 2008, and 2011.

City dwellers migrated from the urban area to the countryside, where they practised subsistence agriculture. At the beginning of the 2000s, around 2,000 people from Baia Mare changed their address annually (in 2002: 2,242, in 2004: 2,416, in 2005: 1,926), and around 1,000 people changed their residence (in 2002: 1,198, in 2004: 1,816, in 2005: 1,183). Some people, especially those previously employed in industry, moved to neighbouring communes. The 2002 census shows that the population of the nearby communes such as Groși, Recea, Tăuții Măgherauș, Săcălășeni, Satulung, Ardușat had increased compared to the data from the 1992 census. Despite the poor infrastructure and public transport connections, these internal population movements were the early signs of suburbanisation in Baia Mare. The development of the town's surrounding region would later favour the establishment of new companies in search of available and cost-accessible workforce. For example, the county's most profitable companies and important regional employers, Eaton and Optibelt, were opened in the 2000s in the neighbouring communes of Fărcașa and Tăuții Măgherauș.

Others chose to migrate outside Romania's borders. However, because Europe was increasingly a fortress (Anghel & Horvath, 2009), legal migration for work was hardly possible. The data provided by the Maramureș Passport Office clearly show that the lowest number of passports issued coincided, in fact, with the most brutal years of transition (between 1999-2001, around 17,000 passports were issued annually compared to double that amount after 2002,

when visas for Romanian citizens were eliminated). This fact demonstrates that deindustrialisation, which generated masses of disposed people, does not automatically lead to external migration. The migratory regime (Anghel & Horvath, 2009) and the demand for labour force in countries with advanced capitalism (Piore, 1979) are the remaining essential elements in explaining how large migration flows develop. Furthermore, as long as the migration costs are high, only those with resources can resort to legal or clandestine migratory strategies. For example, at the beginning of the 2000s, only the cost of the passport equated to almost half of the minimum wage.⁷ The stories that my respondents shared are populated with individuals who fled the country in the late '90s using a bureaucratic niche (such as applying for political asylum), bribing customs officials, or hiding in trucks, all these strategies implying significant costs. One respondent who migrated to the UK in the early 2000s explains how he entered the country:

My girlfriend's brother-in-law had been there for a long time, and he was a heavy guy [...] I gave him a thousand pounds, and everything was settled at the embassy. I was on a business visa, and I worked as self-employed [...]. I went into the catering field. I got my qualification at Spiru Haret, here, in our city, during one afternoon. [...] I was working using fake papers. G. C. A gipsy who had migrated to England a long time ago. Until the 2000s, if you were a gipsy, you received political asylum in England. (38, M, Baia Mare 2021).

Some locals from Baia Mare, especially women with access to consumer goods from factories, practised "suitcase trade". The city's geographical positioning near the border with Hungary and Ukraine facilitated this survival practice. One of the respondents, forced by his father's illness, contributed to the family earnings, starting from a young age, by selling abroad ceramic products from the Faimar factory:

It was organised; at that time, there were two or three people in the city who transported people, and they had manoeuvres at customs. I remember I only went when a certain customs officer was on duty that didn't control me. [...] In Hungary, you could travel with a passport. [...] One weekend, that's all. At Miskolc market, in Debrecen. In Miskolc [I went] more often, there was the Saturday market, and in Debrecen on Sundays or vice versa. You would go, sell the products, go to the other market, get what you needed, and come back [...] palinka, Rama margarine, toilet paper, chestnut puree, only fine things!" (38, M, Baia Mare 2021)

⁷ In 2002, the new type of passport cost 800,000 lei, while the minimum wage was 1,750,000 lei.

Massive deindustrialisation and bankruptcies lead to record-high unemployment and underemployment rates. Due to inflation, prices were skyrocketing. Wages were not keeping up, leading to a state of widespread scarcity. Many young people born during the demographic boom of the '80s finished compulsory education (minimum ten grades) during this period and were about to enter the workforce. Some were employed while still in school or college, forced to support their families financially or at least not to burden them. Their work, mostly informal, becomes crucial in supplementing the family income or in supporting themselves financially during their studies. Such early and harsh labour experiences partially explain why they were willing to work in DDD (difficult, dirty, and dangerous) sectors on Western markets, such as construction in the case of men and cleaning and caring in the case of women, despite their often medium or high-level education. The excerpts below illustrate how common this practice was, in fact, especially among young men:

I was 16 and a half years old, I went to school, and I went to work. I was a waiter, and I opened the first jazz pub in Baia Mare [...] I was a waiter until I was 19 years old. After that, I said to myself that I need to draw a line, so I went to Spain with all the pennies I had saved. (36, M, Baia Mare 2021)

When I finished high school, I went to college in Cluj, and somehow, I was on my own. In my second year of college, I went to the States. [...] I worked on construction sites all my student years. I also worked at the Cluj airport when it was under construction. (36, M, Baia Mare 2021)

At 14 [I started working], but ok! At the age of 12, I was carrying sacks of potatoes on my back after picking them. Or I was logging wood at 13. So, it wasn't bad, it was ok. It was acceptable; it was achievable. That was my first job [on a construction site in Baia Mare]. (37, M, Baia Mare 2022)

At the same time, health, education, and social protection were seriously underfunded and partially privatised. Instead of following more socially embedded neo-developmental policies where the state is a buffer zone that protects “against the dislocations produced by market competition and its associated structures of power and privilege” (Ban 2016, p. 4), Romania followed the neoliberal economic path. This meant that healthcare, education, and various other forms of social protection lost their universal character and became less accessible to the larger population. In Baia Mare, at the municipal level, there was a decrease in the number of doctors active in the public sector, from 358 in 2000 to 285 in 2005 (Starea Socială a Municipiului Baia Mare, 2007). Meanwhile, the number of doctors from the private sector increased by

a shocking 373% during the same period. Given the large number of studies that demonstrate that post-socialist deindustrialisation was a major burden on workers' health (Scheiring & King, 2022), the neoliberal attack on the medical sector had particularly negative effects on the local working class. Statistical data show that, until recently, the highest number of deaths in Baia Mare was registered between 1996 and 2003 (according to INS, the number of deaths increased from 1072 in 1990 to 1265 in 1996 and 1258 in 2003). One can infer that, like elsewhere in the post-socialist space, these excess deaths were "deaths by despair" (Scheiring & King, 2022).

Many social protection services were felt primarily on the shoulders of NGOs because specialised state institutions only covered urgent needs. Some of these organisations, such as Somaschi, Sacro Cuore, and YMCA, were charitable missions associated with the Catholic Church. A former employer describes the context in which his organisation developed as follows:

The Somaschi organisation has been here since 1997. From my point of view, those were the hardest years, with Constantinescu in the lead. The highest inflation; it was hard and nasty. They [the catholic priests] came and saw what the needs were [...] We met needs specific to social work. (38, M, Baia Mare 2021)

What is interesting for this study is the fact that, in time, these missionary and humanitarian exchanges functioning under the patronage of the Catholic Church become one of the avenues for international migration for a segment of Baia Mare's population. In the decades following the fall of communism, goods, money, and people travelled between Baia Mare and Italy via religious networks.

"When the road was clear, I was the first to migrate"

In the context of Romania's accession to the European Union, two political-economical actions taken by the Western European states influenced decisively the migratory flows. Firstly, starting from 2002, Romanian citizens could travel through Europe without needing a visa for three months, a fact that determined the emergence of "work tourists". Basically, migrants went and worked for three months abroad and then returned for a while in the country, after which they went back to work abroad. However, there was a process of selecting migrants according to economic reasons. Romanians had to prove, at the border, that they had a certain amount of money, medical insurance, and a round-trip ticket.

At the national level, the 2002 and 2003 INS records show the lowest number of immigrants since the change of regime in 1989.⁸ In Maramureş and Baia Mare, however, the situation was very different. Based on the data provided by the Passport Office, the demand for travel papers significantly dropped only for the first two to three months of 2002. Later that year, it basically exploded, and by summer, more than 4000 passports were issued monthly (in January 2002, 934 passports were issued; the number rose to 3907 in July, 3853 in August and 4282 in September 2002). A possible explanation for the rapidity with which the citizens of Baia Mare adapted to this change is the existence of already well-established migration networks, which offered much-needed financial and integration support to the new migrants. The high number of passports issued for children (1130 in July 2002, for e.g.) points to the fact that eliminating visas was also an opportunity for family reunification for those workers already integrated into Western markets.

Secondly, Romania signed a series of collaboration agreements regarding the employment of seasonal labour with countries such as Spain, Germany, Portugal, and Italy. Romanian migrants worked in agriculture, construction, and the hospitality industry, but also in sectors that hired highly qualified personnel, such as medicine and IT. For example, in 2005, over 42,000 people emigrated temporarily from Romania to work in the EU through the Workforce Migration Office.⁹

Although migration is still costly and full of risks, for many Baia Mare inhabitants, it was the only viable alternative to survive or, in fortunate cases, to increase the quality of their lives. Those who migrated starting from 2002 were young men (18-35 years old), with an average level of training, most of them being qualified workers. The PRECWORK survey confirmed that few of those who worked under socialism (now +50 years old) chose international migration. Those who became adults between deindustrialisation and reindustrialisation, the 30-49 age group, were initially more prone to migrate externally. This situation can be interpreted as a shift in expectations among the younger, urban-born generation. Unlike their parents and grandparents, who measured their well-being against the backdrop of Romania's rural hardships, these younger individuals aspired to the lifestyles prevalent in Western industrialized nations. One informant explicitly articulates this aspiration.

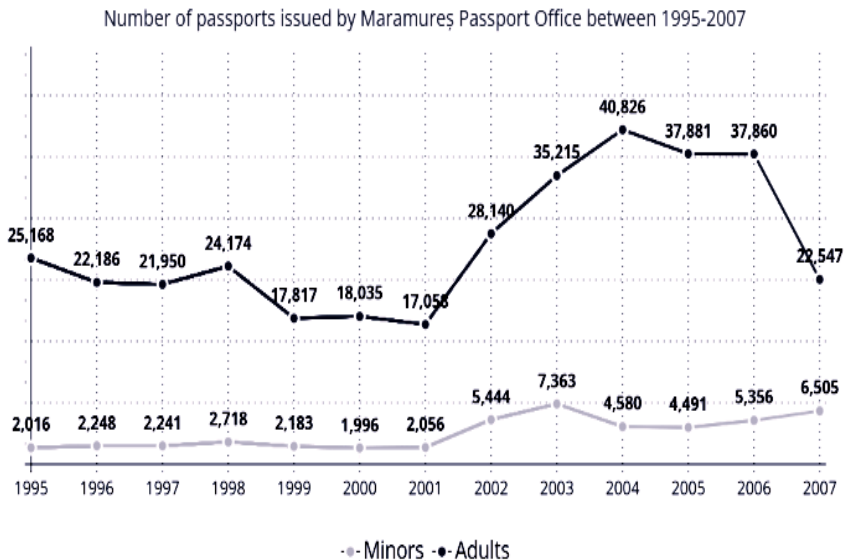
⁸ According to INS the total number of emigrants for 2002 was 8,154, while in 2003 it was 10,673. By comparison in 2000 the number was 14,753.

⁹ Data source: Liberalization of the labour market in Romania. Opportunities and risks (2006). Impact study carried out by the Department for Labour Abroad, Office for Labour Migration and the Faculty of Political and Communication Sciences, University of Oradea: <https://www.e-migration.ro/Publications/301106studiu.pdf>

Starting from the 11th grade, I felt the acute need to become independent. I only dreamed of having my money, of having a car. I only had cars on my mind. I only dreamed of migrating. [...] I went to Italy. That was probably when the three-month permits were released. When the road was clear, I was the first to migrate. [...] I know that I went in April. To be legal, you had to have a visa on your passport every three months. And so it happened that I came home in December, and I stayed for about two or three days, and I went back before the holidays, and I did another three-month work session elsewhere, at a furniture-making workshop. (38, M, Baia Mare 2021)

Although entry into an EU country and the three-month stay was legal, many migrants exceeded this period and became irregular migrants. These institutional restrictions favour, paradoxically, their settlement in the host societies. The existence of a large informal economy sector and the development of networks that organise the migrant's life, often using illegal means, facilitate their illegal stay. The preferred destination countries were Italy and Spain, which concentrated almost 60% of Romanian migration during that period.

Graph 1. Number of passports issued between 1995-2007



Data Source: Maramureş Passport Office

Despite the rapid economic growth in the pre-accession period, Baia Mare's labour market could not absorb the extra workforce due to economic restructuring and the cohorts of young people who finished compulsory education. The number of employees decreased from 57,553 in 2003 to 52,889 in 2005, the most affected areas being the extractive industry and medical services. Baia Mare found itself in a situation where a large proportion of adults were of working age and could not be employed. The effects were felt especially among young people: unemployment (11,213 unemployed at the municipality level in 2003, 9,643 in 2004, 9,449 unemployed in 2005, and 8,153 unemployed in 2006), informal work, and international migration.

In 2006, the town hall received over 900 applications per month for minimum income, about 700 applications for winter heating aid, and nearly 5,000 applications for complementary and single-parent support allowances (Starea Socială a municipiului Baia Mare, 2007). These categories of people were, at that moment, unable to leave the country. Only since 2007—when Romania's EU membership resulted in a major decrease in migration costs—have the most vulnerable residents, including Roma women, started engaging in various seasonal labour activities in the West.

The closing of mining and its complementary industry also meant a change in the city's economic profile. The service sector was growing. In 2007, 8,396 enterprises were registered in the municipality, of which over 71.92% were active in the service sector, especially in trade. Most of these private companies were small, with low added value. The share of employees in the service sector increased during 2004-2007 from 49% to over 56%, while the share of employees in industry decreased from 45% to around 38% (Strategia de Dezvoltare Durabilă a municipiului Baia Mare, 2009).

However, some companies established in the first post-socialist decade started to grow and generate significant revenues. Aramis, currently the largest employer in town, increased its profits six times in just eight years, right before the financial recession (their surplus went from 557,591 lei in 2000 to 12.336.128 in 2008). Other companies, such as Italsofa, Aviva, and PGA Electric, although operating only since the 2000s, managed to achieve fast economic success. These companies, characterized by low to medium production complexity and by their export orientation became the new economic engine of the city. Put simply, Baia Mare's political leaders recognized that its low labour costs gave it a comparative advantage in the European economic system and encouraged foreign direct investments by providing low labour costs. Yet, these companies were not only insufficiently covering the local labour demand, but their operations required mostly manual work, which only a segment of the population was willing to do. A large amount of the labour force, especially the more educated segment, was, thus, still un-employable.

“I had no other solution, and I had to leave”

The EU accession marked the beginning of a new migration stage that differed from the previous ones, both in scope and complexity. The Baltic, Nordic, and CEE countries offered Romanian citizens unrestricted access to the labour market. Most governments in Western Europe, though, postponed granting them full rights, invoking the right to favour their internal labour force or the need to absorb the migrant populations already present on their territory. However, after the accession, the procedures for registering and regulating migrants' work were simplified. Romania recorded the highest increase in its migration stock during that period. OECD data show a 50% increase in the number of Romanian emigrants in Italy and 51% in Spain compared to 2000/01. For many, the EU accession meant not only lower financial costs but also fewer risks associated with migration because of already established family networks, as the next testimony exemplifies:

In 2007 [I left]. I had a brother there, in Spain; he left long ago; he kept calling me. I told him that I was not leaving, that I should stay here, I was living with my mother, she was alone, I didn't want to leave her... but I saw that I had no other solution and I had to leave. (40, M, Baia Mare 2022)

In the context of reducing the costs, time, and risks involved in moving abroad, migration became less selective compared to previous stages. Poorer, less educated people left for work, often using kin and neighbourhood networks, without securing a job contract first. The likelihood of social security payments associated with “informal” employment is inversely correlated with the likelihood of abuse and exploitation experienced by migrants. A report published by the National Agency against Human Trafficking showed that in 2009, Maramureş occupied the first place in the country (next to Botoşani) in terms of the number of victims of trafficking for labour exploitation.¹⁰ Most of them were men working in agriculture and construction.

Along with the increase in the number of emigrants, the dependence on migration in Baia Mare and all the problems it entails also increased. When economic activity decreased abroad, remittances were curtailed because workers were fired and sent home. Not only did families become dependent on migration to survive, but the local economy also relied heavily on remittances sent by those who left. Instead of investment, remittances were mainly used for

¹⁰ The full report can be found here: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---lab_admin/documents/presentation/wcms_124537.pdf

consumption purposes. The PRECWORK survey showed, for example, that for a large proportion of the population, migration is a form of livelihood, as 78% of remittances are used for daily living.

Except for goods and money, the migrants transfer “social remittances” to their places of origin (Levitt, 1998). For example, in Baia Mare, Alessia, a modern first name of Italian origin, is the third most common name among female newborns in 2005, while Antonio, another Italian loanword, was the third most used name among boys in 2007 (Felecan, 2011). Because Italian names can be easily adapted to the Romanian language, many of those who migrate decide to baptise their children using Italian names to give them better chances to leave the country, find a job, and integrate into the host society. This suggests that for many, the separation from Baia Mare was rather definitive.

“It was the economic crisis [...]. I lost that job”

The 2009 economic crisis led to a decrease in domestic production, negatively affecting wage incomes and jobs. The economic output fell, exports dropped sharply, and the large capital inflows that financed the economic boom dwindled. Romania adopted the most radical form of neoliberalism and eliminated the last universalist social services while attacking the power of unions (Ban, 2015). Romanian employers responded to changes in demand by forcing their workforce to exit the labour market and cutting labour costs for the remaining employees by lowering the wages, reducing the number of hours worked per week, and officially employing part-time while the actual job was full-time. The educated young professionals in Baia Mare were not spared, as the informant below recalls:

In the fifth year of college, I found a job in Cluj, and I stayed in Cluj. I did junior project management in construction. After that, the market started to fall; it was the economic crisis [...]. I lost that job.” (36, F, online 2021)

The crisis did not affect everyone in the same way and to the same extent. Baluță et al. (2011) show how the 2008 economic recession and the related government measures had a different impact on women vs. men. While traditionally male fields were affected by decreased production (e.g., construction), the austerity measures implemented by the Boc Government (2008-2012) mainly affected women. Since women were present in positions of execution in the sectors that experienced staff reductions or substantial salary cuts, such as health, education, and public administration, they fully felt the effects of the crisis. Also, the massive restriction of public social care services (nurseries,

kindergartens, and care institutions for the elderly) meant that women were more closely tied to the domestic space. Statistical data from Baia Mare confirm that women were the first to bear the crisis's costs. Between 2010 and 2013, the most dramatic decreases in the number of employees were experienced in the following sectors: education (10% loss of the total number of employees), construction (7%), trade (6%), health and social assistance (4%) (Baia Mare. Strategia Integrată de Dezvoltare Urbană, 2015). Three out of these four sectors employ mostly women.

As the economic crisis hit, informality grew, and, as a result, the local labour force moved into the service sector, where they worked for minimum wages. Some young people decided to extend the schooling period. Yet, even those who managed to keep their jobs during this period were at risk of poverty, as the testimony below illustrates:

I worked in Polus exactly when it opened [...] I think it was 2008. [...] The minimum salary was 5 million; I will keep this with me all my life, I will never forget it. [...] I never forget traumas. That salary was traumatic. (34, M, Baia Mare 2022)

At the same time, for much of the 2000s, Romania was adopting a consumption-led growth model based on debt that partially compensated for the lack of wage growth in the region (Ban & Adăscăliței, 2022). The crisis caused significant repayment problems, especially for households and small companies that had loans in foreign currencies. Over half of the domestic private credit was, at the time of the crisis, in foreign currency (Franks, 2009). Because the leu to euro exchange rate had depreciated by more than 15% in just a few months in 2008-2009, a weaker leu simply meant a higher financial burden for the consumers.¹¹ As a result, a lot of people from Baia Mare migrated simply because they couldn't afford to pay their bank debts. Migration was the only solution to avoid the impossibility of repaying bank instalments, as stated by various informants:

When I left for England, we also had some debts; at the time, we were renting from F.' aunt [his wife], we didn't have a refrigerator, and we borrowed some money to buy a refrigerator. I said to myself that if we pay our debts, get an apartment and something else, we would come home, and we'll see what next. And that's pretty much what we did. (36, M, Baia Mare 2021)

¹¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2015/09/28/04/53/soint050409a>

What is certain is that the euro had risen very, very strongly. At one point, the rate had reached 4000, and [...] that was the most critical point [when we decided to leave]. (38, F, Baia Mare 2021)

The economic crisis generated other changes in the international mobility of Romanian citizens. Many Romanians in Southern European countries heavily affected by the economic recession, such as Italy and Spain, decided to relocate. Because of their precarious position in the labour market, they lost their jobs and left in large numbers to countries where the economic situation appeared more stable. Thus, the Romanian diaspora expanded in this period, mainly to Great Britain and Germany.

On the other hand, others who could not afford the luxury of moving remained in their initial host countries and went through periods of maximum precariousness and vulnerability. A respondent who had worked in the construction sector but also in various factories, both in Spain and Italy, describes how he survived the crisis:

I went back to Madrid in the same apartment; my friends let us stay in the living room until we found some work. We found work in construction; we worked, but then broke and worked again, and again, there was no work. [...] Yes, there was a crisis. The first crisis in Spain came, and it was crazy. [...] There was a time when I opened the refrigerator, and it was empty [...] At one point, there were 40 euros in the whole house. An Indian guy from the store knew us so well that it was like in Romania: give us, bro, some things, and we'll pay for them later. Write it down in your notebook. (36, M, Baia Mare 2021)

In the public speech, international migration was increasingly seen as a pride-worthy strategy for social mobility. External migration was promoted by the local elites as a solution both in times of economic growth and in times of crisis. Prior to the recession, the spectacular flow of remittances (the volume of remittances for 2007 accounted for approximately 6% of Romania's GDP) was seen as a contributing factor to the country's development (Anghel & Horvath, 2009:15). During the crisis, a high emigration rate meant lower unemployment, reduction of poverty, and less pressure on the Romanian welfare system.¹²

¹² In 2010 president Traian Băsescu used national television to thank Romanians for choosing to work abroad instead of staying in the country and benefiting from unemployment benefits: <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-diaspora-7667381-presa-britanica-critica-traian-basescu-dupa-acesta-multumit-romanilor-care-muncesc-strainatate-nu-cer-ajutor-somaj.htm> (accessed 10/11/2023)

“It’s a multinational, with factories all over the globe; we’re strictly on production”

The reindustrialisation possibilities of any region depend on the level of development of that particular region, its economic structure, access to resources, infrastructural facilities, and the size and composition of its labour market. In Baia Mare, at the level of investments, the reindustrialisation process became noticeable starting from the early 2000s. In 2006, the manufacturing industry was already placed at the top of investments, with 40.0% of the total investments, an increase of 33.4% compared to 2005 (Strategia de Dezvoltare Durabilă a municipiului Baia Mare, 2009). Yet, foreign investments were rather modest (4,25% of the companies were based on foreign capital) and went into medium or small-size companies. Despite this, the city experienced an economic boom. GDP per capita registered a spectacular increase of 82.2% between 2003 and 2006, placing Baia Mare in the 9th place in the country in terms of urban economic development. As stated before, this positive evolution came to a halt during the economic crisis but soon took off in a quite remarkable manner.

Nowadays, the most relevant sectors of the economy are the manufacturing industry (especially furniture production) and trade, which together generate almost 70% of the city’s total GDP. In 2019, 42% of Baia Mare employees were active in the manufacturing industry, while the rest were employed in the trade sector, construction, transport, and hospitality. Although the industry grew in size and specialisation, this growth was reflected in the increase in profit but not necessarily in an increase in wages. The cumulative net profit registered by the companies active in Baia Mare quadrupled in the last 10 years, from 37.5 million Euros at the end of 2010 to 171.7 million Euros in 2019 (Strategia Integrată de Dezvoltare Zona Urbană Funcțională Baia Mare, 2020). However, the average net monthly salary in Maramureș county for 2019 was 2,500 RON, which is way below both the regional and national values (3,000 RON in 2019). In fact, the highest-paid jobs in Baia Mare are in public administration: water distribution, waste management, and education, not in the private sector. This situation explains the current paradox that I laid out at the beginning of this paper: What drives international migration from a city that experiences a dynamic reindustrialisation process?

Looking back, the reindustrialization of Baia Mare was achieved using two key resources existent in the region: wood (natural resources) and people (human resources). The use of both resources is evident when analysing the profile of the largest companies in town. Firstly, the top companies, both in terms of profit and employees, are furniture manufacturers: Aramis, Italsofa, and Aviva. The concentration and specialization of low-added-value manufacturing centred on wood processing has generated an entirely new production complex in Baia Mare.

Secondly, the export-led economic growth model implemented in Baia Mare case relies on low and medium-skilled labour, whose wages are below or at least in sync with productivity (Ban & Adăscăliței, 2022). Educated and qualified urban residents resist these new labour arrangements and choose to migrate to Western labour markets. A lot of young, qualified people are dislocated from their hometowns because they don't meet the labour market requirements. The PRECWORK survey confirms that migration is not a significant phenomenon at the level of those who have a job; it is a solution for those who are not in the local labour market, as only 5% of the migrants left their old jobs to work abroad. The in-depth interviews show that the "successful" migrants who chose to return aim for employment in the public sector. A part of them go through re-qualification and get hired in the state forces (police or prison administration) or in the education system, where the wages are higher. A few of them make use of their experience abroad and get employed in medium management positions. The informant below describes his experience regarding the insertion into the local labour market after returning from a long period of migration in the UK:

I also left my CV at two factories in Baia Mare. I left it at the gate. And they called me from a factory. I work for them now. At Eaton. [...] They called me a week later to say that they needed a team leader and called me to discuss. [...] It's a multinational, with factories all over the globe, we're strictly on production. We make the cabinets, they go to a warehouse in the Czech Republic, and then they are sold. (42, M, Baia Mare 2021)

The extraordinarily high levels of internal and external mobility the town has experienced testify to the precariousness of the local labour market based on low-skill manufacturing and services sectors. The companies attract into flexible labour arrangements low-qualified workers consisting primarily of the rural population and Roma living on the outskirts of the city. Still, even this pool of cheap and flexible labour has diminished over time as even the more precarious strata of the population opted for external migration, leaving both policymakers and employers to ponder in front of labour shortages. Sadly, the solution found is to go further east to recruit the labour force instead of increasing the wages. The migration of foreign workers from numerous South-Asian countries into the city may be regarded as a typical case of how labour forces on the global market move regionally from the periphery toward the semi-periphery, reproducing an unequal global economic system.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between different economic development regimes and international labour mobility in the city of Baia Mare, Romania. Looking at the post-socialist period it aimed to understand how deindustrialisation and reindustrialisation generated different paths and rationales for external migration. Various sources of data analysed indicate that, in post-socialism, Baia Mare specialized in migration. This phenomenon was progressively disadvantageous for the local economy, as young, skilled workers decided to leave to work abroad. The lack of jobs, poverty at work, and the fragility of safety nets in financial crises were the leading causes of migration. As shown, all major recessions that affected the city have been followed, with a lag, by migrations of some segments of the local population abroad. As a result, the inequality between migrant and non-migrant households also increased, which further augmented the number of leavers.

Although the city's economic situation has improved over time, emigration continues to be an active trend. Baia Mare's labour market in terms of income earned, the stability of employment and social security is not attractive to its educated and skilled native population, yet it manages to engage the most precarious segments of the urban population: the Roma, the regional rural population (the new commuters) or even the international migrant population from more far away peripheries (mostly formed by Indian and Nepalese workers). All in all, as the world system theorists argue, far from leading to equilibrium, international migration only aggravates the existing economic disparities between the European core and its Eastern semi-periphery and between migrant and non-migrant households. Developments in the labour market (and consequently in international migration) might be largely dictated by a change in the economic growth model adopted by Romania, from an FDI export-orientated model to wage-based growth (Ban & Adăscăliței 2022). Baia Mare may be able to hold onto its native population and slow the rate of emigration if local wages and overall working conditions improve.

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