

DEBT DEPENDENCY AND THE COST OF MIGRATION: THE CASE OF ROMA AND NON-ROMA MIGRANTS FROM BAIJA MARE

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ABSTRACT: The Baia Mare region was once one of Romania's main mining centres, with a significant proportion of the local population engaged in industry jobs. However, the extensive economic restructuring that followed the collapse of the old communist regime and the emergence of capitalist development was characterized by brutal privatization measures and great economic instability. While the transition years brought new opportunities for some, for most they meant unstable housing and employment, debt, and a declining social status. Thus, many workers quickly became 'surplus populations' (Li 2017) and were forced into patterns of circular migration abroad. Employing a qualitative research methodology, analysing both interviews and secondary data, this paper will focus on the adaptive responses of workers from Baia Mare to the changes in the socio-economic landscape after the collapse of the communist regime and the advance of neoliberal policies in Romania. In particular, the paper looks at Roma and non-Roma migrants from Baia Mare, attempting to compare their strategies and work histories in the context of migration, to see the extent to which class and race differences play a role in creating specific migration patterns in the post-socialist context. The comparison between racialized people living in improvised shelters on the periphery of Baia Mare and those who are working class but not living in a situation of destitution will show us the role that dispossession plays in creating certain conditions that lead to debt dependency and specific migration patterns.

Keywords: post-socialism, migration, debt, dependency, Roma, racialised dispossession.

Introduction

Roma migration is the subject of numerous political debates and academic studies, being framed in the public discourse as a problem to be solved (De Genova et al. 2016). The European Union, which works to socially integrate the Roma

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population without addressing the institutional and structural racialization that it faces, broadly embraces this viewpoint. Oftentimes, the issue of Roma migration is framed from a perspective of Roma exceptionalism, arguing from a culturalist point of view for the need of integration, obscuring structural processes of racialisation. This paper aims to scrutinize how racialization influences Roma migration, establishing a link between the racialization of the vulnerable labour force and the uneven migration patterns that ensue. These patterns make the Roma experience of migration particularly grim, as they remain caught in a brutal cycle of debt and dependency on informal and exploitative labour markets abroad and at home.

The research questions that this paper is aiming to respond to is how the experience of migration differs for Roma migrants when going abroad and how this difference is related to racialized dispossession. The study draws upon theories of Roma migration, racial marginalisation, and transnationalism to understand the migratory patterns and livelihood strategies adopted by the research participants in response to changing socio-economic conditions.

This article places the issue of Roma migration in the context of the economic restructuring processes of a Romanian post-industrial city. The transition period in Romania and the neoliberal governance that characterized it led to the precarisation of people's lives. This paper will make use of ethnographic research methods and secondary data to study the lives of migrants from Baia Mare. One of Romania's largest cities and a former industrial centre, Baia Mare makes an interesting case study for Roma migration not only due to the dynamics of deindustrialisation and reindustrialisation that have marked the transition period, but also for the city's particularity of ethnic segregation in terms of housing and racial ghettoization.

The aim of this paper is to link the racialisation of housing and ghettoization, or what can be referred to as racialised dispossession (McElroy 2018), to the racialisation of migrant labour. The process of dispossession of Roma people serves the neoliberal system by providing a cheap and ever-abundant source of labour to cover the needs of irregular work sectors (Petrovici et al. 2019). I intend to extend this view to also include in the discussion international labour trajectories, seeing how racial hierarchies at home extend outside national borders.

I start from a very simple observation: compared to non-Roma people, Roma migrants seem to have less success in their migration. By looking comparatively at Roma and non-Roma migration patterns I do not mean to suggest a deterministic approach to race and ethnicity, nor to essentialise migration patterns across race lines. Contrary, what I hope to uncover are the indirect consequences of the racialisation of poverty in post-socialist countries and the effects it has on the migration trajectories of Romani people.

The argument of this paper centres around the idea that the racialised dispossession inflicted upon the Roma ultimately impacts the outcome of their migration, keeping them in a cycle of debt they cannot seem to escape. The reason is two folded: firstly, it regards the state of employment abroad, and how the racialisation of Roma impacts the type of jobs they have access to as migrants, and consequently their migratory path. The second issue is related to housing. Thus, this paper will address the impact housing marginalisation has on Roma migration trajectories, as they have little resources to finance their migration. Ultimately, this paper connects racial dispossession at home with deregulation of migrant labour in the case of Roma.

Methodological considerations

The research for this paper is based on multiple data sources and methods: in-depth interviews with migrants from Baia Mare, official statistics on labour and migration trends, policy analysis of government reports, archival records, and data from the quantitative survey conducted within the framework of the PRECWORK project. The survey tracked aspects related to housing, work and migration in the disadvantaged areas of the city of Baia Mare and was applied to 800 respondents, 45% male, 55 % female.

As a member of the research team, I conducted fieldwork in Baia Mare during two periods: June to September 2021 and March to April 2022. The chosen periods allowed for capturing seasonal variations in the respondents' experiences. The data collection involved conducting a total of 25 in-depth interviews with migrants from Baia Mare. Among the respondents, 15 were Roma migrants, 8 were Romanians, and 2 were Hungarians. Including multiple ethnic groups allowed me to have a comparative perspective and to understand potential differences in their experiences. The gender representation within the sample was carefully considered, with 13 female and 12 male respondents, ensuring gender parity in the data collection process. The age of the respondents was mostly between 25-55. The interview guide was developed to touch on issues regarding housing, income, labour conditions, internal or international mobilities for work, the risk of exploitation, and remittances.

Snowball sampling methods were used to recruit respondents for this study. This approach allowed me to access and engage with respondents from marginalised Roma communities (Pirita, Craica) in the Baia Mare region. A noteworthy aspect regarding the sampling strategy was initiating the first contact through established connections with non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives who were actively involved in supporting and providing

various mediation and social services within these communities. This allowed me, an outsider, to gain access to these communities. At the same time, the outsider status had implications on the dynamics of information sharing, potentially impacting the depth and nature of information shared by the respondents.

Irregularisation of Roma migration

The main objective of this section is to address the position of Roma migrants when going abroad. From the interviews it is evident that compared to non-Roma migrants from Baia Mare, Roma migrants have very different histories of migration. Their stays are shorter, they are changing jobs or countries often and, most important, they are more likely to be employed informally. While non-Roma migrants gained access to formalised employment and other social benefits after the accession of Romania to the European union in 2007, most Roma are still experiencing irregular migration in Europe. This irregularisation of Roma migration is strongly related to the perceived inherent trait of Roma as (neo)nomadic, a view that legitimizes European governments' response to Roma migration as a security concern (De Genova 2019)

Roma migration has been extensively problematized ever since former socialist countries in Eastern Europe started the process of integration into the European Union. After the fall of the Eastern Bloc, and the beginning of discussions regarding EU enlargement, the Western Countries focused their attention on the `Roma question`, given the fact that former-socialist countries that were on their path of EU integration had 5-10% Roma population and a large migration to the West was feared (Liégeois 2007). Thus, through the Copenhagen criteria, the issue of Roma integration was explicitly set as a condition for accession for candidate countries.

The integration approach helps to invisibilize the structural aspects of race and the mechanism of power behind racism, centring the focus on the ethnically marked, who have to show a willingness to integrate and who are thus to blame for their own marginalisation, due to the fact that every aspect of racism is depoliticized, and ethnicity is only viewed from the perspective of culture (Maeso 2015). Thus, this approach, both in policy and in research, obscures the larger processes of racialization of poverty and labour, present in post-socialist countries in Eastern Europe. This results in obscuring the larger structural conditions that shape the neoliberal political economy, characterized by the deregulation of markets, state withdrawal from public services and privatisations, as well as racial marginalization and segregation in labour and housing.

The phenomenon of migration from Romania to EU member states witnessed a surge, following Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007. However, migration was not absent before 2007; rather, distinct migratory regimes can be discerned over time, with periods of more or less regularization. The year 2007 brought about the legalization of previously undocumented migrants living abroad and established a regulatory framework for employment and residence, especially for certain groups of Romanian emigrants (Horváth and Kiss 2016). However, as I will explore in the subsequent analysis, certain groups, such as the disadvantaged Roma, continued to experience migration marked by brief, irregular stays, illegal employment, and exploitation even after 2007.

Certainly, for a considerable segment of migrants who departed after 2007, the EU accession brought job security, legal work opportunities, access to social security benefits, and the option for permanent residency. Migration regimes shape migration patterns significantly; during periods with less regularization, migrants adopt specific migration behaviours, influenced by their irregular immigrant status, affecting the type of jobs available, social benefits accessible, and prospects for a successful migration. Before 2007, many migrants were compelled to work without formal contracts and faced unstable working conditions due to their irregular status. Additionally, they were at risk of deportation, which hindered their ability to settle in the destination countries permanently. Following 2007, this situation changed, as evidenced in the interviews conducted. However, it is important to acknowledge that some Roma individuals continued to experience irregularity even after the EU accession. In this paper I argue that it is precisely this irregular status that keeps Roma migrants in a cycle of deprivation, being constricted to mostly informal employment abroad that leads to shorter stays, unreliable employment and, as a result, the inability of saving money and overcoming financial difficulties as a result of their migration.

The term 'irregularization' refers to 'practices and discourses of orientalizing, securitization and nomadization' (Kóczé 2018:461). This irregularization of Roma migrants is a direct consequence of their status in their home country as semi-citizens, referring to the fact that many do not have in fact access to all their rights as citizens (van Baar 2018). Thus, they already start from a disadvantaged position, which reflects in their trajectories of migration. Neoliberal ideologies effectively obscure racial hierarchies through meritocratic discourses, that blame those who are marginalised, the Roma in this case, for their own marginalisation (Kóczé 2018).

Securitization discourses in Europe create a rhetoric that distinguishes between the unwanted Roma migrants and the wanted white migrants (Yıldız and De Genova 2018), resulting in the establishment of a state of exception (van Baar 2011; Clough, Marinaro 2009) when it comes to Roma migrants, that

facilitates the denial of their rights as citizens, all in the name of security. Of course, these discourses obscure the role they play on labour markets, as the Roma migrant occupies a highly racialised labour sector abroad. The framing of Roma migration as a security concern legitimizes state de-regularization of Roma migration even when it should be regularized. Thus, neoliberal governance effectively manages to create a very flexible and easily exploitative workforce (Bauman 2017).

Roma migration is always assumed to be related to poverty, or to a culture of nomadism (Pantea 2013). The identity of Roma as nomads was used by governments many times to justify the understanding of Roma as not belonging to the nation (Sigona 2005), the nomadic lifestyle being the proof of their status as aliens. Moreover, the interest in the nomadic and the portrayal of Roma as nomadic does not occur as a neutral academic curiosity, but rather it was used by governments to discriminate against and legitimate different acts of violence towards the Roma, justified by their status of outsiders which reinforced suspicion towards them, leading to policies of non-intervention and securitization (van Baar 2018).

While the Roma population does not officially report a higher rate of international migration than other ethnic groups, there is a blatantly racist stigma associated with Roma mobility within Europe. Roma migrants are facing a surge of anti-Gypsyism sentiment and rhetoric in countries such as Italy, France, or Germany, where governments took discriminatory measures against Roma migrants, measures that can be considered human rights violations (Clough, Marinaro 2009): collecting personal data, even some Roma migrants with identification documents were forced to evict or their personal property was destroyed, without being offered any alternative for housing, thus leaving them in an even more precarious position, or they were expelled and repatriated etc. (Sigona 2011). These illegitimate actions are showcasing the position of Roma migrants in Europe, as their mobility rights are being limited despite their status as EU citizens, with a direct impact on the outcome of their migration.

Segregation and racial dispossession – The Case of Baia Mare

This paper investigates the lives of Roma migrants from Baia Mare, attempting to understand what causes them to be stuck in a cycle of debt, with very little upward social mobility, especially when compared to non-Roma migrants. So far, I addressed the issue of Roma migration in Europe and how the position they occupy in foreign labour markets is contributing to the outcome

of their migration. In what follows, I discuss the issue of racial dispossession, showing how limited financial resources impact the outcome of migration, as many experience a `relative immobility` (Szabó 2018).

Accumulation by dispossession, a concept introduced by David Harvey, explains the changes of the neoliberal era, in which capital manages to effectively centralise wealth on a global scale through increasing privatisation, financialisation and commodification (Harvey 2005). Tania Li pushes this discussion further to show that dispossession is not always purposely creating labour for capital to use, but it also creates `surplus populations` who have virtually no place in the capitalist system of production and thus no means of subsistence (Li 2017). Yet, when discussing the precariat (Standing 2011), the class of labourers considered outside capitalism, often engaged in insecure or informal work, it becomes apparent that their marginalization serves as a fundamental condition for sustaining a consumption-oriented neoliberal system. Even from the outside of formalised economy, they serve as the bloodstream of the neoliberal system of production (Beluschi-Fabeni, Leggio, and Matras 2019). Far from it being an unfortunate accident, dispossession is a feature of the capitalist system, meant to create an easily accessible workforce. In this paper I will further build on this idea, connecting dispossession with the Roma racialisation, looking at how it directly affects migration patterns, as Roma migrants remain dependent on informal labour markets abroad.

Dispossession is the primary reason Roma migrants from Baia Mare are stuck at the bottom, even when engaging in international migration, as the conditions at home will be reflected in the work and mobility possibilities abroad. When discussing Roma migration, recognizing the foundational role of racial segregation and marginalization is crucial as they fundamentally shape migration patterns. Precarious work cannot be understood without addressing dispossession, or rather `double dispossession` (Kasimir and Carbonella 2014), which is the exclusion of workers from formalised employment and their exclusion from the city and how the two are interconnected.

We can see double dispossession at play in the case of Roma migrants from Baia Mare, as they have been pushed slowly out of the city into slums and out of employment during the deindustrialisation period in the 1990s. As a frame of reference, the city of Baia Mare experienced an industrial boom with substantial investments in industrial infrastructure during the 1960s and 1970s, which was also reflected in the rapid increase of population. Baia Mare attracted workers from neighbouring regions. However, starting from the 1990s, Baia Mare faced a downturn trend in population growth, triggered by the collapse of existing industries in the region after the fall of the communist regime in 1989, when the main extractive industries were shut down. This process did not

happen immediately after 1989 but it unfolded until the beginning of the 2000s. Still, the wave of layoffs affected the Roma first, as they were most likely to be employed as unqualified personnel in these industries. As a result, Romani workers were among the first to engage in international migration.

The closing of the mines gave way for new industries to emerge in the city, more precisely manufacturing industries, linked with international supply chains that took advantage of the semi-peripheral position of Romania and the asymmetrical power relations that transformed the country into a low-cost labour provider for global manufacturing production. These new industries did offer Roma workers the security of formal employment, but even so, this did very little to change their precarious position, as many, even though employed, are still living in improvised settlements at the periphery of Baia Mare. This constitutes the other type of dispossession the Baia Mare Roma have to face, namely the issue of housing.

There are multiple studies tackling the issue of spatial marginalisation of Roma and racial segregation in Romanian cities (Chelcea 2006; Lancione 2022; Mireanu 2019; Teodorescu 2019; Vincze and Zamfir 2019), especially connecting this phenomenon with post-socialist transformations and the penetration of a new neoliberal order that brought massive privatization and a retreat of the state from public service. The process of ghettoization, or the expulsion of Roma to the city margins, in precarious housing conditions is linked to larger processes of dispossession of the working class in the world (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014). Far from being a consequence of the failure of integration projects, ghettoization is a feature of the post-socialist neoliberal urban landscape, that is dependent on the extraction of value from highly marginalised and racialised individuals (Vincze 2019).

Of course, it is important to note that the marginalisation of Roma is not simply a consequence of the invisible hand of the market, but it is a direct consequence of the actions and policies taken by a state that reinforces both a neoliberal order and a racial system of power: this happens through evictions, displacements without adequate housing alternatives, discriminatory state housing management and redistribution, privatization of social housing, or uneven development etc. (Vincze 2019). The racial state, as theorized by Goldberg (2018) has the power to obscure race hierarchy and discrimination by naturalizing it, making it invisible to those who have internalized the racist order of the state (Goldberg 2018). What defines the racial state is the fact that it produces and reproduces racial spaces, with access and limitations, it also ascribes racial representation and dictates the formation of the self and the understanding of racial relations. Thus, the inferiorization of Roma and their portrayal as the racial 'other', serves as a justification for their placement in improper and dehumanizing housing conditions (Vincze 2019).

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Baia Mare offers a compelling context for examining ethnic segregation in housing and racial ghettoization. This social segregation was symbolically made visible by the infamous case of the wall erected by the City Administration in front of a social housing apartment block on Horea Street². In fact, the history of Roma housing in the city of Baia Mare is marked by deprivation. Although the Roma population accounts for only 1.9% of the total population, none the less they are represented in overwhelming numbers in the marginalized areas of the city (see Fig. 1).

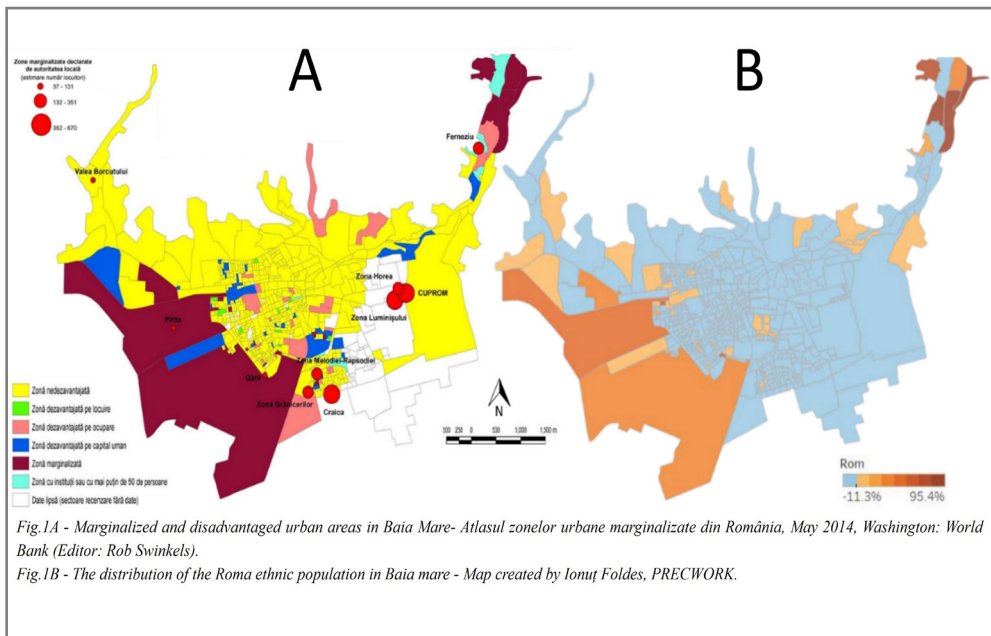


Fig.1A - Marginalized and disadvantaged urban areas in Baia Mare- Atlasul zonelor urbane marginalizate din România, May 2014, Washington: World Bank (Editor: Rob Swinkels).

Fig.1B - The distribution of the Roma ethnic population in Baia Mare - Map created by Ionuț Foldes, PRECWORK.

In Baia Mare there are several informal settlements that were mostly established by Roma populations: Pirita, Craica, Ferneziu, Gării, to name a few. The two main informal Roma communities I engaged with during my fieldwork are Pirita and Craica, two informal settlements occupied by Roma people who have built informal housing on unused land at the periphery of Baia Mare. One of the biggest threats the people living there are facing is the danger of expropriation. Pirita is situated in the western region of the city, proximate to the water treatment plant. Despite accommodating an approximate population of 250 individuals, the municipal authorities do not officially recognize the existence of this community, consequently curtailing their access to essential social services. The Craica

² <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-locale/baia-mare/zidul-tiganesc-din-baia-mare-un-subiect-1494258.html>

community is situated in the southern part of the city, specifically within the former Hatvan neighbourhood. In this area, residents have constructed improvised houses along the train line, occupying land that is owned by CFR (the Romanian National Railway Company). Due to the informal nature of these settlements, there is a constant risk of expropriation, as it happened in 2012 when the municipality carried out evictions, relocating them to buildings in the former Phoenix/Cuprom complex and demolishing their barracks.

It is also important to mention that Pirita is much more marginalised, as it is further away from the city, so the access to schools, jobs or other means of survival is restricted. Compared to Pirita, in Craica it is much more common for people to engage in circular transnational migration, which is paired with periods of time of formal employment in the factories from Baia Mare.

The collapse of local industries and the ongoing restructuring of the regional economy within the framework of capitalism have marginalized Roma workers, leaving them with access only to low paid formal or informal jobs. The motivations that push Roma to seek opportunities in foreign labour markets are the same circumstances that bind the family to a state of destitution at home, as they have little choice but to depend on the earnings of the migrant for the social provision and social reproduction of the household. That is why I am looking at families and households, as migration is rarely an individual endeavour, especially if we consider that migration is part of a larger strategy for covering the family social reproduction need (Kilkey, Merla, and Baldassar 2018).

Comparing histories of migration

This section will take a closer look at the experiences of migrants from Baia Mare, trying to uncover the effects racialised dispossession has on migration. In addressing Roma migration, I start from a very simple observation: there is a striking difference between Roma and non-Roma migrants from Baia Mare, both in terms of patterns of migration and outcome of migration. The reason for this difference is the material deprivation in relation to housing that forces Roma into debt, which they cannot overcome through migration alone, as they are constricted to low-paid, informal jobs when going abroad.

Let's take for example Gabriela³, a Romanian woman, from a neighbouring village of Baia Mare. She went to Spain in 2005 during the summer vacation, working as a cleaner, after her first year of college. Arriving there and seeing that she was able to earn a good salary, she decided to freeze her year at university

³ Fictional name to insure anonymity.

and remain there to work. There, she met her current husband, also Romanian. After her maternity leave, Gabriela started working in the kitchen of a private Hospital in Madrid, rising in ranks from dishwasher, to waiter, to manager. In addition to this work, she also helps at the husband's family restaurant during the weekend. The money they earned were sent to Romania, to be invested in the construction of their house. They also bought an apartment in Madrid. They had another child after which they returned to Romania, where Gabriela finished her studies and is currently working as a teacher in the local school.

Now let's look at another case: Bogdan⁴ is a Roma man from Baia Mare in his 40s. His father worked in the mine and after it was closed, they lost their apartment and ended up in Craica. He worked at Aramis⁵ in Baia Mare for 3 years, describing his experience there in negative terms. He first emigrated in '98 - '99 to Italy. He lived there alone for a year, living in an abandoned car for the first few months until he made connections to help him find work. He was in various parts of Italy working as a construction worker, while his wife worked as a carer for the elderly. He also went to UK, Island, and Germany to work, staying there for a relatively short time, only a few months. When the interview was taken, he was back in Craica, waiting for a next working gig abroad.

As we can see from the examples above, the life-histories differ quite greatly between different ethnicities from Baia Mare engaged in international migration. During my research, there were many examples of Roma experiencing hypermobility, as compared to non-Roma who had a more linear trajectory of migration. The survey data⁶ is also confirming the trends observed in the interviews. For example, non-Roma tend to stay abroad 4,1 years on average, in the case of Romanians and 3,2 years in the case of Hungarian- ethnics. Comparing this with just 1,6 years for Roma migrants, we can see how migration patterns differ across ethnic lines (See Fig. 2). This difference in turn influences the kind of life and opportunities they can build abroad, resulting in different outcomes of migration.

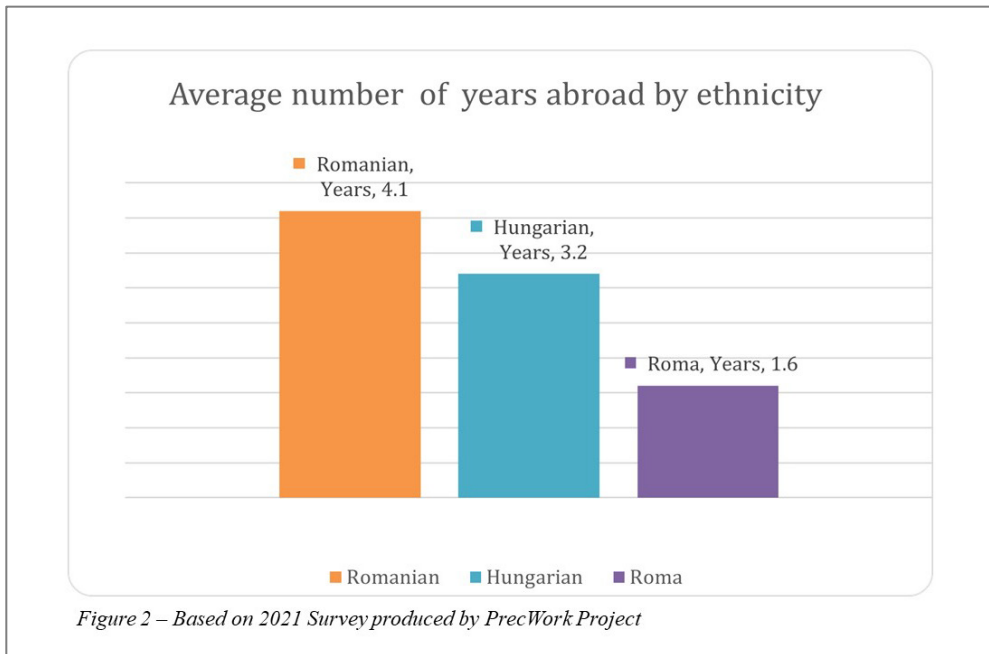
The most notable difference between Roma and non-Roma individuals from Baia Mare in terms of their migration experiences is that Roma migrants appear to have less successful migrations. They are at a higher risk of being unable to save money while living as migrants, potentially leading to a cycle of debt, dependence and low-paying or informal employment. This situation is made even more evident when compared to non-Roma migrants from Baia Mare, who are more likely to save the remittances and return home, afford to buy property, and have a better financial situation due to their migration. The notable

⁴ Fictional name to insure anonymity

⁵ Furniture factory in Baia Mare

⁶ 2021 Survey produced by PrecWork Project

difference can be mainly ascribed to the systemic dispossession that the Roma face in their home countries and their irregularized status as Roma migrants abroad. Roma's long-lasting marginalization in housing in the city of Baia Mare pushed many into debt, which created an uneven starting point for migration. The money borrowed is often used to finance the migration, with an expectation of greater returns. However, given the conditions imposed by money lenders and the instability of their jobs, many remain caught in a cycle of debt. Additionally, most of the remittances are used for the social reproduction of the household at home, making it impossible to save money from migration.



Furthermore, their racial marginalization at home extends to their position as migrants abroad. Their trajectory of migration is marked by irregularity, having access to mostly informal jobs when migrating abroad, which results in shorter and unpredictable stays abroad, with periods of return in Baia Mare and the constant risk of mistreatment or going without pay after months of working, again due to not having a formal contract of employment. In what follows, I will take a closer look at the causes that make Roma migration from Baia Mare unsuccessful, looking at the issue of debt, the issue of housing and job insecurity abroad.

The cost of migration and job insecurity

For many, the outcome of migration hinders on the labour opportunities they have. The collapse of local industries and the ongoing reorganization of the economy within the framework of capitalism have resulted in Roma individuals finding themselves in a marginalized position on the labour market. These circumstances limit their access to a narrow range of low-paying formal or informal jobs. More so, as we previously discussed, Roma migration is oftentimes irregularised and securitized as a result of the neoliberal governance ideology which merges with right-wing rhetoric to further racialize Roma and create a cheap and flexible source of labour force in Europe. In what follows I will discuss what are the work conditions for Roma migrants from Baia Mare when they engage in transnational migration.

While migrants generally tend to become more self-sufficient overtime, this progression is less evident among the Roma migrants I interviewed, who have a notably precarious position within the foreign labour market. From our survey it appears that 41% of Roma from Baia Mare are working without a contract, comparing with 13% in the case of Romanians and 29% in the case of Hungarians. Another aspect that makes them vulnerable on the labour market is the low level of qualification, as 82% of the Roma respondents declared that they are employed as unqualified workers. Low qualification makes them easily replaceable and keeps them in a low pay range.

As Roma migrants from Baia Mare seek work abroad, they typically find jobs in construction, agriculture, and manufacturing, with a notable presence in slaughterhouses. Their migration pattern involves a continuous back-and-forth movement between Romania and various European countries such as Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Spain. Importantly, this movement is not always a matter of choice; it often stems from practical considerations related to available job opportunities. The work secured by the Roma is typically informal, often tied to specific seasons, and it involves low-skilled labour, unfortunately leaving them vulnerable to exploitative conditions. This migration, therefore, is not just a journey but a complex response to economic realities and the challenges of securing sustainable employment.

The initial departure is the most vulnerable phase, requiring them to risk funds to afford the travel and accommodation during the first month(s), with no guarantees, relying entirely on migrant networks (Pantea 2013). Following this first step, a significant number have established their own support systems, ensuring future employment, and have learned to navigate their circumstances, reducing their vulnerability. Depending on family members to access foreign labour markets results in a form of social obligation that extends beyond just financial transactions (Beluschi-Fabeni et al. 2019). The act of migration itself

comes with substantial financial burdens borne by their households, with the expectation of greater returns (Friberg 2020). In certain cases, these costs are so steep that they hinder migration and the opportunities it offers. This highlights that while for many the act of migration means a cycle of debt and constant movement between home and abroad, it is nevertheless a path that partially alleviates the conditions of complete destitution.

But we couldn't go because I was sick, and we didn't even have the strength to pay for the trip. You need money, you need food, you need to deal with children on the road, kind of nasty. No, that's life, so we didn't even think about going abroad. That I didn't have the strength, no. I heard people are making money over there. (56, F, Pirita, Roma, no external migration interview)

For the individuals interviewed, the decision to seek work abroad marks a pivotal moment, as it alters their life course, propelling them into a migration cycle where they inhabit two distinct spaces simultaneously—they are both “present” at home, participating in the development of their households and contributing with their income, and abroad, living in the countries where they work. During periods when they cannot find work abroad, they return to the job market at home, considering it a transitional phase until the next job opportunity arises. Their dual existence is also reinforced by their living conditions abroad: often residing in shared accommodations provided by their employers. The migrant workers are not expected to build a life there, but only to provide their labour. Right from the beginning, the interviewees embark upon a migration cycle driven by the inability of securing a viable job at home, along with the struggle to save money from their earnings.

It is the instability of the jobs, which are usually low-skilled temporary jobs, that makes the Roma migrants from Baia Mare highly replaceable and therefore exceptionally vulnerable. As a result, many of them find themselves repeatedly in the position of starting from scratch, moving across borders depending on where the opportunity presents itself, or returning home to await the next potential gig. This return is not by choice and serves as a setback for many, diminishing their ability to save their earnings. They are forced into accepting low paid positions in Baia Mare, only to leave as soon as a better chance arises.

Since they only have access to mostly informal jobs when going abroad, Roma migrants are at high risk of being mistreated by their employers and are repeatedly going without pay. From the conversations we had, it appears that many experience this phenomenon or at least know that it is a real possibility.

He had problems, yes (the husband). When he was working at home, he was called by a recruiting agency and was told that he must pay 5 million (500 RON), I don't know how much, for some documents so he can leave for work in a week.

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He sent them the money and was scammed. It's hard, especially if you don't have any money, it's hard. (Roma, F, 40, Cuprom, housewife, migrant husband)

Two months. He (the interviewee's husband) worked for them for two months, with a work contract and didn't receive anything, it was a fake contract, and he didn't give her the money.

What was he doing?

Fruit picking, I think, or whatever it was. But I'm not sure to say. (28, F, Rome, Craica, migrant)

The accounts of scams are numerous: some went on working a few months only to realise at the end they are never going to be paid, some reported receiving less pay than what they were promised or went on to discover the intermediary was withholding a part of the pay they should have received. Even when there is no obvious abuse from the part of the employer, not having a formal contract can lead to losing one's job with no alternative form of protection and being forced to return home with no compensation.

The interviews with Roma migrants consistently bring to light the theme of initial and ongoing costs associated with transitioning from their home country to the host country. This theme is less frequently discussed in interviews with non-Roma migrants. For those outside the Roma community, the initial migration has a more permanent character even though the path of migration is still seen as a temporary stage in their life course. Nonetheless, a distinct difference exists between these two groups: Roma migration is marked by hypermobility, with a continuous cycle of movements between their home country and abroad, frequently changing jobs and also countries or industries. On the other hand, non-Roma are more likely to stay and build a life abroad for longer, build relationships and advance in their careers, because they are more likely to have access to formal employment opportunities. There is no back and forth movement with periods of unemployment and job insecurity, which saves non-Roma from having to bear the cost and risk of migration repeatedly.

The nature of the jobs that Roma migrants from Baia Mare have access to when they migrate abroad to work, coupled with the instability of jobs and the risk of informal contracts, means that the migrants cannot be on their own, but must always rely on the household, which in turn relies on them. This can occur even if the migrants have already experienced migration, as they oftentimes struggle to retain their earnings. The inability to accumulate their income earned abroad stands out as a significant distinction between the Roma and non-Roma individuals in the life stories I encountered.

Debt and racial dispossession

As explored in the theoretical segment of this paper, it is imperative to consider the issue of precarious labour, particularly migrant labour, in relation to marginalisation, or how the experience of migration is shaped by racial dispossession. In what follows I will explore deeper how the issue of housing impacts the migrants' path of migration, connecting it with the issue of debt and social reproduction.

The interviews with Roma people reveal a disparity between their expectations regarding the outcome of migration and the reality they face. This is especially true when considering the paradox of imagined paths of social mobility through migration envisioned as a form of escape from a deprived social position, and the actual realities of migration that offers no such escape, but another way of being stuck at the bottom of social hierarchies (Grill 2012). Virtually all interviewees concur that the primary objective of migration is to accumulate money to purchase a house or a piece of land. This is one of their biggest concerns and struggles and it is linked to the process of dispossession that began after the collapse of the mining industry in the region. This means that many of them lost their parental homes during the transition. Some were evicted from their rented homes due to the high cost of living and moved to the ghettos in Baia Mare, Pirită or Craica to secure rent-free housing. The data from our survey shows that 63% of Roma have experienced evictions, in striking difference with 22% of Romanians or 16% of Hungarians, showcasing how the process of dispossession is impacting Roma at a much higher rate. Some of the people interviewed account situations where they were forced out of their rented apartments due to the escalating cost of living, leading them to relocate in Baia Mare, in Pirită, Gării or Craica shantytowns to secure cost-free renting. Furthermore, due to racial discrimination they are kept from returning to formal housing, even when they could afford it. In other instances, family properties had to be sold off to settle the debts they had acquired.

We stayed with his father, after 7 years we moved here. We stayed in a rented apartment for a year, but they kicked us out. It was hard, we had to pay the electricity and the heating, and we couldn't manage. I was with the kid at home, and he had his salary, but the food and clothes and what else we needed, we didn't have enough. And here in Craica it is also difficult with the electricity, but we still manage because there is no rent to pay. And we built this little house, I went to England with him (partner), the child was with my mother.
(26, F, Craica, Rome, UK immigrant)

While most of the Roma individuals interviewed view migration as a potential path towards obtaining homeownership and increasing their income to improve their vulnerable circumstances, their daily lives are haunted by the fear of becoming homeless. Unfortunately, migration seldom presents them with a genuine opportunity to achieve these aspirations. On the rare occasions when it does, it tends to be for those who already had a relatively stable footing at the beginning. An example from the interviews highlights this: one Roma woman managed to fund her migration through a small family venture in fruit wholesaling, which offered her an initial economic stability to rely upon, which proved beneficial, as she managed to use the earnings to fund a loan for a house in Baia Mare. Still, it should be noted that from the stories I encountered, this was rather an exception. In most cases, the accumulation of money remains only a distant dream, and many remain in the same position even after years of working abroad. In the discussions we had, many of the migrants from these marginalised communities were engaged in international migration for many years, yet they were still living in virtually the same conditions. As one of the interviewees testified, he started migrating in the '90s as a construction worker in Israel, and three decades later he was still going every few months to work in Italy, helping with moving furniture, even though he was long in his retirement years.

For the Roma community, the burdens of migration can be quite overwhelming, often pushing them into debt as they seek to gather at least a minimal amount of capital to fund their journey. More so, many are forced into debt even before engaging in transnational migration, and more particularly into agreements with informal moneylenders. The conditions for borrowing money this way are harsh, with high interest rates and fraudulent conditions. Yet for many, more legal options are out of reach.

I arrived in Baia Mare because I lost my house, I had a house in Jibău, I borrowed money with interest from moneylenders I ended up not being able to pay and he was waiting. If he saw that on the due day I didn't give them, he still doubled it, he still doubled it. Neither I nor my husband were employed, we worked occasionally, in the countryside, what we could find. Sometimes we couldn't find any work...so, we collected an amount of debt that we couldn't get out of so we lost the house. (50, F, Gării, Roma ,migrant)

A distinctive form of indebtedness that I encountered during my fieldwork is the selling of future incomes. What that means is that for a sum of money a person would sell the future income for a year or more, which included various social benefits the family was entitled to. In practicality it means that all

forms of social benefits or other sources of income are given to the moneylenders until the debt is paid. So is the case of Alina⁷, who lives in Craica with her 3 children and her husband who works abroad. She borrowed money by selling her household income, for a sum of money needed for preparing their house for winter – as many of the improvised houses require constant maintenance.

I sold my income, the children allowance, and the maternity benefits as well. I gave it for 5000 lei, to the people who do business (referring to money lenders). My income is 2000 lei a month, with maternity allowance. No, and I sold it for a year. When I receive my money, they always come and leave me 500 – 600 to have for food. So, they are not taking anything, and as long as I pay my electric bill, its ok. Now that I don't have a job (...) we have a harder time. (28, F, Craica, Roma, migrant)

A critical factor hindering their capacity to save earnings towards property ownership is their connection to their household. Social reproduction in relation to migration is more often discussed in terms of the work migrants provide in assisting for the social reproduction of families abroad. Less often it is discussed in relation to their own family, and how migration restructures the social relations in the extended families at home (Locke, Seeley, and Rao 2013). Most of the Roma migrants I interviewed, passed on the money earned from working abroad directly to their extended family, who utilize it for daily subsistence. Between personal survival needs abroad and the family's necessities at home, the earnings—though substantially higher than what they could procure in Baia Mare—get allocated to everyday expenditures, which includes settling past debts. The relationship with their household is one of mutual dependence. Unlike non-Roma individuals, Roma migrants are oftentimes the primary or sole provider for the household at home.

Yes, so the money I earned I always sent home. I was leaving money for cigarettes, because I also smoke, I drink coffee, maybe I also have a cup of tea, you understand. So, I received 1500 euros per month. I kept 200-300 euros for myself, I sent the rest to my family. My mother does not speak, she is mute, deaf from birth. We are 14 brothers. (39 years old, F, Craica, Rome, migrant)

The migrant is the main line of support for the family social reproduction at home, providing the necessary resources for maintaining the household. What makes this social obligation even stronger is the need for financial support from the family as well, to afford access to jobs abroad. Migration is not a solitary

⁷Fictional name to ensure anonymity

endeavour; rather, it hinges on the initial support of the family in the home country. For instance, families might provide the necessary capital for travel expenses, in addition to facilitating connections with migrant networks abroad. These networks offer accommodation, job opportunities, and valuable insights for new employment, essentially furnishing the essential knowledge for success overseas. Consequently, Roma migrants are unable to strike out on their own, leading them to perpetually navigate between these two worlds.

Conclusions

This paper compared the strategies and work histories of Roma and non-Roma migrants from Baia Mare in the context of migration, in an effort to determine the degree to which racial and class disparities influence life histories in the post-socialist context. The profound decline of the regional industry during the 1990s had a strong impact on a significant portion of the population, driving many to seek opportunities in foreign labour markets as a last resort. While circular migration is a prevalent phenomenon, the life-histories of Roma and non-Roma individuals differ significantly. Roma migrants from Baia Mare have distinct migration histories characterized by shorter stays, frequent job or country changes, and a higher likelihood of informal employment. In contrast, non-Roma individuals gained access to formalized employment and other social benefits after 2007, while a significant number of Roma continue to experience irregular migration in Europe.

Employing ethnographic research, the paper established a link between racialized dispossession—particularly evident in housing and employment—and the exploitation of Roma labour in the context of transnational migration. The central thesis of this paper is that this dispossession perpetuates a cycle of debt for Roma migrants, influencing the trajectory and outcomes of their migration. This impact manifests on two fronts: firstly, in terms of employment opportunities abroad, where the racialization of Roma individuals significantly shapes the types of jobs accessible to them as migrants, consequently influencing their migratory paths. The second dimension is tied to housing, addressing the consequential impact of marginalization on Roma migration trajectories, exacerbated by limited resources for financing their migration. In essence, this paper established a critical link between racial dispossession at home and the deregulation of migrant labour, particularly in the case of the Roma population.

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