Ill. 1
The migration of the Roma from Romania to Western Europe and back.

2.6

Socio-cultural transformations following the recent mobility of Roma within the EU

László Fosztó & Stefánia Toma

The westward migration of the Eastern European Roma after the demise of the state socialist regimes led to public discussions, in particular the difficulties encountered by Roma migrants in the destination countries. The disputes became even more intense after the enlargement of the European Union (2007) when citizens of Bulgaria and Romania could travel unrestrictedly within the EU. While a growing number of scholarly publications addressed the legal and political dimensions of this migration, the cultural and social consequences within the Romani communities of this recent mobility received less systematic attention. In this factsheet we are offering an overview of the socio-cultural changes observed on the ground within Romani communities (and their relations with the local majorities) by focusing in particular on the localities of origin of those emigrating from Romania.

INTRODUCTION

The international migration of the Romanian Roma to Western Europe was subject to heightened attention during the past two decades. While public accounts and popular imagery in earlier periods described the mobility of the Eastern European Roma as a continuation of "nomadic traditions", mostly based on exoticizing ideas of Romani life, more recently the public attention has turned towards institutional practices of states like Italy, where the 'Nomad Emergency' was in-troduced by the government of Silvio Berlusconi in 2008, or France, where the Sárközy administration started 'voluntary deportations' to repatriate Roma to their native country of Romania in 2010. These interventions were followed by national campaigns for the demolition of illegal camps and shantytowns in both countries. Other Western European countries also introduced repressive measures to limit 'the Romani migration'. Media reports contributed to scaremongering in the destination countries by highlighting criminality rates among migrant Roma or by presenting them as beggars. Ac-

Ill. 2
Old and new roofs
(Cluj area 2014)
Photo by Stefánia Toma

Ill. 3
Gate of a newly built house
(Cluj area 2014)
Photo by Stefánia Toma

counts of the living conditions in the home localities were rare; aspirations of the migrants for a better future as well as their aims and their reasons to move across the continent were systematically ignored.

We approach phenomena linked to migration from the perspective of the people and communities involved in travelling abroad and returning home. From this angle, Romani migration is part of the larger process of heightened mobility of the Romanian population. Still, it has some particularities, which we will highlight below. The factsheet is structured as follows: First, we look at some aspects of the circulation of resources, goods and practices within the community of migrants and their relatives. Secondly, we present the impact of migration on the social attitudes and practices in the home localities. Thirdly, we offer a glimpse into the new forms of communicative practices which open up new possibilities for home-making, social integration at home, and diaspora formation within the EU and beyond. Our empirical material is coming from the Romanian case, but comparable processes can be observed in the cases of other countries.[1]

CIRCULATION OF PEOPLE, GOODS, AND SKILLS

Roma from Eastern Europe are most often involved in circular mobility. This pattern of migration and return increasingly affects the physical, social and cultural landscape of the

communities of origin. The financial and material resources which are brought back or remitted from travels abroad are often used to satisfy household needs or to pay back debts. These debts might originate from the first investments in the migration process: those without a stabile income have to take a loan in order to leave. Housing improvements seems to constitute the second phase. We also observed the emerging third phase in the form of productive investments by returnees within the local Romani communities, for example the opening of new small grocery shops, car-wash businesses or car-repair workshops.

THE EXAMPLE OF HOUSES

As soon as household needs are met, materials for renovations are bought and the work of improvements of the houses begin. The external walls are repaired, isolated, and painted in vivid colors; windows and doors are replaced, and roofs are changed using fashionable new materials. On occasion, whole houses are even rebuilt from the ground using more permanent and heat-isolating materials. These are the first visible changes in all localities and Romani settlements involved in migration. These signs indicate that the mobility of the inhabitants has not only commenced, but has also reached a phase in which material and social remittances contribute to the transformation of the local community.

The construction of new houses and improvement of older buildings are the first tangible investments of remittances in home communities. Together with the external improvements of the houses, interiors are upgraded as well. Families that previously lacked the comfort of a well-equipped household now invest their remittances in modern kitchen appliances and can afford to change their furniture or install a bathroom. These changes bring about improve-

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1 The research presented here resulted from MigRom – 'The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: Causes, effects, and future engagement strategies', a project funded by the European Union's FP7 Programme under the call 'Dealing with diversity and cohesion: the case of the Roma in the European Union' (GA319901). See 'further reading' section for a broad outlook.

Ill. 4
Village fair
(Sălaj county 2014)
Photo by Stefánia Toma

Ill. 5
Signs of the success in migration
(Cluj area 2014)
Photo by Stefánia Toma

ments in the living conditions of the family, but are also signs of successful mobility. The improvement and design of the houses reflect the migrants' aspirations and desires for an improved life. More than that, through this the migrants shape the future of their children and hope to maintain the family line. This also indicates that the social life and future aspirations of the mobile Roma are anchored in their communities of origin and that they seek to carve out new positions for themselves and their children.

IMPROVING SKILLS, STATUS, AND EDUCATION
Roma and their non-Romani neighbours do not differ radically in interpreting these signs of status. An improved or new building contributes to increasing the status of the Romani family both within the community and in the eyes of the majority. This is even more so when financial resources brought back from migration are invested in construction materials and the construction work carried out on the building is performed by the returnees who demonstrate their skills acquired while working abroad. Locals comment approvingly on the handiness of the workers and the efforts of the families to implement the 'western models of civilisation' to which the latter were exposed during their travels. The improved skills and professional expertise – even without formal training – can help guarantee a better job at home.

The types of work migrant Roma provide abroad are highly diverse. According to our research, however, this appears to be an improvement when compared to the situations in the home communities where work opportunities on the informal labour market are decreasing. There, Roma mostly rely on the social and kin-networks available to them to get employment abroad. The new jobs come with new professional experiences and the acquisition of new skills and

technologies. Besides this, workers and their family members learn foreign languages. Our research also indicates that in the case of better-situated families remittances are invested in the education of the children by enabling them to stay in school longer, since they do not need to take up work early on to secure the everyday survival of the family.

DIFFERENCES IN STYLES
While the circulation of goods and skills contributes to the transformation of the local landscapes of all communities where migration has begun, there is a wide range of forms this phenomenon could take, based on the cultural values and social identities of the migrants. It would be misleading to suggest that migration only creates similarities between the majority and the local Roma or between different Romani groups, and that it would ultimately contribute to cultural homogeneity in the localities of origin. The example of the houses renovated or built by the mobile Roma shows that the social and cultural processes are diverse and, in many cases, will contribute to the maintenance of social and cultural divisions or even reassert particularistic identities in the localities of origin.

If we look at the options and styles of renovated or newly built houses, we can identify processes of convergence and divergence with the styles of the local majority: On the one hand there are slightly modified, renovated and repainted peasant houses, but on the other hand we can also find conspicuous divergence from local traditions in the form of impressive two- or three-storey palace-like buildings with elaborated roof decorations. These styles are intimate expressions of the persistent Romani identity, which is far from becoming an obsolete part of the past. We can witness dynamic processes that help people to accommodate to the changing conditions and recreate particular practices under

Ill. 6
Second hand clothes from European countries
(Negreni Fair, Cluj Area 2012)
Photo by László Fosztó.

Ill. 7
Second hand shoes from European countries
(Negreni Fair, Cluj Area 2012)
Photo by László Fosztó.

the present conditions. Additional resources brought in through the mobility can feed these creative processes.

RETURN: CHALLENGING ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL PRACTICES

The social consequences of mobility challenge age-old prejudices and exclusionary practices, reverse social exchanges, and enable migrants to reposition themselves within the majority-minority relations in their home locality. For example, in some cases the patron-client relations are reversed or new positions on the informal labour market are created by migration practices; when mobile Roma invest in palace-like buildings, the construction workers are usually members of the local majority community. In other cases, members of the majority are hired to look after the houses of migrant Roma or non-Romani women are employed either occasionally or for longer periods of time as domestic workers and caregivers of older family members who were left behind.

RESIDENTIAL DESEGREGATION AND THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL DISTANCE

A particular transformation of the locality is the spontaneous desegregation in localities where Roma have traditionally lived in segregated settlements. Using resources from their migration, Roma acquire houses or plots, move to central locations in the localities, or build their own large houses. While similar developments occur among the majority migrants, since they also move to more prestigious spaces and build bigger houses, in localities where Roma lived in segregated settlements, desegregation often goes along with a high degree of social distance vis-a-vis the Roma. In these cases, a characteristic response of members of the majority to the rising visibility of the Roma

and their physical proximity is increasing social distance and avoiding social interactions. These cases are more typical for localities where the migration of the Roma developed on the basis of family and ethnic networks that are separated from the networks of the local majority.

There are, however, localities where network ties crosscut ethnic boundaries and facilitate intense exchanges and communication between the different segments of local society. In these cases, Roma and their non-Romani neighbours are colleagues and often share common migration experiences as well as ways of interpreting them. In such cases, local transformations and the repositioning of mobile Roma within the local social relations produce less tension and the majority has a high level of acceptance of differences; in other words, social distance between different ethnic groups remains rather reduced.
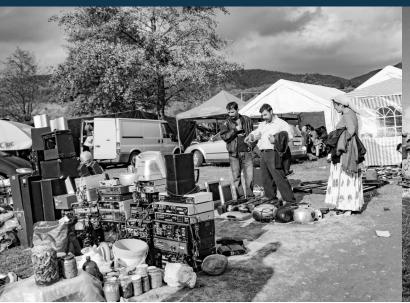
The dynamics of local social distance between mobile Roma and their non-Romani neighbours will most probably change in the future corresponding to the development of social relations, demographic processes, and interventions of the local institutions. Churches, local authorities, or civil society organisations can play a mediating role that is crucial during periods marked by the socio-cultural transformations described here.

ADDRESSING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY THE RETURNEES

In addition to the financial efforts necessary to initiate a migration, there are many other difficulties and social costs faced by the mobile Roma. In many cases, migration commences not only due to the lack of job opportunities but due to poverty and social exclusion. The popular saying 'Leaving is hard, but returning is even harder' also holds

Ill. 8
Family in the fair
(Negreni, Cluj Area 2012)
Photo by László Fosztó.

Ill. 9
Preparations for renovating an old home
(Braşov county 2015)
Photo by László Fosztó.

true for the case of migrant Roma. At return, they might find that even the few social networks they were part of have weakened or broken; even family and kinship relations might be somewhat disrupted. A re-accommodation period is needed to rearrange these social ties. While some of the difficulties can be dealt with personally, others become the responsibility of local administration or state institutions. For example, some returning Romani families, whose children were born in foreign countries or attended school abroad, report that they met with difficulties when enrolling their children in schools back home. These children are either likely to drop out of school or they can only finish some form of 'second-chance' education when older, in the absence of reintegration programmes. Generally speaking, the countries of origin need to address the social and cultural aspects of the mobility, which require dedicated social and educational policies.

STAYING ABROAD: BELONGING ACROSS BORDERS

Being separated by geographical distance requires new forms of social and cultural practices to maintain connections. The development of communication technologies and the internet in particular have a very important impact on these new practices. Practices related to family, kinship, and rituals are among the most important domains where the new developments have a visible effect. The spread of mobile phones and smartphones in particular revolutionised both the communication between migrants and their relatives in the home country, as well as between migrants who live in different destination countries. Social media created a whole new domain for the exchange of verbal and visual messages that could be used to display traditional and renewed Romani identities within the community, but also in the broader social world. Romani language entered

public digital spaces and became written in different forms. We can also witness an expansion of the use of Romani, a process that developed 'from below', unassisted by state policies.

THE SPREAD OF NEW DEVICES
AND THEIR IMPACT

With the spread of the mobile phone, families could acquire a phone rather easily – even those who never had the possibility to have a landline in their houses due to economic, administrative or legal difficulties. This was particularly important in rural Romania where the communication infrastructure was rather underdeveloped. By the second decade of the post-socialist transformations, mobile phones were abundant and cheap, and a national coverage of mobile networks became common. Mobile phones were status symbols before they became instrumental in everyday practices of maintaining connectedness both domestically as well as internationally.

Pre-paid mobile cards were the cheapest short-term option for obtaining a phone number. These cards were typically acquired and exchanged quite often between members of the family and friends, so communication between two members of the community was usually embedded in a larger network of people. Numbers may change their owner within the social network and oftentimes calling a number will reach another person who then provides the caller with the most recent number of the person he/she meant to reach. Exchanges rarely remain private, not least because several members of the family surround the person on the phone and listen in to their conversation. This is well in line with the traditional forms of verbal communication, and these shared phone conversations may recreate the awareness of family and friendship that is already embedded in local and trans-local social

Ill. 10
Newly built brick house in the Roma settlement
(Brașov county 2015)
Photo by László Fosztó.

Ill. 11
The main road of the village with renovated peasant houses
(Brașov county 2015)
Photo by László Fosztó.

ties. The advent of the smart phone with its multimedia potential and access to social media platforms reinforced the existing communal nature of long-distance communication.

FAMILY, KINSHIP, AND RITUALS

Kinship and family networks represent a valuable social capital for Romani families. These relations can facilitate mobility, by helping members to obtain information about job opportunities abroad, to find accommodation, or to stay informed about new possibilities. They can foster contact with the home localities while staying in foreign countries, so that migrants can take part in decision-making on how to use the remittances and what investments to make. New communication channels facilitate the continuous contact with children and elderly family members left behind, simplifying the planning of returns for family meetings and rituals. While some of the family members abroad can take part in everyday life through regular conversations online, their absence is still strongly felt. Thus, mobility contributes to the reconfiguration of family life, gender roles, and the relationship between the generations.

Investments into rituals, the participation in and display of conspicuous consumption are closely connected to reproducing social ties and collective identities not only at home, but across the European continent. Holidays and religious events are important moments of returning, visiting and/or virtually engaging with the home community. These occasions represent opportunities for celebrating the collective identity, as well as for ritual transfers within the kinship structure. While participation and face-to-face meetings remain crucial, images and videos recorded during home-visits or records of whole rituals (for example baptisms or burials) can – to some degree – substitute direct

presence and can be shared with family members who could not be present. Watching them can help to recreate a sense of belonging, similar to the use of traditional family photo albums. Sharing these materials on online platforms and through social media facilitates the maintenance of family and kinship relations regardless of geographical presence on the one hand, and on the other hand strengthens the sense of belonging to ethnic or kin groups.
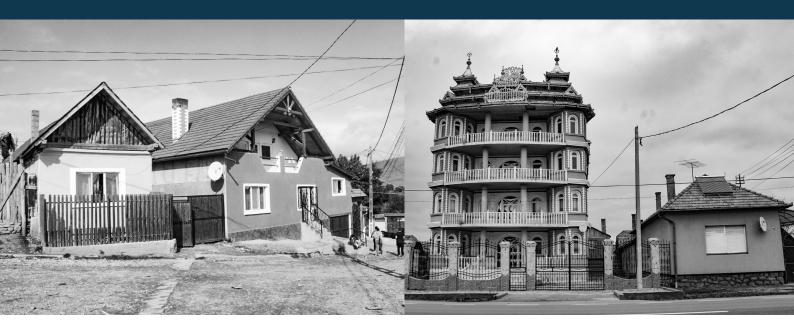
Rituals also connect families with organizations which are situated in the social space between the family and the state, most typically associations and churches (both Pentecostal and other denominations). These organizations can be agents of social and cultural mobilization that contribute to the maintenance and renegotiation of the Romani identity in the destination countries. Religious assemblies and churches are connected through extended networks and through these ties circulate both religious ideas and practical information facilitating mobility.

SUMMARY

The migration following European integration is arguably the reason for the most important social changes in the Romanian countryside today. The effects of international mobility, return, and the remittances spent or invested trigger visible modernization processes 'from below' in Romani communities. This causes an increase in the amount of interaction between the Roma and non-Roma that affects and challenges existing patterns of ethnic relations and influences socio-cultural practices. International migration has enabled the mobility of Romani families to increase their capacity for upward social mobility in their home localities. Therefore, the opening up of the European space can be seen as a

Ill. 12
Newly opened shop at the Roma settlement
(Brașov county 2015)
Photo by László Fosztó.

Ill. 13
'Palace' and renovated peasant house
(Cluj area 2014)
Photo by László Fosztó.

transformative process for the Roma involved in migration. While a large part of the existing scholarly literature focuses on situations observed in the countries of destination and highlights the rejection of the Roma, issues of security in Western countries and the deportability of persons and families, we focused on the ways Roma make use and interpret the new possibilities created by migration. First, we presented some aspects of the circulation of resources, goods and practices within the community of migrants and their relatives. Then we addressed the impact of migration on the social attitudes and practices in the home localities, mentioning some of the difficulties returnees met with during their reintegration. Finally, we offered insights into the new forms of communicative practices which create a novel space for home-making, social integration at home, and diaspora formation within the EU and beyond.

FURTHER READING CONCERNING ROMANI MOBILITY WITHIN THE EU

There is a growing body of literature that includes monographs (Nagy 2018, Humphris 2019), edited volumes (Matras and Leggio 2018, Magazzini and Piemontese 2019, van Baar, Ivasiuc, and Kreide 2019), thematic issues of journals (Nedelcu and Ciobanu 2016, Yıldız and De Genova 2018, Durst and Nagy 2018, Asztalos Morell, Greenfields, and Smith 2018), as well as individual studies (Marushiakova and Popov 2018). This literature deals with various aspects of the migration and mobility of the Roma within the EU. A large part of the analyses is focused on the situation of the Romani migrants in the destination countries and the effects of interventions by institutions of these host societies.

There are also case studies focused on particular aspects of the migration, the return and mobility of the Roma from the perspective of the communities of origin. These studies deal with migration from different communities and the role of social networks (Pantea 2013), return and repositioning (Anghel 2019, Szabó 2018), the impact of migration experiences and remittances (Toma, Tesăr, and Fosztó 2018), the dynamics of social distance and the role of cultural differences (Toma and Fosztó 2018a, Toma and Fosztó 2018b), the focus on material culture and the houses of the migrants (Benarrosh-Orsoni 2015, Benarrosh-Orsoni 2019, Tesăr 2016), new social aesthetics and home making (Racles 2017).

There are studies on the role of mobile phones (Benarrosh-Orsoni 2016), the new digital media (Alietti, Olivera, and Riniolo 2015, Ogáyar-Marín, Muntean, and Gamella 2018), transformations of kinship (Gamella 2018), transnational family relations through technologically mediated rituals (Beluschi-Fabeni 2018), ethnicity and religion in the context of mobility (Lipan 2017), or the role of the internet in the emergence of new forms of the Romani language (Leggio 2020).

Lastly, there are studies from other Eastern Central European cases which offer the opportunity for a comparative analysis with the Romanian case presented here: the mobility of the Bulgarian Roma (Slavkova 2017, 2018), Slovakian Roma migrating to England (Grill 2012), or Bosnian Roma in Italy (Solimene 2019, 2011) as well as the new patterns of mobility and circulation within the EU (Roman 2018).

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