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# COVID-19 in Romania: transnational labour, geopolitics, and the Roma 'outsiders'

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has played out in Romania in a similar way to that in many other European countries. The government implemented decisive early measures which were able to keep the infection and mortality rates relatively low. This paper considers three distinctive aspects of the situation in Romania. First, the situation was complicated by the influence of transnational migrant workers, large numbers of whom returned to Romania when the pandemic started, accounting for distinct geographical variations in the rates of infection. At the same time, large numbers were able to leave the country at the height of the pandemic because they were “needed” for low-paid agricultural/social care work in western European countries. Second, the pandemic placed tension on Romania’s relationship with the EU, whilst highlighting a number of existing issues between Romania and its neighbors. Third, Romania’s strict lockdown measures exacerbated long-standing internal tensions, particularly with regard to the large and marginalized Roma community. The paper concludes by considering some of the possible longer-term implications for Romania of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Romania; transnational migrant labor; EU; Roma community

## Introduction

Romania, like all other European countries, was unable to escape COVID-19. The first case was reported on 26 February 2020 in a 25-year-old man who had been in contact with an Italian visitor on a hunting trip (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2020). By March other outbreaks were reported in southern, western and northern Romania. The first fatality was recorded on 22 March. All cases arose from contacts with other European countries. There were no reported cases of the virus spreading directly from China, probably since Romania has no direct flights with China.

This paper aims to review developments in Romania up to 1 June 2020. We focus on three significant themes: 1) the role of transnational labor as a vector through which the virus spread to (and within) Romania; 2) the impact of the

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pandemic on Romania's relations with the EU and with its neighbors, particularly Hungary and the Republic of Moldova; and 3) internal tensions within Romania, especially those relating to the large Roma community. This analysis is based on a critical reading of press reportage (both Romanian and international) of the pandemic, along with a range of supplementary statistical data produced both in and outside Romania.

## **The response to COVID-19 in Romania**

The Romanian state responded to the pandemic by following the World Health Organization guidelines and by enforcing a rigorous lockdown, modeled on that of Italy. A State of Emergency was declared by the President on 16 March 2020, lasting for an initial period of 30 days (it was subsequently extended). Emergency legislation was passed through Military Ordinances. The lockdown (involving severe limitations on movement and a strict nightly curfew) was enforced by the police, assisted by the army. Punitive fines (reportedly the highest in Europe) were introduced for breaking the lockdown, with 300,000 people being fined, generating 600 million lei (€120 million) (Păvălucă 2020). This was the largest restriction of civil liberties since the fall of communism: indeed, Romania under lockdown bore some resemblance to the grotesque authoritarianism of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime. Nevertheless, the lockdown was accepted and respected by the majority of the population.

The lockdown was relaxed to a "State of Alert" on 15<sup>th</sup> May under which citizens were required to wear face masks in public institutions, in shops and closed markets, and when traveling on public transport. Some smaller shops (but not hotels or restaurants) were permitted to open. Restrictions on mobility were eased but those people wanting to travel outside of the settlement where they live permanently were required to carry a declaration of motives. Domestic and international flights also resumed with strict regulations in airports. From 1<sup>st</sup> June the relaxation was listed further to include hotels, with restaurants permitted to open after 15<sup>th</sup> June.

Given the large number of Romanians who recently returned to Romania from other European countries Romania's response has been relatively successful. Despite a "brain drain" of health professionals over the past decade (Gillet 2020), Romania's health system has largely coped with the pandemic. By 1 June 2020 a total of 19,398 cases had been reported with 1,276 deaths, placing Romania in 25<sup>th</sup> place in the global mortality table (Johns Hopkins University 2020). On the other hand, the impact of the pandemic on the Romanian economy has been significant: GDP was forecast to fall by 4%, while the fiscal deficit was forecast to rise to 9% of GDP (Milatovic and Cracan 2020). Many employees saw their jobs suspended, and unemployment increased by 276,000 between March and April (Anon 2020a).

## The return of transnational migrant workers

Since Romania joined the EU in 2007 its citizens have enjoyed the right to travel to, and work in, other EU countries. Consequently, large numbers of Romanians (predominantly the young and well-educated) have left Romania in search of temporary or permanent employment in EU countries. In 2015/16 an estimated 3.6 million people born in Romania were working in OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2019). At the same time the Romanian population has fallen significantly, from 21.6 million in 2005 to an estimated 19.2 million in 2020 (Institutul Național de Statistică 2006, 2017). Work-related emigration presents Romania with two problems. The first is a “brain drain” of talented young people seeking better opportunities and higher salaries abroad (Goschin, Roman, and Danciu 2013). The second is an increasingly aging population remaining within the country, particularly within rural areas (Bodogai and Cutler 2014), thereby placing Romania in the “greying periphery” of Europe (Kulcsár and Brădățan 2014).

The largest communities of Romanians working within the EU are found in Italy and Spain, where over one million and half a million Romanians respectively are now based (OCED 2019). This situation has its origin in the cultural and linguistic similarities between these countries, particularly since Romanian, Italian and Spanish are all Romance languages. However, significant communities of Romanian migrant workers are also found in Austria, France, Germany, Greece and the UK. Romanian transnational migrants make a significant contribution to the Romanian economy sending remittances of almost €6 billion home each year, representing almost 2% of GDP (Mehedintu, Soava, and Sterpu 2020).

Romanians working abroad represent a significant transnational workforce (Duval 2003) who, whilst being settled in their country of work, also maintain significant ties with “home” (Marcu 2011, 2014). Indeed, many migrants return to Romania each year (OECD 2019), either temporarily or permanently. When the COVID-19 pandemic gathered pace in March and April 2020 many Romanian migrants (particularly in Italy and Spain, both severely impacted by the pandemic) sought to return to Romania. An estimated 250,000 Romanians (including 50,000 from Italy) returned in March alone (Anon 2020b), in some cases unwittingly bringing COVID-19 with them. This movement of people was intensified by the annual return of up to 1.3 million migrants to celebrate the Romanian Orthodox Easter on 19<sup>th</sup> April (Gherasim 2020). This phenomenon was not exclusive to Romania: around the world many migrant workers headed for home if they were able to (Mençutek 2020), producing significant flows of people, both internationally and domestically. In their responses to the pandemic, governments have largely overlooked the dilemmas faced by transnational migrant workers. Yet this is a group who may fail to recognize the seriousness of the pandemic and who are known to experience additional

barriers in accessing health care in the countries in which they work (Liem et al. 2020).

These trends help explain the distinct geography of COVID-19 infections in Romania (Guvernul României 2020). While infections have been reported in each of Romania's 41 counties, the largest concentration of cases has been in the northeast of the country. In mid-May three northeastern counties (Suceava, Neamț and Botoșani) accounted for 34% of all cases. This has traditionally been an area of poverty and high unemployment (Turnock 2005) and for this reason this area was characterized by a large number of transnational migrant workers. Another concentration was in the west of the country (the counties of Arad and Timiș, accounting for 7% of cases) along the border with Hungary, thought to arise from over 250,000 Romanian migrants who returned home by land (Pora 2020). While this is generally the most affluent part of the country there are pockets of poverty such as the county of Hunedoara (3.7% of cases), an area hit hard by the restructuring of communist-era industries and which subsequently has high rates of poverty and out-migration. Inevitably there has been a high concentration in Bucharest (a city of almost 2 million people) which accounted for 10% of cases. Yet there are curious anomalies. Maramureș – another county where the population has a long tradition of working abroad – had a low rate of infection (0.5% of cases). So too did the county of Harghita (0.4% of cases), an area with a high proportion of ethnic Hungarians and low rates of work-related outmigration (COVID19ro.org 2020).

However, while large numbers of Romanian migrant workers returned to Romania their absence was noted in the countries in which they worked. With their own populations in lockdown, a number of western European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK) were increasingly concerned about a shortage both of agricultural laborers needed to pick crops, and workers taking care of the elderly. In Germany, agricultural lobbies pressed the government to allow Romanian workers to come and pick their crops (particularly asparagus). At a time when the population was in lockdown, the Romanian government agreed a specific exemption for agricultural workers (Rogozanu and Gabor 2020). Consequently, several thousand Romanians who were “needed” abroad – many from the poorer regions that were already hardest hit by COVID-19 – crammed onto buses and planes (with little social distancing) to board flights to Germany. Similar arrangements for Romanian workers were made in various other countries: in total 188 specially chartered flights left Romania for western European countries at a time when scheduled flights were suspended (Mutler 2020). In other cases, dedicated trains were provided such as those for care workers working with the elderly, which departed from the western city of Timișoara bound for Vienna.

The reliance on eastern European workers to do low-paid jobs in western European countries was nothing new, but the whole issue was thrown into sharper focus by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since EU enlargement, labor migrants

from new accession countries have been frequently presented in terms of threats to both the economy (through “taking” jobs from local workers) and the welfare system of the destination countries (Hellwig and Sinno 2017; Eberl et al. 2018). In particular, some mainstream media coverage has focused on stereotyping and denigrating EU migrant workers, emphasizing issues of criminal behavior and delinquency (*ibid*; Rasinger 2010; Dursun-Ozkanca 2011; Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Tong and Zuo 2018). Such representations are contemporary forms of a long-standing process: the ongoing imagining of the east of Europe as “other” (Kuus 2004; Light and Young 2009; Ibrahim and Howarth 2016). This is a discourse which has been particularly prevalent in the case of Romania in countries such as the UK where media representations of Romanian migrant workers after 2007 have been consistently negative, portraying such people in a variety of ways as a threat to existing ways of life (Mawby and Gisby 2008; Light and Young 2009; Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Tong and Zuo 2018).

However, in spring 2020, this discourse took on a new form. It was now recognized that migrants from the east of Europe were “necessary”, since the economies of many western European countries were now dependent on flexible and mobile migrant labor. Furthermore, insecurity over food supplies was not something governments were willing to risk at a time when their populations were in lockdown. In countries such as the UK – where 98% of fruit pickers were EU migrant workers (Doward 2020) – the problem was exaggerated when British workers proved unwilling to take on agricultural work, despite a national appeal for them to do so. Furthermore, a shortage of agricultural labor presented an existential threat to the survival of some British farms (*ibid*). COVID-19 threw EU migrant workers into the spotlight: they were suddenly visible and increasingly recognized as essential.

At the same time, the pandemic also highlighted the exploitation and inequality experienced by migrant workers from the eastern part of the EU. Agricultural laborers from Romania and other countries faced long working days, poor pay, poor working conditions (lacking protective equipment) and substandard accommodation in which large numbers of people were housed, preventing social distancing. There were COVID-19 outbreaks at workplaces in Germany and the Netherlands, with over 200 Romanians being infected at one abattoir in Germany (Mutler 2020). At one point, migrant Romanian workers protested in Bonn about unpaid salaries and working conditions (*ibid*). The working conditions of Romanian temporary migrant workers received an unprecedented level of attention, with both the German and Romanian media portraying such work as a form of modern slavery (Soric 2020; Stănescu 2020). These events demonstrated the inadequacy of labor protection legislation for vulnerable seasonal migrant workers but the broader issue appeared to be that protecting the food supplies of western European countries took precedence over the health and safety of eastern European workers. A group of 28

labor and human rights organizations from across Europe produced a joint statement calling on the EU to reform the Common Agricultural Policy and guarantee the labor rights of agricultural workers (European Public Health Alliance 2020). A broader issue concerning the role of seasonal workers in spreading COVID-19 (both in their country of work, and when they return home) is, as yet, poorly understood.

### **Geopolitics: relations with the EU and neighboring states**

The Romanian state has long been closely aligned with the EU, while Romanians are enthusiastic about EU membership (perhaps to compensate for a dismal lack of trust in their own politicians). For example, a survey in 2016 reported that 73% of Romanians approved of EU membership; and 52% supported closer political union with the EU (YouGov 2016). Nevertheless, given that health policy is the responsibility of individual states, the EU has not played a major role in Romania's response to COVID-19. Romania benefitted from central EU purchasing of PPE under the "rescEU" package (Goniewicz et al. 2020). The EU Commission supported proposals by the Romanian government to offer €3.3 billion of financial support to SMEs during the pandemic (European Commission 2020). Romania also stands to benefit from a share of the EU's proposed €750 billion recovery fund (Anon 2020c). Overall, however, the response to COVID-19 in Romania has been a national rather than supranational effort.

Indeed, the COVID-19 crisis may be reshaping popular geopolitical imaginings of the EU. A survey in March 2020 indicated that 74% of respondents considered that the EU could do more to address the pandemic, while 46% were dissatisfied with the help from the EU to eradicate the virus (Anon 2020d). Another survey in April reported that only 50% were satisfied with the measures taken by the EU, while a minority (41%) were satisfied with the solidarity shown between EU member states (Anon 2020e). These findings do not necessarily indicate a wider unhappiness about EU membership (still less an emerging Euroscepticism) but perhaps a recognition of the limits to what the EU can do for Romania. What may be more telling is that when asked which country was likely to provide the help needed to end the pandemic the country mentioned most often was China (22%) with the EU recording only 14% (Anon 2020d). Although relations between Romania and China are not especially close, the Chinese Embassy in Romania provided medical equipment for Bucharest City Hall, while some cities in China sent medical supplies to their "twin" cities in Romania. Romania has also benefitted from supplies of protective equipment from China arranged by private companies and individuals (Oehler-Șincai 2020), in addition to central EU stocks supplied by China.

The pandemic has also impacted on Romania's relations with neighboring states. Relations with Hungary have been tense for some time, due to Romanian suspicions of the nationalist policies of Victor Orbán's government. As the COVID-19 crisis worsened Hungary closed all but one of its border crossings



on 17 March 2020, creating lengthy queues. Romanians were later allowed to return through Hungary into Romania but only during overnight hours, using dedicated “green roads” kept open for freight traffic (Reuters 2020). All border crossings were reopened on 15 May. Tension with Hungary increased after the lower house of Romania’s parliament adopted a law allowing a degree of cultural autonomy for the Hungarian-speaking Szekler region of Transylvania. This happened by default since draft laws must be debated within 45 days or are otherwise adopted: parliament had been closed by the pandemic and so had not debated the law (Barberá 2020). Romania’s president – an ethnic Saxon from Transylvania – denounced this situation (Mediafax 2020) although it was rejected by the upper house (Senate) the following day. Victor Orbán responded by posting on Facebook a map of “Greater Hungary” showing Transylvania as part of Hungary (Holroyd 2020). This inevitably infuriated many Romanians and intensified long-standing distrust of their neighbor.

Romania has used the COVID-19 crisis to show its continued solidarity with the Republic of Moldova which has faced its own problems of infection through returning migrant workers. In an effort to increase its soft power influence, Romania sent donations of medicine, protective equipment and medical personnel to Moldova in April and May, something that was presented as a “humanitarian gesture” (Anon 2020f, 2020g). However, Moldova under its Russophile Prime Minister, Ion Chicu, has responded coolly. In May 2020 Chicu launched an attack on Romania describing it as the most corrupt country in Europe. Chicu also criticized Romania’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, pointing that the number of infections in a single county (Suceava) was half the number reported in the whole of the Republic of Moldova (Anon 2020h). This soured diplomatic relations between the two countries, with the Romanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs expressing its disappointment with Chicu, given the solidarity and humanitarian support Romania had offered Moldova (ProTV 2020). Elsewhere, relations with Bulgaria and Ukraine (which have never been particularly close) are unchanged, while Serbia (traditionally a closer ally) has closed its border with Romania and looked to China and Russia for support. Romania has kept a close eye on relations between Greece and Turkey, fearing an influx of migrants from Syria and a possible new source of infection.

### **Internal tensions with the Roma community**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated internal tensions with Romania’s large but impoverished Roma community (who constitute up to 10% of the population). In particular, the crisis has heightened the existing discrimination and stigmatization of Roma (Crețan and Powell 2018; Crețan and O’Brien 2019). Roma people have long been subject to racism, exclusion and ghettoization in Europe. Moreover, lack of access to education, the formal labor market, and housing (O’Nions 2010; van Baar 2011; Soaita 2017), result in the wider public



considering Roma in terms of social risk and holding them responsible for their own situation (van Baar 2011; Maestri 2016). Local authority policies have often been inadequate to deal with the many problems faced by Roma communities and, in some cases, policy has been an overt response to populist discontent (sometimes stirred by right wing political parties) against marginalized and ghettoized Roma people (Crețan and O'Brien 2019).

Research on Roma stigmatization has focused on the marginal spatial and socioeconomic position of Roma, mainly within Eastern Europe, with persistent inequalities and poor housing conditions leading to their differential treatment as “others” in political and everyday discourses. Roma are stereotyped as beggars, drug dealers and prostitutes and are stigmatized, regardless of their economic position in Romania. Although internalization of stigma is little-researched, it generally points to defensive strategies adopted by Roma (regardless of their social position, class or wealth) to avoid stigmatization (Crețan and Powell 2018). In this way, policies need to facilitate a better understanding of the distinct urban power relations that shape Roma stigmatization and reveal how this long-term historical process has recently been accentuated at the larger European scale (Powell and Lever 2017). Social-environmental justice and empowerment of Roma could be possible future solutions for solving current inequalities (Malovics et al. 2019), even though recent policies dealing with the marginalization of Roma communities have merely been based on “political pragmatism”, while power differences between Roma and non-Roma still exist. Generally, there is a need for policies to enable the formal participation of Roma in the labor market as routes to economic inclusion and “empowerment”, with proper desegregation and more reciprocal Roma – non-Roma interactions (Crețan and Powell 2018).

These existing prejudices against Roma have worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the first case in the city of Timișoara was a Roma child, and a local politician attributed infection to the child’s environment, rather than spread within the classroom (Matache and Bhabha 2020). Furthermore, the Romanian press has been swift to condemn the actions of Roma, particularly in cases where Roma communities had not observed the lockdown restrictions. As a result, some Roma communities have faced additional restrictions beyond those experienced by other ethnic groups in Romania. For example, one town with a majority Roma population – Tândărei, in southern Romania – was quarantined by Military Ordinance after Roma families were reported to have gathered in large numbers over Easter for family celebrations (the local quarantine was lifted in May). In other settlements rates of infection among Roma have been particularly high due to reluctance to adhere to the lockdown requirements. Roma appear to have been disproportionately fined and harassed and, in some cases, beaten by police, something that has been widely reported around the globe (Lee 2020), provoking concern among human rights organizations (e.g. Matache and Bhabha 2020).

Tensions between Roma and police or other groups living mainly in the suburbs have occasionally erupted into street violence. Such incidents occurred in the Rahova neighborhood of Bucharest and in other cities (Hunedoara, Ploiești), and towns (Codlea, Săcele) (Anon 2020i). Most incidents arose from disputes between neighbors, or street parties that disturbed public order. In some cases, police crews were attacked with shovels, stones, and other improvised weapons, and their cars were damaged. Armed special intervention forces were called in to defuse the conflicts. Such events were particularly prevalent during the period of the Orthodox Easter due to an intermingling of poverty and a lack of job opportunities, connected to strict lockdown measures which were not accompanied by a clearly-defined policy for socio-economic rebuilding on the part of the Romanian government.

### **Conclusion: Romania after COVID-19**

What will Romania look like once the pandemic is over? There is a widespread expectation among Romanians of a period of economic austerity. One survey in April reported that 81% expected the post-pandemic crisis to be long and difficult, and 59% anticipated a rise in crime (Anon 2020j). After the pandemic there is likely to be an increase in poverty and social deprivation which will exacerbate existing inequalities between rich and poor, and between urban and rural areas. COVID-19 may also bring about wider social change, particularly among the poorest and most marginalized parts of the population. The combination of the health risks of living in high-density urban neighborhoods, and the recent loss of job opportunities in the informal sector may push the urban poor back toward rural areas (thereby reversing a long trend of rural-to-urban migration in Romania) and bringing about a degree of de-urbanization.

In a post-pandemic recession the pressure on Romanians to seek seasonal or permanent employment in EU countries will increase considerably. On one hand, transnational employment opportunities in western Europe may be considerably reduced as each country faces its own period of recession and rising unemployment. On the other hand, the pandemic has illustrated the dependence of western European economies on low-cost migrant labor from the eastern countries of the EU. Recession could push still more Romanians to seek work in other EU states and could also mean greater reliance among those remaining in the country on the remittances sent home by workers able to find a job outside Romania. Whether the pandemic brings about a long-term improvement in the working conditions of east European seasonal workers remains to be seen.

In Romania, as in some other countries, there is emerging disillusionment (particularly among the poor and elderly) with globalization and neoliberalism and a preference among some Romanians for localism and nationalism. This, however, is nothing new and reflects a long-standing division within Romania

between those advocating closer alignment with western European norms and those preferring nativist and national values (Verdery 1991). The combination of poverty and growing skepticism about the EU could create conditions where Romania returns to the extreme nationalism and anti-minority sentiments that characterized the immediate post-communist period. As recent developments in Hungary demonstrate, this would strain Romania's relationship with the EU. On the other hand, the far right has dramatically declined in influence in Romania over the past decade. Furthermore, there is also widespread recognition both that EU support will be necessary for Romania's economic recovery, and that EU membership creates many opportunities for employment. Therefore, if Romania is able to resist the lure of nationalism it could emerge from the pandemic with its reputation enhanced within the EU.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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