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The emergence of a systemic urban edge: The case of slums from a mid-sized Transylvanian city

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Introduction

This paper aims to link the emergence and proliferation of slums in Târgu Mures, a mid-sized city in central Transylvania, to some of the systemic processes that have shaped the development of European cities in recent decades. Our argument is that rather than being exceptional and marginal occurrences, slum build-ups and their relationships to the surrounding urban society are integral to the urban transformations occurring in Târgu Mures and similar cities. These slums reveal, in extreme form, processes that are more widespread but largely "subterranean" in urban contexts in Europe (Sassen, 2014). Despite their striking appearance, local authorities do not perceive of slums as informal solutions to the problems created by urban transformations. Alongside primary data on slums collected from Târgu Mures in 2019, this brief study uses data from the *Environmental Justice Atlas* (EJAtlas), an online resource which documents and catalogues social conflicts around environmental justice issues. We outline four distinct processes that have contributed to the emergence of slums, namely economic restructuring, curtailment of social housing provision, the redevelopment of urban space via private investments (Vincze and Zamfir, 2019), and migration. All these define a new wave of poverty that takes distinct spatial forms and in which the interplay of visibility and invisibility reveals the relational nature of contemporary slums.

Slum-generating processes

Given their spatial and morphological diversity, slums are difficult to define (Nuissl and Heinrichs, 2013). However, a reasonably broad definition is that of the UN, which includes among the main characteristics of a slum: inadequate access to safe water, inadequate access to sanitation and infrastructure, poor structural quality of housing, overcrowding and insecure residential status (cited in Mould, 2017, pp. 1–2). The slums that we discuss here are part of what we call the urban systemic edge, which is characterised by "conditions that are so extreme that they become invisible and ungraspable" (Sassen, 2015, p. 173).

Contrary to the general opinion that slums are aberrant and exceptional occurrences, we argue that they are in fact the consequences of contemporary developments in European cities. The local ecology of the slum can be read as a reflection of systemic issues and transformations in the city. However, their systemic nature is often misunderstood. Below we illustrate the four processes of slum creation and explain their operation in the case of Târgu Mures, Romania and of other instances drawn from the EJAtlas.

The economic restructuring that began in the 1970s and 80s in Western Europe and the 90s and early 2000s in Central and Eastern Europe has seen the collapse of manufacturing in many European cities. This led, via rising levels of unemployment, to the emergence of an urban precariat, largely composed of low-skilled or unskilled workers, many of whom were members of racialised minorities. By racialised, we mean minorities who are assigned to an inferior position in urban society due to supposed racial characteristics. This happened in the city of Târgu Mures, in which a Roma population was concentrated throughout the 1980s, specifically in Rovinari, which denotes a quarter built a decade

earlier in the North-western part of the city. By the 1990s, Rovinari experienced a precipitous decline, as described by a Roma intellectual: “without gas to heat, they ripped the wooden window frames and put them on fire” (Târgu Mures, 2019). A Roma “ghetto” was taking shape in Rovinari by around 2000, with the media poignantly describing the degradation similar to the one in the famous Ferentari quarter of Bucharest (Giurgea, 2007).

Since 2000, however, a different trend has set in: with help from the National Agency for Housing (Rughinis, 2004), local authorities began upgrading several apartment buildings from Rovinari. The families who held a valid rental contract for their social housing were offered temporary accommodation in a refurbished former agricultural building (disparagingly called “the Castle”), and those without a contract were resettled to metal barracks. With the rising utility costs at the “Castle” and as a result of land-use conflicts in the area of the metal barracks, several families were later evicted once more and forced to settle on the abandoned plots of the former sugar factory of Târgu Mures, close to the Băneasa street, or on the banks of the Mures river (Alexandrescu et al., 2021).

Figure 1: Băneasa street: Makeshift slum (2012-2019) on a brownfield site of Târgu Mures, Romania. The apartment buildings on the far right show the approximate location from which they were evicted.
Source: the authors

With regard to the second process – the curtailment of social housing – it soon became clear that local authorities were unwilling or at least unable to re-house all of the former residents of the Rovinari social housing units. This was obvious once the refurbishment of Rovinari began in 2004. Rather than a safety net, social housing became almost a privilege available to only a few. While the rent itself was not high at the “Castle” or the refurbished Rovinari social housing, water and heating were prohibitively expensive and the failure to pay several months’ worth of utility costs led to the swift eviction of the “bad payers”, sometimes on a two-day notice (Alexandrescu et al., 2021). The limited availability of social housing has also been observed in other cases, such as the planned resettlement of the Banlozi Roma settlement in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EJAtlas, 2019f, p.20) and following a flood in Asparuhovo, Bulgaria (EJAtlas, 2019g). In all these instances, local authorities seem to have given up on the goal of providing affordable housing for their impoverished and racialised citizens.

At a time when the forced evictions in Romania had seen an increase from 750 per year in 2009 to 1300 in 2017 (Blocul pentru Locuire, 2019), the curtailment of social housing provision for poor Roma is even more striking. However, the very logic of eviction

precludes the possibility of re-housing those who have once been defined as unworthy of living in standard accommodation. This is because the evictions of racialised minorities from formal housing "used to be rare and scandalous [....] [but now are] incredibly commonplace in the lives of the urban poor", as Matthew Desmond explained (Sassen et al., 2018, p. 235). From Pata Rât in Cluj Napoca, Romania to Luník IX in Slovakia and the Sorgenfri settlement in Malmö, Sweden (Filčák and Ficeri, 2021; Persdotter, 2018; Vincze, 2013), eviction appears as a frequent tactic of displacing the problem of insufficient housing for the urban poor.

The redevelopment of urban space via private investments is the third process that shapes the emergence of slums (Vincze and Zamfir, 2019). This process has two apparently contradictory components. The first is – paradoxically perhaps – the absence of development of urban spaces, particularly in the wake of the dismantling of industries and the emergence of abandoned brownfield spaces within the city. The second component is the selective redevelopment of these abandoned lots, mostly via real estate investments. There is a temporal gap between these two processes, and one that has influenced the location of slums in Târgu Mures.

Despite the exposure and potential contamination of brownfields, those evicted from formal housing settled on them due to their unregulated status and the proximity to urban facilities. The Băneasa street slum pictured in Figure 1 "offered" available space to build shacks, and its former use as a dumping ground for construction materials from the city meant it also offered its new residents reusable scrap materials. A nearby warehouse offered limited access to clean water and the Băneasa street could be used to bring food and fuel from the city and offered access to work opportunities. Such spaces of quasi-complete informality, which emerge when all formal recognition of racialised poverty has been withdrawn, have sprung up in many other European cities, from an abandoned quarry in Oslo (EJAtlas, 2021a) to a former chemical factory in Baia Mare, Romania (EJAtlas, 2019c).

The second component of the redevelopment of urban space often consists of real estate investments that aim to recreate urban space according to the needs and expectations of middle-class clients. In the case of Târgu Mures, the Băneasa 5 slum (pictured in Figure 1) was silently tolerated by the local authorities between 2012 and 2019. However, in the summer of 2019, the families residing there were notified of their imminent eviction. They were subsequently resettled a short distance to the West. The reason for this was the planned expansion of a new residential complex built by Maurer Imobiliare, one of the largest real estate developers in Romania. This company is well-known for its flagship developments courting the "highlife" of the city (Vincze and Zamfir, 2019). After the move, the slum became more spatially contained and hidden from view with a green mesh (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The relocated Baneasa 5 slum to make room for the Maurer Imobiliare real estate development.
Source: the authors.

The fourth and last process that shapes the recent formation of slums as systemic urban edge is migration, both rural-to-urban and trans-national. As poor migrants move into cities such as Târgu Mures, they tend to be "warehoused" (Sassen, 2014) in marginal areas where local authorities have little to no responsibility towards their welfare. At the initial eviction from Rovinari, the mayor made it clear that he was "not interested in the fate of the Roma who came from elsewhere and took shelter at the margins of Târgu Mures" (Giurgea, 2006). In the ghetto of Valea Rece from Târgu Mures, located South-East from Rovinari, the shacks built by recent migrants line the expanding margins of this ghetto and become increasingly precarious the further one moves from the main street.

Figure 3. Slum build-up on the side of Valea Rece street (closest to viewer).
Source: Google Earth Pro.

Local authorities thus deny any responsibility towards those who came to the city in search of better living conditions. As they are seen as illegitimate migrants, either as rural "newcomers" in CEE cities or as troublesome economic migrants in Western European cities, they tend to be seen as the "natural" scapegoats for urban ills (crime, pollution). Local authorities usually pursue mixed (and often confusing) strategies of threatened deportation and seeming tolerance towards the proliferation of such informal settlements.

Taken together, these processes paint a picture of slums as a continuously created urban edge, with extreme conditions emerging from recent city-wide processes. Here also lies the paradox of the urban edge that has materialised through new slums in European cities: while it is centrally connected to general processes of urban development, it creates

spaces that appear as deviant and even abhorrent to the urban norm. Scholars and critics of the contemporary urban condition have been diligently at work in making the urban edge visible by linking it to core urban processes. For urban decision-makers, on the other hand, this invisibility is enforced by a mix of racial stereotyping, blaming and social conservatism. In what follows, we argue and illustrate the idea that the urban edge is made visible and invisible at the same time, but in different ways.

The interplay of visibility and invisibility in the creation of slums

Slum is a relational term: the object that it designates emerges within a specific spatial and temporal context (Nuissl and Heinrichs, 2013) and is often in opposition to a given trend of urban development, such as gentrification and the financialisation of housing. The slums that we are concerned with in the case of Târgu Mures are not the historically unplanned old and new *mahalale* (neighbourhoods) that have accompanied the rapid growth of pre-World War II cities such as Bucharest (Florea and Dumitriu, 2016). The slums that we analyse here are the result of an urban development that has become less and less inclusive and that has tended to expel those who cannot find a place in the current neoliberal urban economy (Sassen, 2014). For this reason, the contemporary slums can be seen as the visible markers of an urban systemic edge.

Slums are often made visible to the outside world by some distinctive feature that separates them from the rest of the city. This can include walls of greater or lesser length or sometimes fences designed to hide a given level of misery and also make the access to and from the slum more difficult. In the case of the Valea Rece street in Târgu Mures, an extended fence separated the more impoverished parts of this ghetto from the main street that bordered it to the North. The fence was covered with billboards featuring what appeared as quality urban living while also carrying moralising messages, such as: “work saves us from poverty, boredom and bad habits”, “whoever opens the door to school closes the door to prison” or “strengthen your body by working and your mind by studying”. While hiding the unpleasant parts of Valea Rece, the billboards were meant to remind passers-by that the negative conditions were avoidable through study and hard work. The implication is that those unwilling to study or work can only be blamed for their poverty.

Similarly, the wall built around a Roma settlement in Krusevac, Serbia, was apparently meant as a “noise barrier” to protect citizens from the traffic of a nearby highway (EJAtlas, 2019a) (see also Picker, 2017). Another wall in Kosice, Slovakia, was erected to separate Roma from non-Roma but its segregationist intention was so obvious that a group of Roma-rights activists ripped one portion of the wall in 2014 and added a “Stop segregation” graffiti nearby (EJAtlas, 2019b). These walls often serve to hide from the public eye the disturbing misery of slum dwellings and the precarity of their inhabitants.

We speak of the interplay of visibility and invisibility to refer to the practice of placing poor and racialised minorities in undesirable spaces within cities, or not reacting when they settle there, in order to make evident that these places are separate from the rest of the liveable urban fabric. This practice results either directly, for example through

evictions, or indirectly, through what has been called informality enforced “from above” (Clough Marinaro, 2019). The presence of a slum in a city is never lost on local authorities or local elites. The very existence of a slum depends on decisions made at city level, either to enforce local regulations or to arbitrarily suspend their application. The main goal, however, is twofold: first, to make slums visible by assigning the blame to their racialised residents; second, to render them invisible as a result of evictions and the denial of social housing for the poorest denizens of the city.

Also contributing to the back-and-forth of visibility and invisibility are the odd locations where slums are placed, such as former industrial sites, former quarries, sites near toxic landfills or other environmentally hazardous locations. This is hardly surprising since, according to the late urban theorist Mike Davis (2006, p. 121), “a hazardous, health-threatening location is the geographical definition of the typical squatters’ settlement.” Slovak sociologist Richard Filcak (2012) coined the apt expression that these communities are made to appear “beyond the pale”.

At the same time, lying beyond the bounds of acceptability, the internal form of the slum area is invisible to the outside and, arguing with Saskia Sassen, it is equally ungraspable. The ways in which livelihoods are maintained and life reproduced are not seen and go unrecognised. It is only when a crisis strikes, such as the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic, that the aching innards of slums become visible (cf. Berescu et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the slums themselves are not politically neutral. In the case of Târgu Mures, we noticed that the layout of the slum and the attitudes of some of the Roma residing there conveyed clear messages. Through their exposed main street location, Baneasa 5 suggested a vindicative stance through which its residents expected that local authorities right the wrong done to them (repeated evictions) and relocate them to new social housing. The Malul Mureșului slum, on the other hand, seems more content to stay out of sight of local authorities and far from the critical gaze of the majority population.

Conclusion

The Târgu Mures slums and those in Europe that we discussed in this short paper differ from those in the Global South. They do not result primarily from massive rural to urban migration (cf. Davis, 2006), but emerge at the intersection of racial discourses and practices and economic restructuring both in Eastern and Western European cities. In this short piece, we have argued that there is reason to look afresh at the largely taken-for-granted assumption that slums are the appanage of southern sprawling megacities. European slums have recently been documented on brownfields and floodplains, in abandoned quarries as well as next to landfills or waste dumps. Their placement on or near such hazardous areas is anything but accidental. Marginalised families and individuals usually end up in these areas after a succession of displacements from the residential areas of cities to their abandoned outskirts. Each particular slum can be traced to dislocations in the industrial bases of European cities, the impoverishment of some of its residents, the increasingly punitive regime of social housing, the redevelopment of urban space via private investments and the migration of poor urban dwellers who are

denied the right to the city.

In terms of recommendations, we contend first that cities need to acknowledge their interdependent evolution, both internal and trans-national. Slums emerge where people are expelled from the formal urban economy and find shelter where former industries have left voids in the urban fabric. Second, cities should give up their punitive housing and welfare policies in order to stop the constant flow of the poor towards the urban edge. Finally, a more balanced development of cities that recognises the right to housing and the right to the city for those previously disenfranchised is equally important.

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