

Interview



The Othering and Dispossession of Romania Roma – from Romania to Sweden

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The following is a conversation between Irina Zamfirescu (University of Bucharest, Romania) and Maria Persdotter (Linköping University, Sweden) that focuses on the contemporary migrations of Roma from Romania to Sweden and other wealthy EU states, and which seeks to contextualize these migrations with regards to the current housing situation and ongoing dispossession of Roma in Romania. The conversation was recorded in September 2022 and has been transcribed and edited for brevity and clarity.

MP: To start off our conversation, I thought I would ask you to reflect on the state categories of homelessness and how they are applied – or not – to Roma communities in Romania. By now, in 2023, there has been over ten years of significant numbers of impoverished Romanian Roma coming to Sweden in search of livelihood opportunities. Many of them face major barriers to accessing regular housing and end up living as street homeless. Yet, as irregular migrants they are not included in official homelessness statistics. And in politics and public debate, they are generally not recognised as being *properly homeless*, in part because they are assumed to have some form of secure housing “at home” in Romania. Is this true, generally speaking; do most Roma migrants have secure housing in Romania? If not, what sorts of homelessness services are available to them?

IZ: Let me first say something about the overall housing situation of Romanian Roma. While there are some important differences between urban and rural communities, most Roma communities exist in a situation at the borderline between having a home and being completely homeless. Many Roma communities live in informal dwellings and settlements. These often consist of simple shacks or other forms of substandard housing. In fact, many who travel abroad to other European countries, like Sweden, do so to earn enough money to be able to improve their dwellings.

The important thing to know about the informal settlements is that the inhabitants lack security of tenure. The authorities will often passively tolerate the settlements, but they refuse to actively or officially acknowledge their existence. We have legislation requiring public authorities to formally identify squatter communities and include them in a process that aims for the improvement of the quality of life for these communities. However, this rarely happens. This makes it difficult for the inhabitants to claim title to their dwellings and to access public services. Take the community of Miercurea Ciuc, a city in eastern Transylvania, for example. The members of this community have been living for over 50 years on the outskirts of the city. They are tolerated by the local authorities but excluded from social programs, including programs that would allow them to improve their housing.

Generally speaking, local authorities are resistant to recognise the informal settlements of Roma communities and to formalise their status. This is because they would rather see inhabitants move somewhere else. Again, an important reason for this is that once the authorities formalise a settlement they are obliged to offer public services and benefits to the inhabitants.

MP: What forms of social housing are available in Romania?

IZ: There is some social housing in the cities. However, it is virtually unheard of in rural

communities. There is some EU funding available for rural municipalities to improve the quality of housing for their inhabitants, including Roma inhabitants. However, local politicians and authorities often lack the expertise to be able to successfully secure such funds.

Another thing to note is that private home ownership is a dominant social norm in Romania. Housing is seen as a strictly individual or family responsibility. You should earn your own money in order to be able to improve your housing situation and not rely on government support. This goes back to the post-communist transition. It is widely thought that during the communist era, the state arranged for your housing. Democracy means that you now have to provide for yourself.

Crucially, what has happened in the last several years, since the pandemic, is that more and more Romanians are struggling to pay their mortgages. Rather than fostering a sense of solidarity with others who are also struggling, this situation seems to have given rise to new divisions between the deserving and undeserving. A common line of thinking is: “I am a struggling, hard-working person and therefore the state should help *me*, and not the people who are unemployed”. This is another reason why the authorities are often reluctant to invest in social housing – they fear that such initiatives will be unpopular with middle-class voters.

MP: Generally speaking, what is the situation for Romanian Roma, are they able to access social housing?

Anti-Roma racism is a major issue in Romania, and Roma communities are highly marginalised. Also, the literacy levels among Roma are still relatively low. This means that even if there is some social housing and other forms of support, it is still practically difficult for many Roma to gain access to these. The social services typically do not support Roma communities in navigating the bureaucracies.

This issue is further compounded by the fact that many Roma communities do not trust the authorities. To access social benefits you need to undergo an assessment, a social inquiry. Many people are afraid that if they agree to such an inquiry, the authorities will determine that their children are not being well taken care of and subsequently take them away from them. I know from speaking with many NGOs that work with Roma squatter communities in Bucharest that this is a concern for many of them.

MP: What you are saying is that the fear of having your children apprehended acts as a real barrier to accessing services. Is there a basis for this fear?

IZ: When there are evictions in Bucharest, evictees often protest in front of their former homes. This is uncomfortable for the public authorities who do not want to attract media attention. I have been present at two evictions where representatives from the social services told protesters that “if you do not leave, we will consider taking your children away”.

The fear of having one’s children apprehended also creates a general feeling of insecurity. NGOs working with squatters report that people sometimes self-evict if they suspect that

the neighbours have called the police or the social services. This is precisely because they are afraid that the authorities will take their children from them.

MP: I want to return to what you mentioned previously about home ownership as a dominant social norm. I know that you have written extensively about the transition from communism and how this resulted in a regime of “super-homeownership”. Can you briefly explain how the process of post-communist housing restitution unfolded and how it impacted Roma families?

IZ: Yes, the process of restitution, whereby previously nationalised homes have been returned to their pre-communist era owners and their descendants, has negatively impacted many Roma families. During communism, many Roma communities that had previously been itinerant were forced to settle. The communist party would basically assign people to work and live in a given location; the system was very centralised. As an effect, many Roma families were displaced from their communities. Fast forward to the post-communist restitution process which has been ongoing since 1995: Many of the people who are evicted, or have been evicted, from formerly nationalised homes in Bucharest are actually Roma families who were moved to the city during the communist-era in order to work in construction and other sectors.

Now, when these homes are restituted, the residents, even if they have been living there for decades, are not offered any alternative housing, nor social housing. The common discourse in Bucharest is that those who have been evicted as a result of restitution should go back home, to the places where they were born. However, quite often they were born “here”, in the very same apartments that they now are being evicted from. Yet, they are not recognised as being “from here”, from Bucharest.

Crucially, many of the people who were moved to Bucharest before 1990 had children while living in nationalised homes. And often, those children have their own children now. You will often find two or three generations living in the same home. This creates a problem for some families as it is typically only the people who were first assigned the apartments who are named in the rental agreements. In Bucharest there is a system in place to help evictees get access to social housing. If you can show that you have been evicted, you get some “extra points” in your social housing documents and are bumped up in the queue. For second and third generation evictees, who usually are not named on the rental agreements, it is a struggle just to be mentioned in the eviction notice.

In summary then, the restitution process has negatively impacted Roma people and other low-income, low-skilled workers who cannot afford to rent or buy in the current super-homeownership environment. Many of them are forced out of the city or made to live for years in very substandard housing.



MP: If I understand you correctly, one important reason why Roma have been so disproportionately harmed by the process of restitution is because they usually did not own property prior to the communist era, and because they were displaced and moved into nationalised homes to a greater extent than other groups?

IZ: I would say yes. That said, I should stress that we do not have many statistics on this, especially not related to the housing situation of Roma before the 1990s. Thus, we cannot know for sure that Roma have been disproportionately affected. It is my impression that an overwhelming majority of evictees in Bucharest self-identify as Roma. Many also claim that part of the reason why they are evicted is because they are Roma and they understand the evictions to be a consequence of racism. Similarly, they understand the unwillingness of the local authorities to support them in finding alternative housing solutions to be an expression of racism. Roma activists are currently doing a lot of work to gather information on evictions through ethnographic means. But again, we do not have reliable statistics.

MP: What you are saying now raises some questions for me about who counts as Roma in present-day Romania? It seems to me that the term “Roma” is often used as a self-evident category, as if it is clear cut who is Roma and who is not. Yet, as you know, the question of “who is Roma” is a contentious one in both academic and activist settings.

This relates to a question I have, which concerns the role of subsequent waves of dispossession and displacement in *minoritising* and *subordinating* Romanian Roma. I would like to ask you to reflect on the relationship between ethnicity/socially constructed “race” and class. How do you understand the relationship between Roma as an ethnic community and, respectively, as a segment of the underclass?

IZ: Well, materially speaking, most representatives of Roma communities are people in situations of extreme poverty and vulnerability. That is a fact, and it is acknowledged institutionally. Of course, there are those people who are extremely poor who are not Roma, but the majority of self-identified Roma live in situations of extreme poverty.

There is also, in Romania, an entrenched system of segregation. For example, there are

some schools that have separate classrooms for Roma and non-Roma. There is also rampant discrimination of Roma people in housing and other sectors. In my activist opinion, this can only be explained as an expression of racism.

In response to your question, I also want to stress that there is still relatively little self-organisation and self-representation among Romanian Roma. It is still a category that mostly gets talked about in the sixth person, as “them”. It is rare that Roma are addressed directly or given the opportunity to speak for themselves.

MP: Yes, this issue of self-representation is important. The tendency to talk about Roma as “them” is very prevalent also in the research about Roma.

IZ: Interestingly, during the national census this year, there was a government campaign, with ads on television, encouraging Romanian Roma to declare themselves as such on the forms. I saw this as an acknowledgement from the government authorities that many Roma communities are afraid to declare their ethnic identity due to discrimination and racism. This is an issue for the government because it creates difficulties for the authorities to access European funds earmarked for Roma communities if they cannot prove that there are Roma communities within their constituencies.

MP: That is interesting and it speaks to the ways in which EU policy plays a role in actually constituting the Roma as a distinct government category. Is it your understanding that people do not want to declare their identity-status as Roma mainly out of fear of discrimination and persecution, or is there more to it?

IZ: Let me backtrack a bit; I would not say that people are scared. However, people know from experience that being seen as Roma means that they will be treated differently by people in power. You also need to keep in mind that for years, going all the way back to the communist era, the dominant state policy towards Roma has been one of assimilation, obliging Roma to become more Romanian, *a se romaniza*, as we say in Romanian.

MP: I want to return to where we started, with the question of Roma migration from Romania to Sweden and other countries in the EU North/West. You have spoken about the severe housing deprivation of Roma in Romania and its root causes. I want to take the opportunity to ask you why you think that Roma migration to Sweden increased in the early 2010s. Romania acceded to the European Union already in 2007 and, unlike the majority of the Member States, Sweden did not impose any transitional agreements that would have restricted the rights of Romanian citizens to enter the country. Still, it was not until 2013 that we began to see any significant influx of Romanian Roma migrants to Sweden.

IZ: The economic crisis certainly played a role. In Romania, it reached its peak around 2010. As I see it, that would be the main reason why migration increased in that period.

As for the long-standing causes, you have to consider that poverty is endemic in many Roma communities in Romania. Many earn minimum-wage or less, which is about 300 EUR/month, and that is just not enough to cover basic costs of living, especially not if you have children who are dependent on you. In Romania we have what is called a guaranteed minimum income, a sort of state-support for the most impoverished segments of the

population. It is currently 35 EUR/ month, and to earn this money you need to put in a certain number of hours of work. However, no one wants to work hard hours for this little money. The only reason why anyone would work for 35 EUR/month is because it gives you access to public health insurance.

As for people who leave the country for work or for begging, the money that they are able to make at home is nothing compared to what they could, potentially, earn abroad.

Another factor to consider is that some Roma who live in extreme poverty prefer to avoid working in the formal sector. There are several reasons for this. For some, it is because they have had negative experiences in the past. For example, they might have worked for weeks or even months without getting paid. Such experiences are common and they make people not trust the official labour market. For some, it is also the case that they can make more money working day-to-day on temporary contracts.

Yet another reason why someone might also wish to avoid formal work is if they have a lot of outstanding fines. This is something that I am currently researching; I am trying to look into fines that have been issued by the police here in Bucharest to people who beg in the streets. The city is known to have particularly strict public order regulations. For example, you can get fined for talking too loudly. It is obvious that fines are issued at a disproportionate rate to vulnerable groups. You can get fined for collecting plastic bottles or scrap materials. Often this is considered theft of public property. Or you can get fined for not having a proper rental agreement for your home, or for not having a contract with the garbage collection company, or for being illegally connected to the power grid. Altogether, this means that vulnerable groups are likely to amass endless fines. This in turn, acts as a barrier to enter the formal labour market because, if you have outstanding fines, a certain percent of your income will automatically go towards paying off those fines, and that is not something that many impoverished people are willing to do.

MP: What are the repercussions if you ignore the fines?

IZ: None if you do not have a regular income, that is the thing. If I, as a university employee, would not pay my fines, the authorities would apply a reduction to my salary. If I didn't have a salary, they could increase my local taxes from my properties. If you do not own anything, and if you do not officially work, then there is not much that the authorities can do. In extreme cases they could force you to do community service, but that is not something that happens often. In essence, staying out of the formalised labour and housing market becomes a way to also stay out-of-reach from the authorities. This is a contentious issue in Bucharest. The mayors complain regularly that they cannot do anything about "these people". Meanwhile, the community complains about street-homeless people being a nuisance. "They are loud", "they make a mess", or "they sleep in public parks". "You should fine them!" To this, the mayors will often respond that they cannot do anything because the people in question do not care about getting fines. But the effect of these fines is actually important in the lives of these people.



MP: What you are saying about this, should we call it, strategic informality is interesting. On the one hand, not having a regular apartment or job makes you a target of criminalising and disciplinary measures, Yet, on the other hand, existing in such a space of informality shields you from some of the very same measures. I saw something similar when I was doing research on the situation of Romanian Roma migrants in Malmö. The fact that they live in a space of informality – without a formalised residency status or a registered address – sometimes makes it difficult for the authorities to take action against them. Of course, this means that they are excluded from accessing many public services. Yet, it can still be preferable to the community.

IZ: Some people prefer to stay under the radar of the authorities. I have spent time documenting a community here in Bucharest that lives informally in a factory in a semi-peripheral area of the city. Once I asked one of the women living there if she ever applied for social housing in the city. To this she replied, “why should I? I am good here where I do not pay taxes, and where they cannot fine me.” As I see it, this is an important reason why so many people are not interested in formalising their housing situations. They know that if they did so, they would be made to pay fines. Living informally offers some protection: If you have nothing, then nothing can be taken away from you.

This, again, has to do with the lack of confidence and trust in the authorities which is widespread among impoverished Roma. To me, the fear and mistrust is reasonable. The state approach to informal settlements is almost entirely based on disciplinary measures, on punishment. For many people, their only experience of interacting with the authorities is this; they discipline you and threaten to take your kids away. There is very little in the

way of social interventions or services.

MP: What you are saying now is interesting to me. Always and everywhere there seems to be this idea that “they” ought to return to where “they are *really* from” – a place that is always *not here*. In Sweden, there is a widespread notion that Romanian Roma *properly* belong in Romania and that their social problems should be addressed by the Romanian state. Yet, as you explain, the authorities in Romania are similarly reluctant to recognise their belonging in any given locality.

IZ: For me, it is no surprise that Romanian Roma and other impoverished people choose to go abroad, even if they risk ending up in very difficult living situations. Here (in Romania), they are routinely disparaged and threatened by the public authorities. Here, they are constantly risking eviction. Here, they are subjected to racial discrimination and segregation. So, what is the difference if you go abroad?

MP: That is such an important point, especially when you consider that in many European states, the government strategy with regards to so-called poverty migration is to remove supposed “pull-factors” to create a type of “hostile environment” for the migrants in question.

IZ: Absolutely. The “hostile environment” politics you are mentioning are likely not going to be very effective as long as the situation abroad is still marginally better than in Romania. In this context, it is important to note that the Romanian authorities, broadly speaking, do not mind the fact that impoverished and vulnerable individuals disappear from their jurisdictions. While there is a longstanding and lively debate on the issue of brain-drain here in Romania, this only concerns purportedly high-skilled migrants. There is currently no political party that is seriously committed to improving the situation of Roma in the country in order to make their lives *here* more liveable.

MP: The notion that they “should go back to where they are really from” is, of course, a racist and xenophobic trope. Yet, as you have stressed, many Roma who are seen as non-belonging in Bucharest, for example, have actually been born and lived their whole lives there. Can you say more about what goes into the trope of Romanian Roma as non-belonging?

IZ: In short, it goes like this: “you cannot be from Bucharest because you do not own property here and you cannot afford rent”. That is the definition of who is a true Bucharestian; If you do not own, or if you cannot rent, your place is not here.

MP: So, we are talking about something like an economic citizenship, a possessive citizenship?

IZ: In short, yes. In Romania, this is how it is. If you do not own property, or know someone who is willing to declare that you are living on their property, then you cannot obtain an ID. This is a problem for many impoverished people; many of them only have what is called a temporary ID. This is a type of ID that you can get even if you do not have an official address, and they are valid only for one year at a time. Now, having such an ID is stigmatising. People usually would avoid hiring someone who only has a temporary ID.

I know of people here in Bucharest who have lived in the city for over thirty years without being able to obtain a regular ID card. They really feel that they belong here – and some of them were born here – but officially they are not residents of Bucharest. In essence then, the technology of the temporary ID card reinforces the idea of them as Other, as non-belonging.

This goes to what we were talking about before, about the similarities between the situation for Romanian Roma in Romania and Sweden. This is something they hear all the time “Go to where you were born, your situation is not my problem”. In Romania, poor Roma populations are generally not recognised as full citizens. This is the case in urban as well as rural areas; the public authorities do not recognise them as properly belonging, as citizens.

MP: Yet, if they come to Sweden they are not recognised as citizens precisely because they are formally Romanian citizens. As well, there is a widespread notion that “the Roma problem” is one that belongs *somewhere else*. The tendency to treat Roma residents as less-than-full-citizens seems to be present at all scales really. The exclusions that many mobile Roma EU-citizens experience as a result of the conditionalities written into the free movement directive are mirrored by similar mechanisms and patterns of exclusion at the local level, such as in your example with the ID cards.

IZ: Yes, the Swedish discourse mirrors the discourse we have in many of the big cities in Romania with regards to Romanian citizens who lack ID-cards because of not having secure housing. Here, you will hear that we cannot take on the poverty and the social problems of smaller towns and rural communities. Related to this, there is a discourse of uneven development within the country which says that the central government should support underdeveloped areas in order for them to, in turn, support their vulnerable communities. From this follows the notion that major cities like Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Timisoara cannot use their budgets to provide for people from outside. It is the same discourse even though the scale is different.

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