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EDITORS' NOTE

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Editors' Note

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After the collapse of the state socialist regime in 1989, the de-industrialization and privatisation of the economy was accompanied by processes of impoverishment across significant segments of the working-class population (Chivu *et al.*, 2017), as well as large-scale emigration of Romanian workers to Western European countries and North America (Sandu, 2006). During the following three decades, Romania experienced growing social inequalities (UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur, 2016), unequal access to social protection (Adăscăliței, Raț, & Spătari, 2020), and struggles over labour rights (Guga, 2014; Varga, & Freyberg-Inan, 2015). Today, the country has the fifth largest and the fastest growing diaspora in the world relative to its population, with approximately 3.6 million people living outside the country (OECD, 2019, 13).

Romanian's emigration took place in several phases after 1989, with the most recent wave marked by the country's accession to the European Union (EU). As of the accession to the EU in 2007, and once the freedom of movement was fully implemented in 2012, Romanians have had the right to free movement in the EU which includes the right to work in any of the Member-States and prohibits receiving countries to discriminate against EU citizens at the workplace (TFEU, Article 45). In the receiving countries, Romanians often work in sectors of the economy as diverse as construction, agriculture, or elderly care. In the receiving countries, Romanians often work in various economic sectors like constructions, agriculture, or elderly care. Although indispensable, jobs in these sectors are often characterised by labour exploitation, low wages, and physically and emotionally challenging work.

Much research has been carried out on the different causes of migration, migration networks, or regarding labour migration as an income strategy (Ciobanu, 2015; Anghel *et al.*, 2017; Ducu, 2018; Horváth, & Anghel, 2009; Sandu, 2010, 2006). Furthermore, A Special Issue published in *Studia Sociologia* (Culic, & Anghel, 2012) traced how people reconfigure the concept of ethnicity to accommodate life trajectories and family networks that are increasingly becoming transnational, but

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also how Romanian immigrants create solidarity structures and organisations in their countries of destination.

At the same time, researchers have also focused on the working and living conditions of Romanians abroad and the reaction of the receiving societies to their presence. Romanians find themselves in precarious and exploitative work relations (Cosma *et al.*, 2020; Hopfgartner *et al.*, 2022; Sperneac-Wolfer, 2023; Țoc, & Guțu, 2021), and access to healthcare and social protection is difficult (Blauberger, & Schmidt, 2014; Buzoianu, 2022; Ratzmann, 2022; Scheibelhofer, 2022a). Moreover, Romanians experience institutionalised racism and racializing media discourses (Fox *et al.* 2012) or are subject to criminalization and deportation practices (Vrăbiescu, 2019). Further scholarship has focused more generally on the regime of social rights for mobile EU citizens in destination countries (Bruzelius, 2019; Bruzelius *et al.*, 2017; Scheibelhofer, 2022b; Schmidt *et al.*, 2018), the transnational infrastructure enabling migration (Voivozeanu, 2021), as well as the role of knowledge asymmetries in administrative procedures for social entitlements (Ratzmann, & Heindlmaier 2022).

However, much less attention has been devoted to how Romanians view work, their labour struggles and multiple inequalities endured in the countries of destination, with some notable exceptions (Riedner, 2018; Sperneac-Wolfer, 2023; Voivozeanu, 2019). Regarding the Romanian context, over the period from around the end of Socialism, and during the transition to the market economy in the 1990s and early 2000s, attention was paid to workers (Kideckel, 1993, 2000, 2004). Since then, the topic of labour and especially the post-socialist material and political ‘afterlife’ of the working class silently left the stage and has been, for the most part, conspicuously absent from the attention of sociologists (Varga, 2011). By contrast, this Special Issue focuses on the inequalities, social rights and labour struggles of Romanian workers and asks: How do social relations of power and domination on the labour market shape working and living conditions of Romanian workers, both home and abroad? What strategies do Romanian workers develop to deal with employers’ demands on their labour power? How do Romanian workers access social benefits in the countries of destination?

To answer these questions, we looked towards the case of Germany as one of the major countries of destination for Romanian workers in the EU. This is why, with two exceptions, the papers in this Special Issue discuss the German case. The labour market’s increased demand for workers with different levels of qualifications (OECD, 2019), as well as the economic slumps in Italy and Spain in the wake of the 2008 Financial Crisis (Bertoli *et al.*, 2013, 35) have contributed to Germany becoming a significant receiving country for Romanian workers. Approximately 883,000 Romanians were officially registered as living in the country in 2022, that is, a group larger than any other EU minority group (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023), but the unofficial number could be even higher due to temporary and seasonal migration under the right to freedom of movement. On the one hand, the scale of this migratory phenomenon has proved to be a challenge for local public

administrations fearful of increased “pressure” on their limited social budgets (Eichenhofer, 2015, 113). On the other hand, it has also brought about an increased media attention and inflammatory right-wing discourse from mainstream political parties against the so-called “poverty migration” (Matter, 2015, 15-22).

Meanwhile, there are branches of the German economy that have become dependent on Romanian workers for their continued operation, such as the meat processing industry (Birke, 2021, 48), agriculture (Biaback Anong, 2021, 127) and constructions (Sperneac-Wolfer, 2023, 193). In agriculture, the reliance on Romanian workforce became obvious in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic when in spite of closed borders and prevailing contact restrictions, special charter flights were dispatched to the city of Cluj-Napoca in Romania to bring back thousands of seasonal labourers to the asparagus and strawberry fields of Germany (Crăciun, 2020, 303). Lastly, media reports on seasonal workers point out high degrees of precariousness of migrant workers in Germany (Loschert *et al.*, 2023).

In light of these developments, the case of Germany offers ample opportunity to explore questions regarding work-situation, migration dynamics and the life of Romanian emigrants. Consequently, all papers showcased in this Special Issue give intriguing answers to the questions detailed above and provide important cornerstones for future discussions. In the following we summarise the key findings of each paper.

Luana Pop analyses the division of the Romanian workforce into two welfare classes and the consistently widening gaps in welfare between employees and all other employed. The author argues that despite improvements in the legislative framework in the field of social protection, its effectiveness and the transmission of information leave much to be desired. Possible solutions to this problem involve a focus towards “increasing employability, support for emerging employment forms, and outreach of programs” among the self-employed workers. Furthermore, there is a need for more accessible information on social benefits and how to access them, along with simplified procedures to apply for and receive social benefits.

Drawing on qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations, Christian Sperneac-Wolfer, Andrei Botorog and Ferdinand Sutterlüty reconstruct how Romanian construction workers on German construction sites (as well as their relatives back home) perceive their harsh working and living conditions. The authors suggest that Romanian construction workers develop four classifications of the topic of “work”, which are “embodied as well as embedded in the everyday life of workers” (Sperneac-Wolfer, Botorog and Sutterlüty 2023, this issue), and extend alongside family networks from Romania to Germany. Interestingly, these value-laden, symbolic categorisations of “work” – as a binding obligation, a source of income, a cornerstone of personal identity, and as a “normal” part of life - motivate workers to take on work that they otherwise criticize as ‘slave labour.’

The dimension of social reproduction of Romanian migrant labour is further developed by Paul Sperneac-Wolfer in his paper on Romanian labour in the Austrian fresh food sector. The author employs a multiscale theoretical lens to analyse how Austrian greenhouses rely on “twofold exploitation of Romanian workers” (Sperneac-Wolfer, 2023, this issue) for turning a profit. On the one hand, in order for daily production rates to be met, Austrian growers rely on the willingness of Romanian labourers to do unpaid overtime. On the other hand, short-term labour shortages are overcome by means of established workers, who are embedded in transnational social networks and have therefore access to a potentially large number of additional workers. This offers employers the benefit of recruiting the needed labour force without ensuring the costs of recruitment agencies.

Daniela Ana and Ștefan Voicu examine successful labour struggles in the German meat processing industry in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a newly instituted protective legislative framework. In the midst of the healthcare crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, dozens of strikes took place in slaughterhouses across Germany in 2021, by calling into question the ‘industry standards’ of low pay, poor working and living conditions, uncertainty due to short-term employment contracts, unpaid overtime, etc. Supported by trade unions and new legal frameworks passed just a year prior, the strikes led to an increase of the minimum wage to 11 euros from 9.5 euros, as well as a generally binding collective agreement in the industry. The authors examine what factors led to the success of the strikes, and discuss what role German trade unions might play in supporting future labour struggles.

The topic of institutionalized support is further developed by Cătălin Buzoianu in his paper on social counselling of Romanian immigrants in Berlin. As a social policy tool, and a practice of social work, problem-centred counselling of migrants on social and labour-related issues has become established as a “best practice” for the integration of immigrants in post-war Germany. The author suggests that social counselling, as an individualizing social practice keyed towards problem-solving, is unable to combat the processes of systemic exclusion (restrictive social legislation, institutional racism, lack of affordable housing etc.) affecting Romanian immigrants living and working in precarious conditions. Instead, social counsellors promote self-sufficiency among the advice-seekers, for them to master the bureaucratic and legal complexities of the German welfare state. This is in keeping with the prevalent workfare-logic centred on “activation” in the institutional arrangement of welfare production.

In her paper, Antonia Jeflea describes how during the COVID-19 pandemic, e-governance tools were adapted to suit the needs of Romanian migrants in Germany. Both Romanian and German authorities implemented different approaches to address the evolving administrative situation. However, the author suggests that

for most migrants, Facebook groups emerged as a new form of governance. One of the main challenges faced by migrants, particularly those belonging to the digital diaspora or lacking proficiency in German, was the limited availability of Romanian content at the local level. This language barrier, argues Jeflea, hindered their interaction with public authorities. Unless efforts are made to enhance the accessibility of online platforms for German public institutions, social media will continue to play a significant role in filling this gap in governance.

The aim of Mihaela-Violeta Vochin's paper is to explore social media usage of Romanian and Moldavian nationals residing in Berlin and examine its specific role in the process of inclusion in Germany. The author uses data gathered from Facebook groups as her unit of analysis, as it is still the main platform of community exchange used by the two groups. She argues, on one hand, that members of the various social media groups show a high interest in work related issues. On the other hand, there is a need for state institutions to increase their social media presence to reach migrants and offer them content in their mother tongue.

Together, these findings suggest that future research on Romanian workers at home and abroad should pay more attention to the interwoven legal, political and technological registers that shape their working and living conditions. First of all, the sphere of work includes not only labour exploitation, but also dynamics of the labour process and the work classifications used by workers themselves in their activity. Second, the social context of their work encompasses existing inequalities in the receiving countries, unequal access to social protection and legal frameworks that are often difficult to navigate. In this sense, the findings point to the importance of legal frameworks for labour rights and social rights, both at national and EU levels. Third, online communication channels have become crucial for job recruitment and function increasingly as instruments of governance in the field of labour migration.

Consequently, the subject of Romanian workers home and abroad requires a wider theoretical and methodological framework: a transnational, multi-scale and multi-dimensional perspective (Faist, 2012), which is able to integrate the various administrative levels, legal spheres, organisational fields, and geopolitical spaces. Such a perspective would be also capable of tracing the intersections and entanglements between the virtual and the physical settings workers inhabit e. g. the intersection between the concrete work environment and the online forums used by Romanians to criticise the harsh working conditions. This change in perspective would reflect the societal and technological changes that have taken place during the last years in Romania, and in the receiving countries, which have led to the growing importance of the digital sphere for work and migration. Furthermore, the findings invite comparisons with other migrant groups in the European Union as well as with other countries, thus posing new questions for coming research.

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