

Between informal and illegal. Tolerated but not legalised! Aspects of the illegal migration of Romanians to Italy

*“So long as you have callouses on your palms,
even if you are illegal, they never have a go at you!”
(Romanian immigrant)¹*

The migration of Romanians to Italy has two fundamental characteristics: 1) most of it is an informal, illegal, clandestine migration which, 2) tends to transform into a semi-permanent or enduring migration. These are the two essential dimensions of the migrants' everyday life and, particularly, their experience on the labour market that I wish to treat here. This is a strictly empirical presentation depicting in the first instance the community from La Fripta, a forest outside Rome, and the work 'depots' where the Friptari (those from La Fripta) seek work.

My material draws exclusively on the analysis of qualitative² data: interviews with immigrants conducted in Romania, interviews with immigrants conducted in Italy and interviews with members of the families left behind. I have conducted dozens of migration histories and as many life stories which enable me to highlight the specificity of the Romanian migration to Italy.

The interviews were conducted in Romania in the area known as Vrancea and in Italy in Rome and its surroundings, which is to say localities outside the city proper such as San Cesario, La Dispoli, Tivoli or the woods of the Mala Grotta area.

Some of the interviews were recorded, some were noted contemporaneously and some were simple spontaneous conversations (especially with the people that had no ID papers or who refused to be recorded) and then reconstructed from memory immediately afterwards.

***„Here, your brother is no longer your brother”*: on the seclusion of the Romanian immigrant**

Informal statistics³ indicate that about one million Romanian live in Italy while leaders of the local Romanian associations say there are over one and half million

¹ I thank all the immigrants that shared their experience: Adrian, Marius, Paul, Mihaela, Augustin, Ioan, Ciprian, Gheorghe, Florica, Marieta, Maria, Elena, Ovidiu and many others. Warmest thanks to the Orthodox priest Bălăucă and to the Benedictine monk Carlo who intermediated many of the interviews we conducted.

² All materials cited come from interviews conducted by Ana Bleahu and Mihaela Stefanescu.

³ Global News, <http://www.rgnpress.ro/content/view/18002//>, November 10, 2006

Romanians in Italy. The perception of Romanians living in Italy is that they are numbered “*in the millions ... everywhere around Rome you hear people speaking Romanian. I don’t even want to mention Turin, we will become a majority there. Visit any Italian town and it is impossible not to meet Romanians.*”

Of this ‘million’ only about 300,000 have any official papers (permessi di soggiorno annuali or permanenti – annual or permanent living permits). According to data published in October 2006 by the Italian National Institute of Statistics the number of Romanian citizens living legally in Italy amounted to 297,570 persons, representing over 10% of the total 2,670,514 foreign residents in the country. According to the Ministry of the Interior, in 2004 there were 243,793 Romanian citizens in Italy (compared to 237,010 in 2003).

The much larger, informal figure of a million and a half Romanians is in fact derived from that for the 300,000 Romanians living legally. The calculation is very simple: it assumes a ratio of one Romanian living legally supporting other four Romanians living illegally. My own field experience suggests that this back of the envelope calculation may well be accurate.

Among the ‘rest’ one finds people in various degrees of illegality or informality: some have expired papers that they still use, they received a „permesso de soggiorno” for a limited period; others filed for such a permit and are waiting for a legal solution to their situation (according to the Bossi-Fini Law), while yet others haven’t even filed for permits.

The response of officialdom is mixed. During the past 20 years different Italian governments have tried to cope with the challenges immigration poses today. Several laws (The Martelli Law no. 39 of 1990, The Turkish-Neapolitan Law no. 40 of 1998, The Bossi Fini Law no. 189 of 2002) were passed but the management of this phenomenon remains deeply deficient and much of the time the issue is used just as a means to attract attention to the politicians’ speeches.⁴

How did the housing and labour markets market absorb such a large number of Romanians? Where are these immigrants?⁵ For Romanians who go to Italy it is simple to “spot” other Romanians in the street. For us they are very visible: they seem to be everywhere. But a more complete answer to this question is that part of them live crammed into legally rented apartments – only one person may have legal papers, the other 4, 6 or 10 residents are illegal. There also is the category of the “*badante*”, that is the women working for and living with Italian families. Other live in the most diverse possible places: “*metronomii*” refers to those wandering through the metro trains or through the metro stations at the periphery of the city carrying a small back pack. They wear rubber slippers “because we keep the sport shoes for the days we find work.” In the “car cemeteries” in which the “*guards let us enter only after dark ... and we leave in the dark going direct to the labour depots (markets)*” we find yet others and finally in the woods around Rome where they live in “huts covered in plastic sheets.”

How are such choices made, in so far as these reflect choice? The kinship, neighbour networks, as well as affiliation to the same community of origin (village,

⁴ Colombo, A și Sciortino, 2004, Gli immigranti in Italia

⁵ In one of the international seminars I attended, the understandable question of one of the participants was: “there may be 1.5 million Romanians, but where are they?”

district) from Romania is an important aspect for the increasing number of clandestine immigrants to Italy.

Many Romanians leave for Italy packed with phone numbers of as many as possible relatives or friends. Neediness, however, breeds contempt and there is an increasing number of cases in which a contact's cell phone remains mysteriously closed after a promise of help.

What actually is a migration network? The nuclei of these networks are the old immigrants. They are among the first who arrived in Italy; they have invested money and time. Sometimes they even put their life in jeopardy.

Case study

I left Romania in 1997. I left with a guide. The guide was a friend of mine. We crossed the border at Arad. We crossed to the Hungarians, then the Slovenians, on into Croatia, then into Austria and Italy. We travelled in a coach as far as Hungary.

I paid 1000 US dollars in total to this friend of mine. We were four persons in all, we all knew the guide. The guide in Romania worked for someone else. The boss was somebody we did not know, but we trusted the guy from Romania. He was our guide up to Slovenia. Thereafter the guide, a Romanian, returned home. From Slovenia we crossed on foot through forests and vineyards ... a whole night. At the outset we did not know we would have to cross on foot. We spent five weeks in a hotel until we managed to cross on foot. We were just four persons and we had to wait for other people to cross together with us. They [the smugglers] paid for the hotel and all expenses. There were some problems because we shouldn't have had to wait so long. They were our friends. The people from the hotel had nothing to do with us. The people who crossed on foot with us were Romanians from Moldova and Ukraine. In these five weeks we were permanently in touch with the [organisers]. We were talking on the phone or some one was coming to look for us at the hotel. We bought food from our own money. After two weeks we had used up our money and then they brought us food.

I think altogether we were more than 20 when we crossed the border in line, men, women, girls, some from Romania, other from Moldova. Before crossing the border on foot they tried four times to send us by train. They did not know what route to pick. They said they would send us to Austria by train and from there by car. But we did not want this because it was very unsafe. It was just like going to surrender to the police. And ... we did not want to take any chances.

They took us four times to the train by car. They thought maybe they can convince us. Once they took us to a field where the train was supposed to be waiting and left us there. We froze because it was a hard winter. It was February. There were soldiers with dogs. We took cover lying flat on the ground, in the ploughed field, in bushes ... we had just some spare clothes ...

We left Romania on January 28 and we arrived to Italy on March 12. It was so cold ... we had to run to keep warm ... we were crowding together...

There were women who got sick, we had to help them ... but we could not stop. We had to keep moving ... We crossed many vineyards. There were a lot of

barbed wire fences, we had to keep quiet, it was very difficult for the women. When we arrived in Italy, we slept one night in the woods, we huddled close to each other, then we spent all the next day in the forest. We ate together, the people who came after us still had some of the money they had brought from home. They gave us food. Even if we did not know each other before. We ate canned food ...

The first town we arrived in was Venice. From the forest they took us by car to Venice. We separated there. Everyone where he/she had to go. I took the train to Rome. I have a cousin and an uncle who came about two years ago, I spent only one night at my cousin's because they were very many, some 6-7 men there. Then I went to my uncle who kept me three days and then he talked to the boss. He did not tell the boss I was already there, so I had to stay three days locked up in a closet in the dark, so the boss didn't see me. The boss did not want ... he said there are police controls ... and that he can not help me.

Then I wanted to go to England. My friends from England said they would send me money to go to them. But eventually, I found work here with the help of some of my uncle's friends.

If at the beginning of the mass migration networks were effective and provided essential support to immigrants, once the numbers increased the networks became more restrictive, less permeable and less efficient. We witness therefore the shrinking and dissolution of such networks due to oversizing and oversaturation. After 2002, when the "borders opened" the number of Romanian immigrants to Italy increased dramatically. The first migrants who had shared similar experiences of migration, work, housing, could no longer support the new wave of migrants. From then on most immigrants chose to separate fast, starting to solve problems alone. For most, migration then became a strictly individual matter in which solutions to problems are found randomly, step by step, everybody for himself.

"As your luck is" seems to be the basic rule for the success or failure of a migration attempt. After a while the stories of the new migrants start to look alike. Solitude, hunger, fear of the authorities, unstable work places, bosses who do not pay on time or even do not pay at all, appear in the discourse of everybody in various accents.

The immigrants seem to be acutely affected by the dissolution of family relations. On the one hand, relations between husbands and wives deteriorate and this increases the rate of divorce, on the other hand relations between brothers, children and parents are also put under great pressure to the point that they too break.

„There is a phenomenon that is a disaster for everybody here. The divorces! I alone have translated hundreds of divorce pronouncements. The divorces number in the tens of thousands. Many families are destroyed. Either the husbands left the children, or the women left their husbands. Family betrayal is one of the plagues we are fighting. The distance, the privations, the stress make this generation a generation of sacrifice (Father Bălăucă, Orthodox Priest in Rome.)

"Here everybody runs from one another. If you come with your wife you become jealous of the Italian men because they have money, if you come with your

brother discussions erupt because he found work and you didn't ... It all starts from money. They go back home for just one week and they become friends again ... here they fight ... they separate.” (immigrant, aged 25).

Informal communities of Romanian immigrants

The basic structural support of informal immigration of Romanians to Italy is therefore the legal migration on the one hand and on the other hand some *ad hoc* hierarchical structures based either on free association or else on power, blackmail and violence.

As suggested above, to lack documents means to lack the means of a normal life: you cannot rent a house, you only work informally, you have no right to health care services, you live in a permanent state of fear of the authorities and of other people in your situation etc..

“We were sleeping in the field surrounded by strings, alarms we had strung up since we were scared of being attacked, like in the Rambo series...they all are like this in the field, with traps to break your neck if you enter their barracks area; some use beer cans as traps...I had a sleeping bag here and a pillow outside in the field...no luggage at all... (immigrant, aged 25).

In this context semi-organised communities based on informal hierarchical structures appear. This is a new total social phenomenon which we could call “life under the bridge”, “life in the field” or “life in the woods.”

A dwelling is essential to the success of an immigration attempt. Those without papers can not rent. The first thing when you get to a foreign country is to find a place to live. The friends or relatives that help you first find a dwelling for you. If they don't help “*you gather with other Romanians like you, if you are lucky enough to be from your area it is very well, if they aren't, you can still work things out, maybe you pay more if they don't like your face...*” (immigrant, aged 25).

Case study: La Fripta

La Fripta is a Romanian community with a history going back almost 4 years. Its existence has been more or less hidden from outsiders.

To get there, you get off at Mala Grota, at a normal bus stop. The locality you are looking for lies to your left. You walk along the road until when you enter “*boscheti,*” the bushes. You jump over a small ditch and then you enter a forest. The trail taking you to “La Fripta” starts inside this forest.

“Before, we had the huts on the border of the lake, it was simpler, we had free access to the water, but the carabinieri kept coming there with bulldozers and destroyed them. Here they can not bring the bulldozers because it is forest and the carabinieri are in no mood to pull down our huts and destroy them. Some are tied to trees. There is someone who knits the frame from thicker branches. Then we

cover them in plastic sheets, tarpaulins... It is better here, because we are safe, only the carabinieri know of us...they have gotten to know almost all of us over all these years since we have been here; they know everything...the Italian bosses coming to take us to work also know.” (immigrant, aged 37)

Photo: La Fripta

Inside La Fripta the inhabitants are grouped according to their region of origin: Oltenia, Maramureş, Moldova etc.

„To the right is the trail leading to the Olteni, they are higher on the hill side, only some 20 of them, in the valley there are Moldoveni, some 40 of them, and here are us, the Satmareni, we are the largest group, some 100 people. The youngest is 4 months old, the child of Crina...her husband left her for another woman and she came here to her parents...the oldest is 64, he doesn't work, he hangs around and watches the huts while we are out to work.” (immigrant, aged 37)

Photo: Hut structure:”We make them solid...so if the carabinieri pull them they won't break...” (immigrant, aged, 37, La Fripta)

The community has a kind of leader, the only person with papers and the main negotiator with the local authorities. The “boss” has been living in Italy for the past 14 years. He has all the necessary documents. He knows everybody and everybody knows him. From him the other residents find out the exact days when the carabinieri will come to ‘control,’ that is to check papers. *“Usually they come in the morning, at about 6 or 7. They know for sure that at this time they will only find those who have no work. The people that work or who are looking for work leave for the depots at five in the morning. They know that we don't steal. The criterion the carabinieri use to check on us are our hands: “if you have callouses on your palms they don't bother you.” (immigrant, aged 37)*

„The Romanians are extremely organised. They are not united, but they are well organised,” (immigrant, aged 37) says one migrant. They are the only minority that is structured in this way, ad hoc, close to Rome. The huts can be rented. “The rent is 50 euro per month.” Besides the rent there are protection taxes that differ according to the level of insecurity of the particular immigrant. “If your past is colourful, you might not be accepted. You can not move in unless several people agree to it. In principle you have to be recommended by someone. If you simply stick around here...anyhow you have to give account of yourself.” (immigrant, aged 37)

The information circulates orally, from person to person. *“The Romanians brought along their oral culture!”* says the Orthodox priest. Everything is organised from individual to individual. In the huts almost everybody has a cell phone. *“Anything else, but the phone! One cannot live without a phone, you can’t manage it, you can’t find work, you don’t hear this and that. The first thing when you get to Italy is to get a phone. Then you can make phone calls and wait being called.”* (immigrant, aged 37)

The depots

The expansion of networks has slackened the intensity of inter-migrant support and assistance in finding a job. *“We already are too many; it is quite difficult to help each other because it is no longer that easy to find work.”* (immigrant, aged 28)

Apart from the relative saturation of the labour market for unskilled labour, the lack of formal institutions of the labour market and the seasonal character of the work in both agriculture and construction have all resulted in the development of an informal market for the labour force, the so-called “depots”. These depots are places where immigrant Romanians gather while seeking work. There are depots for work in agriculture and construction.

The “depots” for work in construction (Castel de Guido, La Storta, Ponta Roma) are usually in the neighbourhood of a depot/store for construction materials (hence their name). The Italian bosses coming to buy construction materials can thus pick up manpower easily and efficiently.

The “depots” for work in agriculture are outside Rome, in the neighbourhood of the large bus stops or at the crossroads of several bus routes. Usually the people living in the nearby forests, in the “car cemeteries” or “in the field” (Mallagota) turn up at these depots. In the small towns close to Rome, the “depots” are usually located down town (La Dispoli, San Cesario).

These informal institutions work in a very simple manner. At 5.30 every morning the Romanians come and wait outside, in the open, until about noon. They smoke, they gather in small groups, they laugh, talk, exchange information. Most of them are men but one can also see women: *“rather than prostituting, I’d rather stay here and maybe find work”* said one.

Photo: *„the deposit from Malagrota” at 11 in the morning.*

The idea of affiliation to a certain region is preserved in the labour search as well as in the organisation of the ‘home.’ It is an established fact that you will find the people from Bacau at Ponta Roma, or that you will find the Olteni at La Storca: *“we are transnational, but regional,”* I was told.

The climax of the morning is the appearance of an Italian boss. Some come with large cars:

„- they load us into the bus and take us wherever they need, some of us are thrown out...we get as many as possible in and thereafter they throw some of us off...’

- ‘How do they make the selection? What are the criteria?’
- ‘It depends. If the boss comes in a small car it counts to be as close as possible to the car, or whoever manages to open the car door first. When bigger bosses come they know us and they tell one of us how many people they need. Then we make the selection between us. We know each other; you take only a trusty fellow so you don’t have to work ‘for him.’ The worst is when you have a Romanian boss, because they exploit you...or they delay the payment, sometimes they even don’t pay you at all, they even threaten you and if you don’t have a backup...that’s it, you lose your money!...’

‘If two of us go that counts for something... but if you go alone you never know. I heard of a Romanian who jumped on an Italian who didn’t want to pay him after working for a week. They say the Italian killed him and buried him...it was in the Romanian newspaper.’ (immigrant, aged 37)

These places are well known to the authorities, they are tolerated by the carabinieri. In these places the visibility of the Romanian immigrants is maximal: „we are easily hunted down here. If a round-up comes they rapidly give all of us a “*foglia de via*”⁶. If you have Romanian papers and callouses on your palms they don’t hand you the warning notice. They know that us, those staying here, we are here to work not to steal.” (immigrant, aged 37)

In balance between two worlds

„Here you are a slave. You are a Romanian, so you are a slave, you are not equal to them...but you enjoy their civilised world together with them” (immigrant, aged 23).

It is hard to remain in Italy. It is hard to leave Italy. The rejection factors of the Romanian society weigh as heavy as those of attraction for the new world. „Once you are tempered to Italy it is difficult to return to Romania without regret.”

This situation of balance is characteristic of the semi-permanent informal migration defining the migration of Romanians to Italy and to a certain extent to Spain. Comparatively, circulating migration for work in Germany raises no such problems.

The lack of legal regulations distorts the possible positive effects of the migration for work. The regulatory permissiveness combined with the inadequacy of the legislation to deal with the movement of migrants responding to factors of supply and demand create misbalances both in the destination countries and in the origin countries, affecting the deepest fabric of social relations: „the people loose themselves. They can’t return home because they are not convinced they will get another break to escape and...they can not

⁶ The travel paper is a document by which the illegal immigrants are told to leave Italy by a designated deadline. Some of the people we interviewed had already received several “*foglia de via*” but had not complied with the warnings.

remain here in peace because they don't have papers.” (orthodox Romanian priest, Rome)

The end of the story...?

At 1 January 2007 Romania became full member of European Union.

But before of that, in 23 December 2006, the camp “La Fripta “ was destroy: *“the police came and put fire to the hut in the forest. He came during the day...we left everything...my passport, my clothes, all what I collect during the year...some of us was arrested... some others run in the forest...now I have only what I am dressed with...entire year I worked for Italians in agriculture...and now, before the Christmas's time they let us under the sky...without anything...we have no food, no money, no other place where to go...now here will be holiday till January ...nobody are working ...the Italians patrons will not come to the deposit to offer us some work ...we don't know what to do...”*⁷ (immigrant, women, aged 43)

⁷ This is a part of interview made by phone, few ours after carabinieri destroy the huts of the immigrants