

“With calluses on your palms they don’t bother you”: Illegal Romanian migrants in Italy

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Abstract: For every official registered Romanian migrant in Italy there are between one and three illegal, unregistered migrants. This article examines the informal forms of self-organization that arise among the migrants in order to manage the challenges migrants face under a system that needs their labor but refuses to acknowledge this need publicly or institutionalize it openly. Semi-tolerated illegality determines the forms of networks both in the organization of the migration and in the forms of its integration into the labor and housing markets. This strictly ethnographic and qualitative presentation focuses on informal solutions to housing and the creation of informal labor markets and the consequences for the migrants of this enforced informality. It shows how the Italian state is caught between toleration and repression, arbitrarily switching from one mode to the other.

Keywords: European accession, illegal migration, marginality, networks, Romania

The current migration of Romanians to Italy has two fundamental characteristics: first, it is mostly informal and illegal; and second, it tends to transform into a semi-permanent or enduring clandestine existence. These two essential dimensions of migrants’ everyday life and in particular of their experience on the labor market will be the focus of this article. I offer a strictly ethnographic presentation that focuses primarily on the community of 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 qualitative data: interviews with immigrants conducted in Romania, interviews with immigrants in Italy, and interviews with mem-

bers of the families left behind. I have collected dozens of migration histories and as many life stories to enable me to highlight the specificity of Romanian migration to Italy.

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

Some of the interviews were recorded, some were noted on the spot, and some were simple spontaneous conversations (especially with those who did not have ID papers or who refused to be recorded) that were reconstructed from memory immediately afterward.

A secluded life: “Here, your brother is no longer your brother”

Informal statistics indicate that about one million Romanians live in Italy while leaders of local Romanian associations claim that there are over one-and-a-half million. The perception of Romanians living in Italy themselves 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 official papers (*permessi di soggiorno anuali* or *permanenti*—annual or permanent residence 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 percent of 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 of Romanians is in fact derived from these figures of legally resident Romanians. The calculation is very simple: it assumes a ratio of one legally resident Romanian to four illegally resident Romanians. My own field experience suggests that this back-of-the-envelope calculation may well be accurate. Among the illegal ‘rest’ one finds people in various degrees of informality: some have expired papers, usually a *permesso de soggiorno*, that they still use; some filed for such a permit and are waiting for a legal solution to their situation (according to the Bossi-Fini law); others have not even filed for permits.

The officialdom’s response is mixed. During the past twenty 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 largely deficient and much of

the time the issue is simply used as a means to attract attention to politicians’ speeches.

One may well wonder how the housing and labor markets absorb such a large number of Romanians. Where do these immigrants stay? For Romanians in Italy it is simple to ‘spot’ other Romanians in the street; they see them 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, while the other four, six, or ten residents are illegal. There is also the category of the *badante* (housekeeper), the women working for and living with Italian families. Others live in the most diverse possible places: *metronomii* refers to those wandering through metro trains or metro stations at the periphery of the city, carrying a small backpack and wearing rubber slippers “because we keep the sport shoes for the days we find work.” We find others in the “car cemeteries” in which the “guards let us enter only after dark ... and we leave in the dark to go directly to the labor depots.” Yet others can be found in the woods around Rome, living in “huts covered in plastic sheets.”

Migration networks

How do people end up in these places? Kinship and neighbor networks as well as affiliation to the same village or district in Romania are important factors determining the residence of the increasing number of clandestine immigrants in Italy. Many Romanians leave for Italy with as numerous phone numbers of relatives or friends. Neediness, however, breeds contempt and more and more often a contact’s cell phone remains unanswered after a promise of help.

The nuclei of migration networks are the old immigrants. They are among the first who arrived in Italy and they have invested money and time into this country. Sometimes they even put their life in jeopardy. A Romanian immigrant I interviewed told me:

“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 traveled in a coach as far as Hungary.

“I paid a thousand 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 constantly in touch with the [organizers]. We were talking on the phone or someone was coming to look for us at the hotel. We bought food with 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 twenty when we crossed the border in line: men, women, girls, some from Romania, others 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 in 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 of 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 went 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 six or seven 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 cannot 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.”

Dissolving relations

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 drastically increased. The first migrants who had shared similar experiences of migration, work, and housing, could no longer support the new wave of migrants. From then on most immigrants chose to separate fast and started to solve problems alone. For most, migration then became a strictly individ-

ual matter in which solutions to problems are found randomly and gradually, each person for her or 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 do not pay at all appear in everybody’s discourse in various accents.

The immigrants seem to be acutely affected by the dissolution of family ties. Relations between husbands and wives deteriorate and this increases the rate of divorce. But also relations between siblings, children, and parents are put under great pressure—to the point that they break. As Father Bălăucă, an Orthodox Priest in Rome says:

“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.”

I also interviewed an immigrant, aged twenty-five, who told me:

“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.”

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 some

ad hoc hierarchical structures based either on free association or else on power, blackmail, and violence on the other.

As mentioned earlier, 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, and you live in a permanent state of fear of the authorities and of other people in your situation. A young immigrant told me:

“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.”

In this context semi-organized communities appear, based on informal hierarchical structures. This is a new social phenomenon that 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 cannot rent. The first thing to do when you get to a foreign country is to find a place to live. Friends or relatives who help you first find a dwelling for you. If they do not 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.”

La Fripta

La Fripta is a Romanian community with a history going back almost four years. Its existence has been more or less hidden from outsiders. To get there, you get off at Mala Grota, at a regular bus stop. The locality you are looking for lies to your left. You walk along the road until you enter *boscheti* (bushes). You jump over a small ditch and then you enter a forest. The trail taking you to La Fripta starts inside this forest. An immigrant, aged thirty-seven, told me:



FIGURE 1. La Fripta. *Source:* Ana Bleahu.

“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 cannot 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.”

Inside La Fripta the inhabitants are grouped according to their region of origin: Oltenia, Maramureş, Moldova, etc. As one of the immigrants I talked to explained:

“To the right is the trail leading to the Olteni, they are higher on the hill side, only some twenty of them, in the valley there are Moldoveni, some forty of them, and here are us, the Satmareni, we are the largest group, some 100 people. The youngest is four months old, the child of Crina ... her husband left her for another woman and she came here to her parents ... the oldest is sixty-four, he doesn’t work, he hangs around and watches the huts while we are out to work.”

The community has a kind of leader, the only person with papers and the main negotiator with the local authorities. This ‘boss’ has been living in Italy for the past fourteen 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 ‘inspect’, that is, to check their papers. As one of the immigrants narrated:



FIGURE 2. Hut structure—“We make them solid ... so if the carabinieri pull them they won’t break.”
Source: Ana Bleahu.

“Usually they come in the morning, at about six or seven. 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 calluses on your palms they don’t bother you.”

Another immigrant says: “The Romanians are extremely organized. They are not united, but they are well organized.” They are the only minority that is structured in this way, ad hoc, close to Rome. The huts can be rented. The rent is EUR 50 per month. Besides the rent there are protection taxes that differ according to the level of insecurity of the particular immigrant. As one immigrant told me:

“If your past is colorful, you might not be accepted. You cannot 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.”

The information circulates orally, from person to person. “The Romanians brought along their oral culture!” says the Orthodox priest. Everything is organized through word of mouth. In the huts almost everybody has a cell phone. One of the immigrants told me:

“Anything 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 to be called.”

The depots

The expansion of networks has slackened the intensity of inter-migrant support and assistance in finding a job. An immigrant, aged twenty-eight, told me, “We already are too many; it is quite difficult to help each other because it is no longer that easy to find work.” Apart from the relative saturation of the labor market with unskilled labor, the lack of formal institutions of the labor 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 labor force, the so-called depots. These depots are places where immigrant Romanians gather to seek work.

There are depots for work in agriculture and for work in construction. The ‘depots’ for work in construction (Castel de Guido, La Storta, Ponta Roma) are usually near a depot/store for

construction materials (hence their name). The Italian bosses coming to buy construction materials can thus pick up workers easily and efficiently. The depots for work in agriculture are outside Rome, near large bus stops or at the crossroads of different 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 downtown (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, and exchange information. Most of them are men but one can also see women. One of them told me: “rather than prostituting, I prefer to stay here and maybe find work.”



FIGURE 3. The depot at Mala Grota at 11 in the morning. *Source:* Ana Bleahu.

The segregation along region of origin is preserved in the labor search as well as in the organization of the 'home'. It is an established fact that you will find 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. As one interviewee told me:

"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."

To my questions of how do they make the selection and what are the criteria, he said:

"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 loose 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."

The depots are well known to the authorities, they are tolerated by the carabinieri. In these places the visibility of the Romanian immigrants is maximal. As one immigrant said:

"We are easily hunted down here. If a round-up comes they rapidly give all of us a *foglia de via*. If you have Romanian papers and calluses 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."

Balancing between two worlds

A young immigrant, aged twenty-three, told me: "Here you are a slave. You are a Romanian, so you are a slave, you are not equal to them ... but you enjoy their civilized world together with them." Indeed, it is hard to remain in Italy. And it is hard to leave Italy. The push factors of Romanian society are about as strong as the pull factors of the new world. Another immigrant says: "Once you are accustomed to Italy it is difficult to return to Romania without regret." The condition of balancing between two worlds is characteristic of the semi-permanent, informal migration of Romanians to Italy and, to some extent, to Spain. In comparison, circulating labor migration to Germany raises no such problems.

The lack of legal regulations distorts the potential positive effects of labor migration. The regulatory permissiveness combined with the inadequacy of the legislation to deal with the movement of labor migrants responding to factors of supply and demand creates imbalances both in the destination countries and in the countries of origin. These imbalances, moreover, affect the deepest fabric of social relations. As the orthodox priest I interviewed said: "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 remain here in peace because they don't have papers."

The end of the story ... ?

On 1 January 2007, Romania became a full member of the European Union. Just before that, on 23 December 2006, the camp at La Fripta was destroyed. I spoke to one of the women on her mobile phone who told me:

"The police came and set fire to the huts in the forest. They came during the day ... we had left

everything at home ... my passport, my clothes, all the things I had collected during the year ... some of us were arrested ... others ran into the forest ... now I have only what I am dressed in ... for an entire year I worked for the Italians in their fields ... and now, just before Christmas they leave us under the open sky ... without anything ... we have no food, no money, no other place to go ... now it will be holiday time here until January ... nobody works ... the Italian bosses will not come to the depots to offer us work ... we don't know what to do."

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