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The Romanians are coming: open borders but no exit

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Channel 4's controversial documentary series [The Romanians Are Coming](#), depicting migrant life in the UK, has prompted criticism from Bucharest, whose officials accused the show of reinforcing negative stereotypes. **Diana Popescu** argues that the series has an important story to tell, by exposing 'some of Romania's most acute structural problems, and the way they affect the lives of some of its most vulnerable citizens'.



A screenshot from Channel 4's series 'The Romanians Are Coming', depicting Sandu and his son in the Romanian ghetto in Baia Mare, Northern Romania.

"That's the difference between nations, you see. USA is planning to go into Mars and Gypsies from Romania ride horses," says Alex, the charismatic narrator of Channel 4's documentary series *The Romanians are coming*, at the beginning of each episode. The difference here is a recurring one throughout the series: between a developed West where everything is possible and a backward Romania of poverty and squalor.

The documentary's choice of stories has led to protests by some Romanian migrants to the UK as well as to official reactions by Romania's ambassador to the UK and the Romanian PM, claiming that the stories are not representative and demean Romanians abroad. Indeed, the show's title, trailer, choice of a Romanian narrator and response to these protests indicate it does aim to be representative of all Romanians by telling the story through 'my' nation's eyes, and this promise it has failed to keep.

However, the show fulfils another, perhaps more important promise. It tells the stories behind a type of migrant whose image is often conjured up by anti-immigration rhetoric: the poor, relatively unskilled, homeless Romanian taking away jobs from the Brits. Through its series of moving individual stories, the documentary is successful in countering some of these arguments: it shows the jobs these migrants take are not desirable, that they work very hard, often overcoming exceptional disadvantages, that they don't expect benefits (despite some evidence to the contrary) and that coming and staying in the UK is no easy business. The documentary would have simply been less compelling for this purpose had it focused on Romanian medical researchers working on a cure for cancer, for instance. These stories might not be representative of all Romanians, but they are stories about Romania in a very important sense: they are stories about some of Romania's most acute structural problems, and the way they affect the lives of some of its most vulnerable citizens

"Surely you have jobs in your land," a British citizen addresses a group of Romanian Romanis living at Marble Arch. The answer, met with an incredulous stare, is that they don't. But as the mini-series unfolds, the reality of structural joblessness in Romania is firmly established. Adi's story, presented in the second episode, is particularly telling. Adi comes from Lupeni, a former mining town like dozens of others, whose sole industry collapsed along with Communism. Adi has 5 siblings and a mother who cannot support them out of her 35£/month social aid. He also has a wife for whom he dreams of buying a big

bouquet of roses one day. He works at a car wash in the UK, and when going to work he needs to make sure he has successfully erased all tell-tale signs of his homelessness: Adi sleeps under a bridge in order to save as much money as possible to send home. He is the main source of income for both families. “My life is horrible for [sic]the moment” he says resolutely, looking straight into the camera zooming in as he sits on the mattress he sleeps on.

Adi's homelessness is not a solitary occurrence in the series. Indeed, the first episode makes it look like a necessary sacrifice for enjoying the opportunities offered by the British state. This is the story of Stefan, who came to the UK to solve his daughter's medical problem – she is in constant pain and has a crooked leg because of a bad surgery. It is also Alex's story, who throughout the three episodes tries to save enough money to pay a few months' rent in advance on a room, but does not manage by the end. His belief that this situation is only temporary keeps him in the UK. The pictures of Alex's former life in Canada, the scenes with Stefan's family in Romania, and how 'normal' the two of them look when they show up for work, makes the image of the cardboard box they sleep in seem surreal.

In addition to the structural joblessness that affected Adi's town and the failures of the medical system that led Stefan to emigrate, another structural problem of the Romanian state presented in the series is its deep, institutionalised racism. “I'm sure the English will throw us a rope,” hopes Sandu, a Romani living with his family of 9 in a forced Romani settlement in Baia Mare, Northern Romania. The settlement differs from the one I grew up next to in Bucharest in the mid-90s only by the [tall concrete wall that surrounds it](#). The other images, such as that of a small room where Sandu's family has been sleeping on the floor on pillows for the last 15 years, or the young man in a dirty jacket with the coat of the Bundesadler getting high on paint thinner, are common enough. Several days later, in Liverpool, we find a desperate Sandu pleading to do any job, “even cleaning toilets”, wearing his best suit and tie – the same that appear in the promo for the series. Sandu's inability to speak English makes it impossible for him to stay, and he goes back to the settlement with a broken toy and stories of the sights he has seen atop a big shopping centre, which he recounts with Petrarch's enthusiasm describing Mount Ventoux.



A screenshot from Channel 4's series 'The Romanians Are Coming', depicting Stefan.

Another forced Romani settlement depicted in the series is Pata Rât, the landfill that Alex Fecete (the series' Romani narrator) calls home. Alex was forced to move there with his child and his partner after his home in Cluj, Western Romania, was demolished to make space for a new building of the Department of Theological Studies of the local university and an unused playground accessible via a new bike lane. “We were all integrated here,” says Alex about the [approximately 270 persons who were evacuated](#), who had jobs and whose children went to school. “We were civilized”, he says contemplating his current life in the garbage dump, stepping on the freshly painted bike lane that marks a successful alignment to modern standards of urbanism. In Britain, Alex F. finds work at a tyre shop he really likes, but he likes the absence of Romania's pervasive Antiziganism even more: “for me the beautiful thing is that nobody gives a shit I am a Romanian Gypsy.” No one, that is, until another Romanian visits the shop. The Romanian customer notices a camera and learns he is taking part in a documentary about Alex F., because “Romanis have a negative image here”. Misunderstanding the explanation, the customer thinks it's a documentary about hard working Romanians to counter-balance this negative image brought about by Romanis. He offers his perspective, explaining Romanians look like him and Alex (whereas Romanis have dark skin, like another employer the customer points to) and that Romanians, unlike Romanis, are hard-working people “Romanians are sweating, yeah? We're working. Gypsies are not working. They don't really like to work, you see. And all the time they look for sneaky ways.” Romanians' anti-Romani prejudices now enjoy open borders too.

Despite being offered a permanent job with a decent pay, Alex F. decides to go back and make a difference in his community in Pata Rât. “F**k good life. F**k money. I think I will go home” he says, in the sort of verbal over-reaction that seems to be a trademark of the series. “I will make this island of broken houses the best it can be” he decides, and the final moments of the series show him building a fence around one of the improvised houses in Pata Rât. As it turns out, he had been offered the opportunity to participate in a project on Romani integration in Pata Rât funded by the Norwegian government. Instead of individual salvation for him and his family, Alex F. chose to make a difference for his community as a whole.

The pattern that emerges from these stories is that of migrants driven out of their country by successive failures of the Romanian state. By exploring the motivation behind migrating to the UK, the mini-series paints a moving portrait of the

individual and family dramas behind terms such as ‘failures of the medical system’, ‘failures of the welfare state’, ‘structural unemployment’, ‘extreme poverty’, ‘racism’, ‘forced Romani settlement’. Such factors shape most of the decisions to migrate presented in the series – even the more successful ones of Mihaela and Cosmin. Commenting on what it means to be free to work in the EU, Alex F. asks rhetorically “Where is freedom if I have to leave Romania because I am poor?” In cases such as that of Sandu, Stefan, and Adi, the circumstances forcing them to find work abroad are so dire that it seems more appropriate to say that they were ‘driven out’ of Romania than that they preferred to come to the UK.

But an even more interesting pattern that emerges regards these people’s lives in the UK: the factors that work together to trap individuals in spirals of disadvantage in Romania don’t stop at the border, but cross over and affect their lives in Britain. Lack of skills and education render some incapable of finding employment, and lack of financial means to pay an agency’s steep fee of 1000€ for securing employment in the UK and to pay a deposit on rent means homelessness is a necessary part of some migrants’ experience of life in Britain.

The homeless characters of the series seem acutely aware of the loss of dignity this means. Alex talks of finding a home as tantamount to becoming ‘a normal human being’, and Adi’s look while seated on his mattress is reminiscent of Orwell’s remark in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, upon watching a slum girl from the window of his train: “She knew well enough what was happening to her – understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drainpipe.” Yet, the belief in a Britain of open opportunities persists, and the poverty and homelessness endured in Britain are regarded as a temporary phase, bound to be overcome by hard work and determination.

Part of the show’s strange appeal comes from its extremely realistic depiction of these problems and what they mean for individuals’ lives. This has prompted a range of reactions, from compassion to blame and from regret to embarrassment, which cannot be attributed to the director’s intentions. However, the sensationalism of the show, through its over-the-top descriptions, the curious expressions, beliefs, and habits it presents as characteristic of Romanians, and its striking imagery, renders these issues exotic. This is, as far as I am concerned, the show’s biggest failure: its frequent framing of the issues as sensational takes away from the moving, universally human, aspects of the characters’ lived experience of poverty it depicts.

The documentary is a story of how both the Romanian and the British states fail most of the characters presented. The Romanian state sets many up for failure even when the doors of the British state are (ungraciously) open. Both disadvantages and privileges are carried over to the UK. Opening borders has indeed made it possible for privileged Romanians to join the ranks of businessmen working in the City, as the protesters remind us. But most Romanians trapped in poverty at home can’t find a way out in Britain either, often having to go back to a worse situation than before as they have used considerable resources trying to get here. The social inequalities that existed at the national level have now taken a European dimension; the structural problems of countries from the former Communist block (massive unemployment, lack of resources to fund a proper healthcare and welfare system, ageing population, prioritising alignment to some European standards while ignoring more important problems) drive the most disadvantaged out of the country while at the same time incapacitating them from achieving social mobility elsewhere. This is not Britain’s problem, but, as Alex Fechetete’s story shows, the best way of keeping Romanians out is to give them an opportunity to make a difference back home.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe, nor of the London School of Economics.

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