

The Rights and Challenges of South Asian Migrants in Romania during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Since the 2015 refugee crisis onwards, the yearly quota of working permits for Third Country Nationals (TCNs) offered by the Romanian Government has gradually increased, reaching 25,000 in 2020. An important category of TCNs working in Romania are people from South Asia, mainly Indian, Bangladeshi, Sinhalese or Nepali migrants. Most of them are low-skilled workers employed in the primary or secondary sectors of the economy. Apart from the socio-cultural barriers towards integration that these migrants face, the year 2020 exposed them to yet another risk of vulnerability to the dangers of social exclusion: the COVID-19 crisis. In August and October 2020, several pest holes of COVID-19 infections have been reported in South Asian migrant communities in Romania. Poor standards of living, inadequate public policies and delayed political decision-making have done little else than to deprive TCN workers of some basic human rights, while also increasing their vulnerability and exposing their host communities to even higher health risks. This article uses a mixed method of digital ethnography and community research to investigate if and how the human rights of South Asian TCNs in Romania were respected in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, and what effects there were on their quality of life and standard of living. The research will focus on how public policies and measures have been employed to address the COVID-19 crisis that emerged within South Asian migrant communities in Romania and on how the rights of migrants have been respected during the deployment of such measures.

Key words: international migration, quality of life, refugees, asylum seekers, pandemic.

Introduction: South-Asian Migrants in Romania

With a maritime border with Turkey at the Black Sea and a terrestrial border with the Western Balkans, Romania has played a significant role in international immigration, especially since the refugee crisis of 2015. The Eastern European country has a rich history of outbound migration (see Vilcu, 2014) dating back to the early 1990s, when, after the

fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's Communist Regime, many Romanians sought a new life in France, Germany, England or the United States. The image of the Romanian migrant, however, started to be shaped after the country's admission to the European Union on January 1, 2007, which meant greater work opportunities for the native population (Nicolae, 2011; Șerban, 2015). Italy and Spain became emblematic destinations for Romanian labor migrants (Șerban and Voicu, 2010), and allegedly four million Romanians currently live outside the country's borders, accentuating the braindrain phenomenon (Boncea, 2014). This demographic imbalance led to a labor market deficit, leaving many low-paid jobs and positions unoccupied. Consequently, a labor immigration trend also started to emerge during the 2010s in Romania. In 2020, more than 6000 asylum requirements were filed in Romania, not to mention the labor immigrants from third countries (Costea, 2021). Traditional migrant flows to Romania mainly originated from neighboring countries such as the Republic of Moldova or the Ukraine, or from Turkey (Popescu and Toth, 2011). However, many of the Moldovan, Ukrainian or Turkish migrants came to Romania not for employment, but for studies, for setting up businesses, or as an intermediary step towards further Western migration (Omer and Cupcea, 2017). In this context, more and more employment opportunities emerged for South-Asian migrants.

Despite their growing numbers, the presence of Indian, Bangladeshi, Sinhalese or Nepali migrants in Romania is rather overlooked by public authorities, as well as largely neglected in the national scientific literature. Prior to 1989, during the communist regime, Asian and African migration to the Socialist Republic of Romania was rigorously contained and limited to some exchanges with fellow communist states (Gheorghiu and Netedu, 2015). Most migrants from former communist Asian states came to Romania for studies and returned home after graduation. During the 1990s and 2000s, Asian migrants came to Romania for trade businesses or to find work doing household chores. Large, impressive China Markets opened mainly at the outskirts of Bucharest and Constanța during the 1990s, while nowadays, nearly every middle to big city in Romania hosts one or more Chinese shops, where "Made in China" products ranging from toys to hats, notebooks or items of clothing are sold (Cioculescu, 2018: 338). For many other Asian migrants, Romania only represented a transit country on the road to Western Europe. Lately, though, Thai, Filipinos and Vietnamese people have found employment with wealthy new-rich families in search of babysitters or housekeepers (Ștefănuț, 2011), while more recently, a newer wave of South-Asian migrants emerged after the early 2010s, with Indian, Bangladeshi, Sinhalese or Nepali migrants finding employment in construction and hospitality (Oltean and Găvrus, 2018).

This research uses a macro perspective to look at the issues of challenges of South-Asian migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Romania over the months that have gone by since the spread of the COVID-19 virus at a global level, in early 2020. The paper looks at social implications and communitarian issues among South-Asian TCNs since COVID-19

was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. One of the main limitations of this research is that it has an exploratory goal, namely to clarify some aspects regarding the South-Asian migrant community in Romania during the COVID-19 crisis and to familiarize the researcher with a topic whose details will be developed in future studies (Stebbins, 2001). This paper therefore lacks rigorosity and thoroughness, being more a collection of ideas on the condition of South-Asian migrants in Romania during the COVID-19 epidemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic and migrants

Reports indicate that, in Northern European countries, migrants have a greater exposure to the COVID-19 virus in comparison to local residents (Drefahl et al., 2020, cited in Indseth et al., 2020). As pointed out by Jora (2020, 30), the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to deepen social inequalities in most aspects of life, from money to jobs, and education to healthcare. When such major crises impact humanity, socially vulnerable groups are exposed to greater burdens than regular populations. Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are among the social categories that face high risk of having to deal with a diminished quality of life as a result of the pandemic (Cimpoeru et al., 2020; Schweitzer, 2015). The COVID-19 crisis can pose serious challenges to the social integration and human rights of these vulnerable individuals (Arroyo et al., 2021; Falkenhein et al., 2021). The already greatly restricted economic, educational, housing, medical and social integration options for migrants, refugees or asylum seekers now decrease even further.

South-Asian labor migrants, refugees or asylum seekers are among the most vulnerable social groups living in Romania. Most of them come to Romania to pursue employment opportunities. The vulnerability of these migrants starts in their native countries, where, in addition to the unequal access to decently paid jobs, people who decide to go abroad have to pay placement fees to recruitment agencies that find jobs for them in collaboration with partners overseas (Lindquist, Xiang and Yeoh, 2012; Kern and Müller-Böker, 2015; Shresta, 2018). Once in Romania, the position of South-Asians is not the most enviable. Since Romania is not a destination country for TCNs, but primarily a transit country towards Western Europe, the migration phenomenon and related public discourse are not as extensive in Romania as they are in Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Belgium (Băiașu, 2018; Düvell, 2012). Migration was not a priority for the Romanian government before the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, and it is even less now, when most public attention and resource allocation are directed towards combatting the epidemic. Migrants, refugees and asylums seekers from outside the European Union face the danger of marginalization at an even greater level than before COVID-19 (Alio et al., 2020). Their basic human rights, like the right to medical care, risk being pushed to the limit due to lack of public attention. If public discourse around TCNs was previously concentrated around attempts at socio-economic integration, a public health dimension now needs to be considered, because TCNs can be transporters of the virus. While bringing the virus from

the native country should not normally happen, since negative COVID-19-tests are now needed to travel abroad, migrants can become carriers of the virus within the host country due to several reasons.

With precarious living conditions, migrants and refugees live in socially and environmentally backward neighborhoods when compared to an average of the population. Such unfortunate locative aspects were among the causes that accelerated the spread of two infection outbreaks in the summer of 2020 in Bucharest in Romania. One of them concerned 34 Nepalese and Indian migrants working on a construction site (Digi24.ro, 2020) while the other involved 42 Nepalis working for a car dealership (NepalPlus, 2020). Overall, by mid-November 2020, more than 500 Nepalese workers in Romania had had the virus (Ibid.). The precarious housing conditions of many South-Asians in Romania (compared to the local population, see Anghe and Coşciug, 2018; Burean, 2018) can be considered a starting point for the increased vulnerability to the epidemic. Unable to pay rent alone, South-Asian migrants often choose to share living space. This leads to overcrowding, which makes it nearly impossible to respect physical distancing measures that might protect against infection. More than that, overcrowding can also lead to accelerated spreading of the disease (Singh et al., 2020). Other migrants – especially those in the construction sector – live in barracks at or near the work site (Popescu, 2007). This agglomeration in living spaces can be a cause for the communitarian spread of the virus. If labor migrants in general live in rented flats, the more vulnerable groups such as refugees or asylum seekers are left with the options of assistance from non-governmental organizations or residence in the refugee camps offered by the Romanian state. The living conditions in the latter are not necessarily ideal; habitation spaces are minimal and cleanliness leaves much to be desired (Deutsche Welle, 2017). TCNs are thus in additional psychological and social distress due to these precarious living conditions (Speltini and Passini, 2014). Having to deal with dirtiness during a global pandemic when so much emphasis is placed on public sanitation can be seen as negligence with regard to the basic human rights of refugees or asylum seekers. Efforts to improve cleanliness are minimal, as are actions towards an increase in the quality of life and the provision of basic human rights (Jack, Anantharaman and Browne, 2020). The public housing policy concerning migrants ought to be re-evaluated in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, since the usual overcrowding can lead to increased rates of infection (see more in Benfer et al., 2021). The situation is even more dramatic for refugees and asylum seekers that have entered Romania from Serbia and Hungary via the Western borders of the country in Timiș County during the COVID-19 crisis, as evidenced in a report of Radio Free Europe Romania (see Armanca, 2020): due to the lack of locations for placing them in the 14-day mandatory quarantine when entering the country from abroad, these vulnerable people have had to be kept in the custody of the local police. However, the police do not have enough facilities for all the refugees and asylum seekers, which again leads to overcrowding (up to four people in a room). Armanca's report also shows that these refugees and asylum seekers are entitled to only 16 Lei a day (app. 3 Euros and 20 cents, at the exchange

rate of March 15th, 2021), and only if they declare that they do not have any financial means. Food and other basic care products are offered by local NGOs. Those released from police custody eventually end up living in abandoned houses in Timisoara or in other adverse conditions (see Armanca, 2021).

Another aspect of their vulnerability lies in the fact that the majority of South-Asians in Romania are not employed in knowledge-based jobs that might be done remotely, but rather in restaurants, hotels, construction or daycare and family care, which all require physical presence (Țupulan and Safta, 2012). Yet another aspect to be considered is that many of the jobs in which South-Asians were employed, such as those in the hospitality sector, were shut down because of the pandemic. One of the popular sectors of activity for South-Asians in Romania is the daycare/family care industry, where many work as nannies or housekeepers. However, with families fearing the virus, many such agreements were cancelled. Migrants became unemployed in a country whose language they did not know, having to deal with this situation and with public authorities at the same time.

If, to a certain extent, labor migrants enjoy more stable conditions, since they are employed and receive a wage, the situation is more dramatic for refugees or asylum seekers who enter Romania without all the required documents, such as medical certifications or affiliations and school diplomas. The rights of undocumented migrants within the host country and their possibility to act are, thus, reduced. Immigrants are therefore exposed to the risk of not receiving proper medical care in the middle of a global pandemic. Even for labor migrants, a contractual relationship with an employer does not necessarily mean adequate protection from the coronavirus. Moreover, there is also a stigmatization risk, since these foreigners can be regarded as possible spreaders of the disease. On a global level, the danger of COVID-19-induced stigmatization is amplified by already existing xenophobic and racist attitudes against TCNs (Guadagno, 2020), although in Romania it could be said that anti-immigrant sentiment is on a rather minimal scale and mostly unmanifested in collective behavior.

Often being emotionally and sometimes even physically exploited by their employers, immigrants and refugees face the risk of social exclusion, since they have limited connections to public authorities that might help them (Mannila and Rueter, 2009). Due to the fact that many third country nationals (TCNs) barely understand the Romanian language, let alone speak it properly, the establishment of a connection with authorities becomes a challenge, while building trust is even more so. As if such barriers were not enough, according to a recent UNICEF report based on a survey conducted in 159 countries, the national response strategies to the COVID-19 pandemic and the related recovery plans have excluded migrants from key human rights (UNICEF, 2020). Access of migrants to essential services, including healthcare, has significantly declined compared to pre-pandemic times. The poor connection between immigrants and public authorities places respect for the human rights of TCNs in jeopardy.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Non-EU migrants, refugees and asylum seekers represent one of the most vulnerable social groups during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Gaining knowledge about their state during the pandemic is important, both from a scientific and from a practitioner's perspective. Gaining further insight into the position of TCNs with respect to the COVID-19 virus could lead to the development of knowledge that could be used to prevent the transmission of the virus. Several research approaches can be used in order to gain a better understanding of prevailing conditions. Using an individual approach, the cognitive and emotional processes of TCNs can be studied in order to understand how these people are affected by the crisis. What might be more interesting for future research, though, is a communitarian perspective, since migrants often live and work in groups, leading to shared decision-making and shared experiences that can hinder or accelerate the spread of the coronavirus, as was the case with the two outbreaks of infection in Romania in the summer of 2020. Functional, structural, or institutional perspectives can be used for studying the communitarian impact in order to develop an understanding that could subsequently be used in public planning and policies aimed at reducing the transmission of the coronavirus.

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