



**Contemporary Southeastern Europe**

An Interdisciplinary Journal on Southeastern Europe

# **The Othering of Returning Migrants in Romania during the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Event Analysis

Jacopo Sanna  
MA-Student, University of Graz  
[jacoposann.aa@gmail.com](mailto:jacoposann.aa@gmail.com)

*Contemporary Southeastern Europe*, 2021, 8(1), 19-29

DOI 10.25364/02.8:2021.1.2



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

---

*Contemporary Southeastern Europe* is an online, peer-reviewed, multidisciplinary journal that publishes original, scholarly, and policy-oriented research on issues relevant to societies in Southeastern Europe. For more information, please contact us at [info@contemporarysee.org](mailto:info@contemporarysee.org) or visit our website at [www.contemporarysee.org](http://www.contemporarysee.org)

# The Othering of Returning Migrants in Romania during the First Wave of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Jacopo Sanna\*

## Introduction

On the night of 10-11 March 2020, several Romanian news outlets filmed and photographed hundreds of vehicles in long queues trying to enter Romania from Hungary at the border in Nădlac. The COVID-19 outbreak that had officially begun a few months earlier in China was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation the next day, as it was clear that many countries in Europe and in the rest of the world were starting to be severely affected by the new coronavirus. That was not the case in Romania yet, but the level of alert in the country was rather high, mostly because of the strong links between Romania and Italy, the country that was most affected at the time, with more than 10,000 cases and 631 deaths.

Italy is home to around 1,200,000 Romanian migrants, half of them living in the northern regions of the country, at that point the main hotspot of the virus in Europe. Many of them visit Romania regularly, especially at times such as Christmas and Easter; many still have most of their family there and send remittances, while also planning to return there after earning enough money. The connection between Romania and its emigrants is undoubtedly strong. That is why, in times of such crisis, many Romanians in Italy decided to return to Romania as soon as the situation in their host country started to be perceived as serious.

From the beginning of March, several politicians repeatedly sent messages encouraging Romanian migrants to reconsider their intentions of returning home for the Easter holidays in mid-April. Such messages fit into an overall sentiment of fear and suspicion directed towards returning migrants, especially those returning from Italy. When the number of cases in Romania started to grow, returning migrants were blamed for it. As my informants have mentioned, and as several online comments to articles about returning migrants also confirm, some of the most common rhetoric used in those days included the following: What right do they have to come back to Romania, since they left it for not being good enough in the first place? Why don't they stay in Italy, where they have a better medical system?

The peak of this sentiment was reached in the night of 10 March, with the images of the long lines at the border. In the common understanding of the

---

\* Jacopo Sanna is currently a student of the Joint Master's Programme in Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. He previously earned a master's degree in Communication Studies at the University of Udine in Italy, where he wrote a thesis on gender representation in the Yugoslav cinema of the 1980s. His current research interests lie in the fields of cultural studies and migration studies.

media and its readers and viewers, it was COVID-19 that these people were escaping from, coming from countries that at that point were worse affected than Romania. In an article that appeared in *Libertatea* on 11 March, the newspaper's vice-director Oana Costea took the images out of context, explaining that usually such queues at the border are associated with the joy of holidays and underlining how happy Romanians usually are for the return of their loved ones from abroad:

*“They come back home for Easter or Christmas, they prepare meals, they see their parents, siblings, children, nephews, bring them presents from abroad and spend money in the countryside. We rub our hands with satisfaction as we calculate how much the diaspora is contributing to our GDP.”<sup>1</sup>*

Then, she opposes this to how these images were perceived in March 2020, highlighting the fear Romanians felt when seeing the images of the vehicles in Nădlac. Such fear was not only related to the virus itself; as one of my informants said to me: “I did not care that much about the virus at first, but rather about job-related problems that so many returning people would cause. If a large part of the country does not have an income, they are going to steal from me.”

Two days later, an article on *Adevărul* reports a Facebook post by a Romanian woman in Italy that describes, like the previous article, the shift in the way Romanian returning migrants were perceived:

*“These days, we in the diaspora have become the monsters of Romania. We are no longer the ones who bring back huge bags of candies for children, [...] purse bags and expensive perfumes for the ladies, we are no longer the ones who come and pay your debts at the stores, [...] who build in Romania offering jobs and salaries, [...] the ones who pay taxes and duties. No! Now we are the zombies, the ones who will infect and kill you!”<sup>2</sup>*

In this article, my goal is to see how the figure of returning migrants in Romania during the pandemic was shaped by the media, and how this may have affected the perception of migrants by non-migrants, and therefore the relationship between the two groups. Before doing that, however, I will attempt to see how the return of migrants during the COVID-19 crisis can be positioned within a transnational approach to return migration, that is, an approach that sees (trans)migrants as depending on both their host country and their home country.<sup>3</sup>

### **Conceptualising return during a pandemic**

It is hard to position the return movement of Romanian migrants in March 2020 within classifications of return such as that of Oxfeld and Long, who listed three different types of return migration – namely permanent,

---

<sup>1</sup> Costea, Oana. 2020. *Nu de coronavirus mi-e teamă, ci de ce distruge el. În noi.* *Libertatea*, 11 March 2020 (accessed: 19 May 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Mitran, Alina. 2020. *Româncă din Italia: „Nu mai suntem ăia care vă aducem saci întregi de dulciuri, poșete de firmă și parfumuri scumpe”.* *Adevărul*, 13 March 2020 (accessed: 20 May 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Glick Schiller, Nina / Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc. 1995. From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration. *Anthropological quarterly* 68(1), 48-63, 48.

imagined and provisional<sup>4</sup> – or that of Van Hear, which is defined by the axis of voluntary/forced migration.<sup>5</sup>

Among the reasons to return during the pandemic that my informants mentioned there were: the sudden loss of a job due to temporary or permanent closing of businesses during the lockdown in Italy and elsewhere; the closing of universities, in the case of Romanian students studying abroad; and the impossibility of affording healthcare in a foreign country due to not having a regular work contract. In other cases, of course, it was the fear of being sick in a foreign country that mattered most. While for many of these people their return to Romania was meant to be only a pause from their life in Italy, for others it could be something more: a permanent return to their homeland due to a strong sense of nostalgia.<sup>6</sup> Usually, when someone feels nostalgic about home, that does not mean they always want to really go back.<sup>7</sup> Yet a situation in which the host country is suddenly perceived as less safe or less enjoyable than the home country can certainly turn into a catalyst to go back, even for those whose return cannot be considered ‘forced’.

While the return of Romanians during the pandemic swings between provisional and permanent, there is also a certain ambiguity in terms of whether it is voluntary or forced. In fact, while during a return visit or a permanent return there is usually a tacit agreement between migrants and non-migrants on the nature of such a return, with the subsequent altered power relationship that the return shapes between the two categories,<sup>89</sup> this could not happen during the COVID-19 crisis. On the one hand, neither the migrant nor the non-migrant could foresee the length of their stay. On the other hand, returning migrants mostly saw themselves as involuntary (forced) returnees, that is, as people who did not have any choice, while non-migrants saw them as voluntary returnees, that is, as people who selfishly chose to return and to endanger their country without a real reason to do so.

## Methodology

The research draws from an analysis of 188 articles published in the month of March on the websites of Libertatea, Adevărul and ȘtirileProTv,<sup>10</sup> seen through the discourse-historical approach of Wodak and others, with

---

<sup>4</sup> Oxfeld, Ellen and Lynellyn D. Long. 2010. *Introduction: An Ethnography of Return in Coming Home? Refugees, Migrants, and those Who Stayed Behind*, edited by Long, Lynellyn D. and Ellen Oxfeld. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1-18, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Van Hear, Nicholas. 1998. *New Diasporas: The mass exodus, dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities*. London: UCL Press, 42.

<sup>6</sup> Archip, Andreea. 2020a. Coronavirus la Milano. 5 zile într-un oraș blocat. Românii din Italia sunt mai afectați de virusul întoarcerii acasă. *Libertatea*, 3 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Jansen, Stef and Staffan Löfving. 2008. Introduction: Movement, Violence, and the Making of Home. *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology* 49, 3-14, 9.

<sup>8</sup> Ehrkamp, Patricia. 2010. Placing Identities: Transnational Practices and Local Attachments of Turkish Immigrants in Germany. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(2), 345-64, 361.

<sup>9</sup> Jansen / Löfving, *Introduction*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> These are three of the main media outlets in Romania. Libertatea often focuses on editorials and has a rather critical stance towards the government; Adevărul reports the most about single cases; ȘtirileProTv is mainly a news site, yet several of its articles are structured as to give voice to as many people as possible through short colloquial interviews.

particular attention paid to the strategies of nomination and predication.<sup>11</sup> These articles all treat the situation of Romanian migrants and returning migrants in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, but I have decided to focus more extensively on the articles that consider migrants coming from Italy. There are three reasons for this: first, it is the foreign country with the highest number of Romanians in Europe; second, it was the first European hotspot of the virus; third, Romanians from Italy were the first to come back.

While many of these articles contained direct admonishments towards Romanians who intended to come back from Italy, they also indirectly characterised them in several ways, with the final result of crafting a distorted and homogeneous image of returning migrants and imposing this image on their readers. As discourses reproduce, justify or perpetuate a certain status quo,<sup>12</sup> this representation of reality could potentially uncover hidden and often unexpressed feelings between non-migrants and migrants.

### **Constructing the image of the returning migrant**

In this section, I will show that the image of migrants returning from Italy to Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic was constructed in three different steps. The first step was the clear, initial association between the virus and the migrants. The second was the juxtaposition of the 'heroic' acts by Romanians who remained in Italy with the irresponsibility of Romanians who came back to Romania. Finally, the third step was the reinforcement of these concepts by giving voice to Romanians in Italy who were critical of those who went back home.

When it comes to the association between migrants in Italy and the virus, this was quite evident from the beginning. The provenance of infected Romanians was always made explicit, and Romanians "venit din Italia" ("coming from Italy") automatically came to be seen as the infector. Of course, it was not only migrants who were coming back, but also tourists. Yet, while several details of the migrants were always present, such as the area where they used to live, most details of the tourists were omitted. In other words, when returning Romanians were migrants, this was made explicit; when they were tourists, this was often left unsaid. The consequence is that all returning Romanians came to be seen as migrants.

On 6 March 2020, Adevărul reported a plea by Prime Minister Ludovic Orban asking Romanians in Italy not to come back for the Easter holidays. The title of the article was: "Orban asks Romanians not to come home for Easter: we will not have enough resources."<sup>13</sup> While in the body of the article it is mentioned that these are resources for making sure that everyone will be controlled during their quarantine, the ambiguity of *what* resources he is

---

<sup>11</sup> Reisigl, Martin and Ruth Wodak. 2009. *The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) in Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*, edited by Wodak, R. and Michael Meyer. London: Sage, 87-121, 95.

<sup>12</sup> De Cillia, Rudolf / Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak. 1999. The Discursive Construction of National Identities. *Discourse & Society*, 10(2), 149-73, 157.

<sup>13</sup> Sirbu, Laurențiu. 2020. Orban, apel către românii din diaspora să nu vină acasă de Paste: Nu vom avea suficiente resurse. *Adevărul*, 6 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).

referring to in the title over-dramatises the message. In a global context that was already seeing hospitals being overcrowded with COVID-19 patients, at first glance this lack of resources suggests the possible collapse of the health system, therefore assuming an inevitable association between the migrants coming back and the virus spreading.

The main way through which the blame was placed on migrants returning from Italy was by juxtaposing their image to that of Romanians who remained in Italy. By emphasising the heroic, martyr-like and victim-like characteristics of those who remained in Italy, a negative connotation of those who took the opposite choice emerged, and the *voluntary* nature of their return was implicitly reinforced.

First off, people affected by the coronavirus were characterised in different ways and with a different depth depending on whether they were diagnosed in Romania after coming back from Italy or in Italy. In the case of the former, what is mentioned is usually only where they come from, where they live, their age and when they came back. In the case of the latter, meanwhile, their illness is carefully described, with a focus on the symptoms, the measures that were taken, the evolution of the disease and the condition of their family members.

Romanians in Italy, however, did not need to be infected to be considered victims of the situation. An article appeared on *Libertatea* on 11 March 2020 titled: "Severe problems for Romanians left in Italy: some have to leave their house and do not know where to go".<sup>14</sup> Their altruism is emphasised by quoting their words: "If we come back, we will infect our compatriots".<sup>15</sup> In particular, the situation of a few caregivers is considered "desperate", as the people they were taking care of had died and they ended up without a job or a place to live. The heroic nature of these people is reinforced by a certain fatalist attitude both by the writer and by their own words: "She can't return to Romania. She has nowhere to go in Italy,"<sup>16</sup> or "I can't force anyone to take me home."<sup>17</sup> Besides, Romanians who stayed in Italy are shown to also display exceptional empathy, as in the case of several messages reported in the same articles in support of Magda, one of the caretakers in need for help, with several Romanians in Italy offering their homes or other types of solidarity.<sup>18</sup>

Over the course of March and particularly in the darkest days of the pandemic for Italy, the perception of Romanians being *trapped* there emerged.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, this showed how their permanence in the host country is intended as transnational: even if they have been living in Italy

---

<sup>14</sup> Meseșan, Diana. 2020. Probleme grave pentru românii din Italia: unii trebuie să părăsească locuințele și nu au unde merge. *Libertatea*, 11 March 2020 (accessed: 06 May 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Meseșan, *Probleme grave pentru românii din Italia*.

<sup>16</sup> Meseșan, *Probleme grave pentru românii din Italia*.

<sup>17</sup> Meseșan, *Probleme grave pentru românii din Italia*.

<sup>18</sup> Meseșan, *Probleme grave pentru românii din Italia*.

<sup>19</sup> Frîncu, Diana. 2020. Româncă prinsă în cosmarul italian: „Dacă ti-ai abandonat acum animalul, amenda este 10.000 de euro și arest”. *Adevărul*, 23 March 2020 (accessed: 17 May 2020).

for many years, they are still trapped there when they cannot go back to Romania, for example during the holidays. On the other hand, it displayed a certain *impossibility* of coming back that is present in all articles, a sense of doom that contrasts with all the Romanians that came back or that kept coming back. As not coming back became the normality, returning became even more condemned.

In the second half of the month, as Romanian news outlets began focusing on the dramatic situation Italy was going through with more empathy, Romanians who chose to stay were increasingly seen as real heroes for staying and ‘taking care’ of Italy and Italians. As a consequence, those who left ended up being doubly negatively connoted: for putting their home country at risk, and for betraying the country that hosted them. Romanian caretakers in Italy become women that, “in the middle of the disaster [...] give courage to the old people,”<sup>20</sup> and are described as the only company for old people once their relatives could not visit them anymore. Two Romanian cousins who have been living in Italy for 20 years and own a bakery near Rome made the “impressive”<sup>21</sup> gesture of giving bread for free to those in need and justified their selfless act like this:

*“We could not turn our backs on Italy in these difficult times, we must be united and help her, as she helped us when we had a difficult time.”<sup>22</sup>*

On the other hand, the vast majority of articles about returning Romanians focused on those who did not respect quarantine rules, or whose selfish acts in general endangered their fellow citizens. While the characterisation of the lawful Romanians who remained in Italy and made a ‘sacrifice’ for both their home country and their host country is always deep and detailed, Romanians who returned are barely characterised. What we know is their age and details about their return, but the reasons why they left Italy or why they were there in the first place are only rarely revealed. This is also because they are almost never voiced by the media, unlike their counterparts who remained in Italy. A vicious circle may have taken place: the government’s pressure not to return might have implicitly silenced those who returned, something I also noticed in my search for returnees to interview. In the end, what is emphasised by the media is mostly their irresponsibility, rather than their background stories.

Two categories are particularly evident: the arrogant and the liar. The scornful attitude of those not respecting the rules is emphasised through verbs such as ‘refuse’ (e.g. to isolate)<sup>23</sup> or by simple acts that highlighted the

---

<sup>20</sup> Archip, Andreea. 2020b. În mijlocul dezastrului, româncele badante în Italia le dau curaj bătrânilor: „Am sărbătorit o doamnă care are 100 de ani. Citim, cântăm, mergem mai departe”. *Libertatea*, 21 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Macovei, Denisa. 2020. Gest impresionant făcut de doi români din Italia, proprietari de brutărie. Oferă pâine gratis celor care nu au bani să-și cumpere. *Libertatea*, 18 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Popescu, Ana. 2020. Doi români livrează gratis pâine proaspătă italienilor aflați în carantină: „N-am putut întoarce spatele Italiei”. *Adevărul*, 18 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Florescu, Remus. 2020. Clujeanul care s-a întors din Italia și a refuzat să se autoizoleze riscă până la 2 ani de închisoare. S-a deschis dosar penal. Mi-am scris deja testamentul. *Adevărul*, 28 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).

carelessness displayed in some circumstances, for example buying groceries<sup>24</sup> or mindlessly walking through the city.<sup>25</sup> This creates a narrative in which returning Romanians who did not respect quarantine, but even returning ‘Romanians from Italy’ in general, due to the continuous characterisation of the former as migrants, are seen as enemies of the people: criminals who endanger their own people through their selfishness, carelessness and lies.

Other ways through which returning migrants are described were the following: Romanians coming back from Italy “tricked”<sup>26</sup> the system, escaping quarantine or refusing to give details about their travel, giving them the connotation of real outlaws. Others “pretended”<sup>27</sup> to come back from Germany instead of Italy, while in other cases the “recklessness”<sup>28</sup> of infected people is emphasised, as in the episode of an infected person “taking a stroll” through a hospital.<sup>29</sup>

To reinforce such a strong juxtaposition between migrants who remained in Italy and migrants who returned, a few articles, especially on *Libertatea*, gave voice to Romanians in Italy who harshly criticise and generalise those who returned to Romania with even stronger terms. Romanians with the intention of returning are described as “running away” from the virus and from quarantine and are generalised as a privileged category:

*“Quarantine does not mean any extraordinary sacrifice, the fact that you do not go out in the evening, cook at home and do not walk on the beach and in the mountains does not seem such a great sacrifice,”*<sup>30</sup>

says a woman in an article titled, in quite a straightforward manner, “Romanians from Italy, do not leave the country!”<sup>31</sup> In other cases they are directly called “selfish and irresponsible.”<sup>32</sup>

It is important to notice, however, that while returning migrants were blamed for spreading the virus, the government was simultaneously blamed for not properly managing the situation with Romanians in Italy. *Libertatea* in particular criticised the Romanian president Iohannis very harshly,

---

<sup>24</sup> Mitrache, Daciana. 2020. Suspecti de coronavirus, văzuti la cumpărături în Vâlcea. Ce au pătit doi soți care ar fi trebuit să stea în izolare. *Adevărul*, 18 March 2020 (accessed: 14 May 2020).

<sup>25</sup> ȘtirileProTV. 2020a. Un bărbat suspect de COVID-19 s-a plimbat cu STB-ul prin Capitală. Abia venise din Italia. 18 March 2020 (accessed: 5 June 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Florea, Adina and Răzvan Luțac. 2020. Cum păcălesc românii statul și pe ei: o vasluiancă s-a întors acasă prin Germania dintr-un sat italian cu 4 morți de coronavirus și nu e în carantină. *Libertatea*, 9 March 2020 (accessed: 11 May 2020).

<sup>27</sup> ȘtirileProTV. 2020b. Scandal la frontieră cu mai multe familii de romi. Cum s-a descoperit că vin din Italia. 10 March 2020 (accessed: 1 June 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Guță, Daniel. 2020. Inconștienta tinerei cu coronavirus care s-a plimbat prin spitale a îmbolnăvit cel puțin șase oameni. *Adevărul*, 12 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Guță, *Inconștienta.*

<sup>30</sup> Archip, Andreea. 2020c. “Români din Italia, nu plecați în țară!” Apelul unei românce din Milano după ce oamenii fug de carantină! *Libertatea*, 8 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).

<sup>31</sup> Archip, *“Români din Italia, nu plecați în țară!”*

<sup>32</sup> Tecuceanu, Paul. 2020. Mesaj dur transmis de o româncă stabilită în Lombardia românilor care au plecat spre țară: „Egoiștilor și iresponsabililor”. *Libertatea*, 11 March 2020 (accessed: 11 May 2020).



asking on 9 March 2020 why he would not go to visit Romanians in Italy to show them they were not forgotten by their country,<sup>33</sup> and many articles tackled the way in which the return of Romanians from Italy and other countries was managed. In these cases, there is a sort of empathetic approach to the returning migrants, as the 'us' versus 'them' narrative becomes all Romanians versus the authorities. An article published on 23 March 2020 on *Libertatea* reports the fact that the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs offered flights to returning Romanians that cost 250 euros.<sup>34</sup> This is one of the few articles in which there is a deep characterisation of a returning migrant, who is quoted as she confesses:

*"All my money is 140 euros now. I am staying over at a woman's place now, but I work really hard for a small room. I want to come back home, my health is not helping me, I am no longer allowed to work."*<sup>35</sup>

In another article, Romanians coming back from Italy and Greece share their experience of facing long waits without food and water when entering institutionalised quarantine.<sup>36</sup> However, it is often not clear whether the returning Romanians that readers are asked to empathise with are migrants or tourists, and it is conveniently left unsaid. On 26 March, *Adevărul* reports the story of a Romanian woman in quarantine who says "They do not care if we get sick. We have been told we were infected already."<sup>37</sup> However, in her long description of the events, the same woman adds: "I am a simple tourist, I did not *escape* from Italy"<sup>38</sup> (emphasis added), reinforcing the existing narrative of the Romanian migrants seen as fugitives and later as outlaws.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how the image of returning migrants during the first month of the COVID-19 pandemic in Romania was constructed by the media in March 2020: by very quickly associating the migrants with the virus, by juxtaposing the noble acts of Romanians left in Italy with the criminal acts of those who came back, and by reinforcing such juxtaposition by giving voice to Romanians who stayed in Italy. I have also shown that Romanians who did not come back were characterized in depth, while descriptions of returning Romanians, except for a few cases, remained vague.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, some questions collected by my informants or raised in online comments regarding the returning migrants were: What right do they have to come back to Romania, since they left it for

---

<sup>33</sup> Tolontan, Cătălin. 2020. De ce nu merge președintele Iohannis la românii din Italia? *Libertatea*, 9 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).

<sup>34</sup> Manolache, Alina. 2020. O româncă din Italia surprinsă că Ministerul de Externe pune la dispoziția românilor din Peninsulă zboruri "umanitare" la 250 de euro. *Libertatea*, 23 March 2020 (accessed: 20 May 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Manolache, *O româncă din Italia*.

<sup>36</sup> ȘtirileProTV. 2020c. 60 de români, veniți în țară din Italia și Grecia: „Au fost ținuți acolo fără apă, fără mâncare”. 15 March 2020 (accessed: 5 June 2020).

<sup>37</sup> Iancu, Mariana. 2020. Experiența unei românce în carantină: „Nu le păsa că ne putem îmbolnăvi. Ne spuneau că suntem deja infectați”. *Adevărul*, 16 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).

<sup>38</sup> Iancu, *Experiența unei românce în carantină*.

not being good enough in the first place? Why don't they stay in Italy, where they have a better medical system? These questions fit into a certain atmosphere of resentment for which Romanian migrants are often seen as attached to money and making their own family rich, without any real attachment or love for their home country. This was once again seen both through my informants and online comments.

Such 'selfishness' remained a feature of the new figure of the migrant returning home during a pandemic. However, I believe that such a figure was constructed from scratch, detached from the usual figure of returning migrants, whether that is the loved one who returns with sweets for their family, or the selfish one who does not love Romania. In fact, there is a shift from the universe of real individuals to a symbolised, invisible 'other'. As one of my informants confessed when asked about her reaction to the queues of vehicles at the border on the night of 10-11 March, she did not see the people that were coming back in March as relatives of her friends or people she knew, but rather as something else, "other people".

The process of constructing this new figure, which, to exist, *needed* a positive counterpart, in this case the Romanians who stayed in Italy, is similar to the process of "othering" theorised by Bakic-Hayden, where we see "a characterisation of the national 'other' in, for the most part, reductionist terms and simple conceptions juxtaposed to a complexity of self-characterisation."<sup>39</sup> In this case, by self-characterisation I mean especially the characterisation of heroic Romanians who stayed and worked in Italy, the ideal Romanians with which other Romanians could empathise, if not identify. On the contrary, Romanians who returned were *reduced* to being criminals, irresponsible, selfish and liars.

Because of the limited scope of this paper, I have only covered the month of March. However, it would be certainly interesting to analyse how the relationships between non-migrants and migrants who stayed longer than expected evolved, a theme that is generally barely touched by transnational studies on return, and what effects it had on local communities. Future research could also examine how, months later, in July 2020, the roles switched: as Romania started having more daily cases and deaths than Italy, Romanians coming back to Italy from Romania came to be seen as the infector by Italians. A comparative analysis of how the two countries perceived such returning threats, in one case a national 'other' and in the other case a foreign 'other', could reveal numerous similarities.

### **Bibliography**

- Archip, Andreea. 2020a. Coronavirus la Milano. 5 zile într-un oraș blocat. Românii din Italia sunt mai afectați de virusul întoarcerii acasă. *Libertatea*, 3 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).
- . 2020b. În mijlocul dezastrului, româncele badante în Italia le dau curaj bătrânilor: „Am sărbătorit o doamnă care are 100 de ani. Citim, cântăm,

---

<sup>39</sup> Bakic-Hayden, Milica. 1995. Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54(4), 917-931, 923.

- mergem mai departe". *Libertatea*, 21 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).
- . 2020c. "Români din Italia, nu plecați în țară!" Apelul unei românce din Milano după ce oamenii fug de carantină!. *Libertatea*, 8 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).
- Bakic-Hayden, Milica. 1995. Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia. *Slavic Review* 54(4), 917-31, 923.
- Costea, Oana. 2020. Nu de coronavirus mi-e teamă, ci de ce distruge el. În noi. *Libertatea*, 11 March 2020 (accessed: 19 May 2020).
- De Cillia, Rudolf / Martin Reissigl and Ruth Wodak. 1999. The Discursive Construction of National Identities. *Discourse & Society*, 10(2), 149-73.
- Ehrkamp, Patricia. 2010. Placing Identities: Transnational Practices and Local Attachments of Turkish Immigrants in Germany. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(2), 345-64, 361.
- Florea, Adina and Răzvan Luțac. 2020. Cum păcălesc românii statul și pe ei: o vasluiancă s-a întors acasă prin Germania dintr-un sat italian cu 4 morți de coronavirus și nu e în carantină. *Libertatea*, 9 March 2020 (accessed: 11 May 2020).
- Florescu, Remus. 2020. Clujeanul care s-a întors din Italia și a refuzat să se autoizoleze riscă până la 2 ani de închisoare. S-a deschis dosar penal. Mi-am scris deja testamentul". *Adevărul*, 28 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).
- Frîncu, Diana. 2020. Româncă prinsă în coșmarul italian: „Dacă ti-ai abandonat acum animalul, amenda este 10.000 de euro și arest”. *Adevărul*, 23 March 2020 (accessed: 17 May 2020).
- Glick Schiller, Nina / Linda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc. 1995. From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration. *Anthropological quarterly* 68(1), 48-63, 48.
- Guță, Daniel. 2020. Inconștiența tinerei cu coronavirus care s-a plimbat prin spitale a îmbolnăvit cel puțin șase oameni. *Adevărul*, 12 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).
- Iancu, Mariana. 2020. Experiența unei românce în carantină: „Nu le păsa că ne putem îmbolnăvi. Ne spuneau că suntem deja infectați”. *Adevărul*, 16 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).
- Jansen, Stef and Staffan Lövving. 2008. Introduction: Movement, Violence, and the Making of Home. *Focaal—European Journal of Anthropology* 49, 3-14.
- Macovei, Denisa. 2020. Gest impresionant făcut de doi români din Italia, proprietari de brutărie. Oferă pâine gratis celor care nu au bani să-și cumpere. *Libertatea*, 18 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).
- Manolache, Alina. 2020. O româncă din Italia surprinsă că Ministerul de Externe pune la dispoziția românilor din Peninsula zboruri "umanitare" la 250 de euro. *Libertatea*, 23 March 2020 (accessed: 20 May 2020).
- Meseșan, Diana. 2020. Probleme grave pentru românii din Italia: unii trebuie să părăsească locuințele și nu au unde merge. *Libertatea*, 11 March 2020 (accessed: 6 May 2020).
- Mitrache, Daciana. 2020. Suspecti de coronavirus, văzuți la cumpărături în Vâlcea. Ce au pătit doi soți care ar fi trebuit să stea în izolare. *Adevărul*, 18 March 2020 (accessed: 14 May 2020).
- Mitran, Alina. 2020. Româncă din Italia: „Nu mai suntem ăia care vă aducem saci întregi de dulciuri, poșete de firmă și parfumuri scumpe”. *Adevărul*, 13 March 2020 (accessed: 20 May 2020).
- Oxford, Ellen and Lynellyn D. Long. 2010. *Introduction: An Ethnography of*

- Return in Coming Home? Refugees, Migrants, and those Who Stayed Behind*, edited by Long, Lynellyn D. and Ellen Oxfeld. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1-18.
- Popescu, Ana. 2020. Doi români livrează gratis pâine proaspătă italienilor aflați în carantină: „N-am putut întoarce spatele Italiei“. *Adevărul*, 18 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).
- Reisigl, Martin and Ruth Wodak. 2009. *The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)* in *Methods for Critical Discourse Analysis*, edited by Wodak, R. and Michael Meyer. London: Sage, 87-121, 95.
- Sirbu, Laurențiu. 2020. Orban, apel către românii din diaspora să nu vină acasă de Paște: Nu vom avea suficiente resurse. *Adevărul*, 6 March 2020 (accessed: 15 May 2020).
- ȘtirileProTv. 2020a. Un bărbat suspect de COVID-19 s-a plimbat cu STB-ul prin Capitală. Abia venise din Italia. 18 March 2020 (accessed: 5 June 2020).
- . 2020b. Scandal la frontieră cu mai multe familii de romi. Cum s-a descoperit că vin din Italia. 10 March 2020 (accessed: 1 June 2020).
- . 2020c. 60 de români, veniți în țară din Italia și Grecia: „Au fost ținuți acolo fără apă, fără mâncare“. 15 March 2020 (accessed: 5 June 2020).
- Tecuceanu, Paul. 2020. Mesaj dur transmis de o româncă stabilită în Lombardia românilor care au plecat spre țară: „Egoiștilor și iresponsabililor“. *Libertatea*, 11 March 2020 (accessed: 11 May 2020).
- Tolontan, Cătălin. 2020. De ce nu merge președintele Iohannis la românii din Italia? *Libertatea*, 9 March 2020 (accessed: 10 May 2020).
- Van Hear, Nicholas. 1998. *New Diasporas: The Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*. London: UCL Press.