

Article

# Exploring the social relations of Roma employability: The case of rural segregated communities in Romania

by

Loreni Elena Baciu  
Lector, Dr.  
West University of Timisoara, Romania  
E-mail: elena.baciu@e-uvt.ro

Melinda Dinca  
Lector, Dr.  
West University of Timisoara, Romania  
E-mail: melindadinca@gmail.com

Theofild Lazar  
Lector, Dr.  
West University of Timisoara, Romania  
E-mail: lazar.theofild@gmail.com

Johans Tveit Sandvin  
Professor  
Nord University, Norway.  
E-mail: johans.t.sandvin@nord.no

---

**Keywords:**

Romania, employability, poverty, Roma, institutional ethnography, rural segregated communities



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

## **Abstract**

The article reports on a qualitative study of Roma employability in Romania. Being the largest ethnic minority group in Europe, the Roma population is the object of profound marginalization in most of the countries where they reside, by measures such as spatial segregation and exclusion from the formal labour market. This article focuses particularly on the Roma living in rural segregated communities. Inspired by institutional ethnography, the aim is to explore the social organization of rural Roma employability from the standpoint of the Roma themselves. The main obstacles to employment, as they are known and shared by our interviewees, are a lack of available jobs within reach, their own lack of education and a rejection by employers on the grounds of them being Roma. As the analyses show, these obstacles, and the individual's experiences and knowledge about them, are shaped and maintained by extended translocal relations of administration and governance, thus making the rural Roma dependent on a precarious secondary labour market of low-paid day work for neighbouring farmers. The uncertainty of this work, and the organization and work of everyday life it implies for the people inhabiting these communities, further increases the distance to formal employment. It is this complex set of relations coordinating people's doings that produce the employability of Roma inhabiting the rural segregated communities.

*Keywords:* Romania, employability, poverty, Roma, institutional ethnography, rural segregated communities

*Disclosure and conflict of interests:* None

## **Introduction**

The Roma minority is considered the largest ethnic minority group in Europe, amounting to roughly 10 to 12 million people, of which approximately half live in EU countries (European Commission, 2014). Throughout Europe, the Roma population is systematically confronted to a large degree with political and social exclusion (Respect, 2011), as for many years the EU has worked to bring about a common policy for a better inclusion of the Roma. In 2011, the European Commission adopted a Communication pushing for the development of national strategies for Roma integration up to 2020 (European Commission, 2014).

Romania has one of the largest populations of Roma in Europe. According to the 2011 census, they number approximately 620,000 (RNSI, 2012), though the real number is expected to be higher since it is believed that many Roma did not declare their ethnicity in the census. Spatial segregation is a common structural practice across Europe regarding the treatment of both urban and rural Roma (Respect, 2011), which has profound consequences for other forms of exclusion and marginalization, including in relation to employment. There is quite a bit of quantitative research on Roma people's participation in the labour market, both in Romania and other parts of Europe (O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006; Preoteasa et al., 2012; Kligman, 2001; Sykora, 2009; Cace et al., 2011), which consistently documents a low attainment. Some of this research also looks specifically at the labour market effects of spatial segregation (Damm, 2009; Boeri et al., 2011; Lebedinski, 2013). However, very few have explored the employment opportunities from the standpoint and experience of the Roma themselves, which is what the present article aims to remedy.

The article reports on a qualitative study of Roma employability in Romania. Employability comprises not only the ability to find and keep employment, but also the workplace's ability to create opportunities for employment and for personal and professional growth (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 2004; Berntson, 2008). For the purpose of this article, we would add that employability also depends on external factors regulating people's access to the labour market, such as the degree of inclusiveness and equalization.

The analysis presented is part of a larger study of labour market integration in Romania, focusing on both Roma and disabled people, carried out in cooperation between researchers from Romania and Norway, and funded by the EEA Financial Mechanism 2009-2014. The study is inspired by institutional ethnography (Smith 2005), both for its design and for the analyses performed. Data has been generated in two phases, starting with interviews with Roma and disabled people about their everyday experiences in relation to employment, followed by interviews with representatives of institutions that frequently appeared in the interviews from phase 1. Nonetheless, in this article we solely focus on interviews with Roma individuals, and only those living in rural segregated communities, i.e. separate and secluded spaces into which Roma are clustered due to processes of economic and social marginalization (Respect, 2011).

The article is organized as follows: The next section gives a brief overview of the literature related to the employment situation of the Roma. The following section presents and justifies the study design, in which ethical and practical challenges in recruiting, interviewing and representing Roma are particularly underscored. In the subsequent part of the article, we first explore the everyday life and activities of Roma living in rural segregated communities, in which we are specifically interested in how everyday activities connect with- or have traces of institutional relations. Lastly, we examine what these hooks and traces can tell about the social organization of Roma employability.

### **Patterns of Roma Employment in Europe**

As the largest ethnic group across Europe, the Roma face a multitude of socio-economic problems, such as persistent discrimination and exclusion, poor living conditions, unemployment and a low level of education and vocational training (FRA, 2011). All these factors are interrelated, and are part of a cumulative social deprivation that also includes spatial segregation, as 'spatial exclusion seems to be a common denominator to all various forms of exclusion' (Respect, 2011).

Studies across Europe demonstrate that the employment status of Roma citizens is

poor, with the differences between the Roma and non-Roma being noticeable. For example, studies in Belgium show that only 10% of Roma are occupied in standard employment (Pinet, 2009), while in Italy 73% of the Roma in an Italian Red Cross study were unemployed, compared with 6.7% of the general population (Strati, 2011). In Bulgaria, the Roma unemployment rate is reportedly 70-80%, and in the Czech Republic more than 90%, with the highest rates among women and youth (Council of Europe, 2012). According to the Council of Europe's report on Human Rights of Roma and Travelers in Europe, the problem is also that '(e)ndemic discrimination combined with under-education often offsets the potential positive effects of emerging employment policies targeting Roma' (ibid: 157).

In relation to Romania, a national survey from 2008 shows that only 53% of Roma men and 23% of Roma women perform paid work (Radu, 2011). According to the 2011 Census, the unemployment rate for Roma was also six times higher than for the general population at 48.6%, compared to 7.4% (RNSI, 2012), as differences with regard to formal employment are likely to be much higher. Extensive studies show that Roma citizens' income is primarily comprised of sporadic daily work, black market jobs and collecting garbage and scrapping premiums (Cace et al., 2011).

The aim of this article is to explore the everyday work and activities of those living in these communities in ways that bring into view how employability and rural segregation are coordinated institutionally. In so doing, we hope to make visible the ways in which the patterns of rural Roma employment are produced and maintained. Thus, the research question for the current analysis is: How are the work and activities of everyday life of Roma living in rural segregated communities hooked up with institutional relations in ways that limit their employability?

## **Methodology**

Research-based knowledge largely depends on the way in which the research has been conducted. Our orientation towards institutional ethnography reflects a desire to explore how the proven patterns of exclusion of Roma from the formal labour market are actually put together. Institutional ethnographers have therefore shown how ethnicity becomes a means by which people are organized in relation to the

productive processes of the society (Ng, 1981). The purpose of institutional ethnography is to investigate the 'empirical linkages among local settings of everyday life, organizations, and translocal processes of administration and governance' (DeVault & McCoy, 2006: 15). The investigation starts from beneath, from the *standpoint* of those people whose everyday life we have chosen to emanate from, in this case people of Roma ethnicity living in rural segregated communities in Romania. In institutional ethnography, a standpoint means a *point to stand*, rather than a specific or privileged insight. It is a subject position that makes the actualities of people's everyday life the entry point into discovering the social in a way that 'does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge' (Smith 2005: 10). Hence, our study starts with interviews with Roma individuals living in rural segregated communities, about their work and activities of everyday life that speak about the opportunities and obstacles for formal employment. The value of focusing on the work and activities of everyday life is that it helps in *keeping the institutions in view* (McCoy 2006). Nevertheless, when we are a little reluctant to advertise this as an institutional ethnography in the true sense, it is because our data do not always support a direct tracking of the institutional relations. They come into view in encounters with employers and government officials, but even such encounters are relatively rare. They are also present in the knowing of our interviewees, but the rural segregated Roma communities are most of all characterized by a notable absence of direct observable institutional relations, meaning that such relations, which indeed exist, sometimes must be deduced from structural features, rather than being traced through ethnographic accounts.

In total, 24 Roma were interviewed in our study, of which 10 live in urban areas and 14 in rural segregated communities. Based on interviewees' accounts, it seems that the employability of Roma is highly dependent on residence. Among our interviewees, only two out of 14 living in rural segregated communities were employed, as compared to seven out of 10 living in urban areas. Among our interviewees from rural communities, five had never been employed, while all of those from the urban areas had been employed at some point. It is also indicative that four of the interviewees from urban areas benefitted from employment programmes, whereas that was the case for only one from rural areas. More importantly, however, the interviews revealed that living in rural segregated

communities gave rise to distinctive experiences in relation to the opportunities for employment, with a specific set of institutional traces. This formed the basis for a separate analysis that is reported on here. As a result, this article is based on interviews with the 14 Roma living in rural segregated communities, four men and 10 women, with the age of the interviewees ranging from 24 to 42 years.

The interviews had a specific focus on the work and activities of everyday life of the interviewees. This included the work relating directly to seeking or keeping employment and the encounters in that respect with everything from neighbours and social networks to employers, employment offices and other institutions. It also included the work and activities of everyday life that support, impede or in other ways connect with the opportunities of obtaining or keeping employment, all in order to establishing the problematic of the investigation. An interview guide was used that contained a number of key topics such as: searching for a job, asking for and/or receiving assistance, education and training, strategies used to tackle a lack of income, living conditions and housing, as well as perceptions regarding the employment opportunities of the Roma, just to mention a few. The interview guide was a help to ensure that all elements were covered, while each interview followed its own dynamic. The research team took great care in adapting the formulation of the questions to each interviewee and to the interview situation. An emphasis was placed on a sensitivity to issues that the interviewees themselves brought up, and probing was used to follow up on issues relevant to the study. The interviews were conducted by the Romanian team, in Romanian, and later transcribed verbatim and translated into English.

The recruitment and selection of interviewees followed a two-step process. First, we asked for the collaboration of local institutions and NGOs to provide support and assistance for Roma persons previously self-identified as such. Our collaborators asked for their beneficiaries' consent in providing us with their information; thus a list of potential informants was created. From this list, we then made a selection to secure a sufficient variation regarding gender, age, area of residence and status in the labour market. The people on the list were informed that such a selection would be made, and all the interviewees selected were informed about the use of the data and provided with their written consent on their attendance.

Being dependent on intermediaries may involve a certain bias by precluding those with no contact with our collaborators. Still, we do not know whether those precluded were more deprived (due to no assistance) or less deprived (did not need assistance) than those potentially included. The use of intermediaries also involves some ethical dilemmas. Firstly, we did not know how the relationship between our collaborators and those who were asked to participate actually was, and therefore how voluntary their participation was in the first place. Even so, we believe this was the least intrusive way to approach potential interviewees, and the voluntariness of participation was underscored by the interviewees' attendance. Secondly, while our study focuses specifically on Roma, there is currently a strong norm to 'de-ethnicize' social problems, especially when related to ethnic minorities. There is a fear that juxtaposing certain social problems with a certain ethnicity may reinforce the 'othering' and patronizing of the ethnic group in question. We aim to avoid this by specifically addressing the processes and mechanisms through which the problems are being ethically linked (Milikowski, 2000).

In order to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the informants, all information that could identify them has been omitted. This also includes their communities of residence, for which we have excluded all data that we believe could be used to identify the place. When quotes are used, we state the interviewees' gender and age, with the latter in parentheses.

### **Rural Spatial Segregation of Roma**

The spatial segregation of Roma communities is a widespread and well-documented phenomenon in almost every country that has a significant number of Roma inhabitants, particularly in the Central and Eastern European countries (Kligman, 2001; Sykora, 2009; Lippai et al., 2011). It appears that in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, this segregation was prominent in the interwar period, and has gained new momentum after the fall of various Communist regimes (Harper et al., 2009). In fact, the Communist policy improved the situation for the Roma with respect to both education and employment (Cace, 2010; Lippai et al., 2011). Since 1989, the declined enforcement of state policies, particularly with respect to education, and an

ever-more competitive labour market, have rendered the Roma population increasingly vulnerable (Kligman, 2001).

While sharing much of the same implications as urban segregation, rural segregation also contains some specific features. We are not doing a comparison between urban and rural segregation here (for more specifics on urban segregated spaces in Romania, see Mionel & Gavris, 2015). Instead, we provide an investigation into the particularities of rural segregation and their connections with the possibilities of formal employability.

The rural space is known as the space that hosts' with predilection the socially disadvantaged populations (Sykora, 2009; Precupetu, 2013; Preoteasa, 2015), primarily because of their low prospect of economic prosperity due to their exclusion from 'the economic geography of investments and wealth that is concentrated in metropolitan growth poles' (Sykora, 2009, p. 430). This could be a valid explanation for the large percentage of Roma individuals residing in rural areas (60%), as compared to other ethnic groups in Romania (40%) (Badescu et al., 2007). Nonetheless, even if already disproportionately represented in more or less disadvantaged rural areas, several researchers reveal that the segregation of the Roma goes even deeper (Badescu et al., 2007; Sykora, 2009; Lippai et al, 2011; Preoteasa et al., 2012). The areas inhabited by the Roma from rural areas are in themselves segregated from the rest of the village, being established in peripheral areas, and often 'physically separated by a natural barrier, railway or other obstacle' (Sykora, 2009, p. 427).

Empirical research on the rural settlements inhabited by the Roma population depicts a grim image of these spaces (see Voicu, 2007; Harper et al., 2009; Badescu et al., 2007; Sykora, 2009; Preoteasa et al., 2012; Moisa et al., 2013). The dwellings are described as shelters, more than proper houses, most often made from frail, inexpensive materials, and generally unfit for decent living. The living space (rooms) is usually over-crowded, with many persons sharing a single room. Many of the villages lack access to basic utilities, but even if they do have certain public services or utilities (e.g. paved roads, electricity, running water, sewage supply), the providing network usually does not reach that part of the village inhabited by Roma.

The two communities from which our interviewees are recruited reflect many of these characteristics. One is located in a village 30 km from the nearest city. The village has approximately 3,000 inhabitants, of which 600 live in the Roma community situated 1.5 km from the village centre. There is no bus going to the city, although there is a train passing from a train station a few kilometres away. Spatial segregation from the village centre indicates the ethnic identity of the people living in the community. The relatively small size of the houses, compared to the number of household members, the lack of residential and agricultural land, domestic animals and unpaved roads, in addition to streets filled with children and adults gathering in front of the houses, all outline the typical image of a poor Roma community, living in conditions below the poverty threshold of the rural Romanian communities. Currently, the situation is somewhat better than it was five-six years ago, ever since a foundation managed to direct the attention of the municipality towards the living conditions in the community. In terms of infrastructure, most households today have electricity and access to public water supplies. Moreover, in recent times, some houses, in which the poorest families in the community used to live, have been demolished and rebuilt, and a new Community Centre has been established at the initiative of a foundation, but which is owned by the municipality. The foundation has been of great importance to the improvement of living conditions in the community.

The other community is located in a village about 40 km from the nearest city, and 20 km from a smaller town (with approx.15,000 inhabitants.). The village has roughly 2,000 inhabitants, of which about 800 are Roma. A few Roma live in the village, while the vast majority live in the spatially segregated Roma community at the outskirts of the village centre on plots of land that are currently not on their property, with improvised houses and without any connection to basic utilities (due to the lack of property documents). The village has a small medical centre, a pharmacy, plus a library and cultural centre, as well as a kindergarten and school (primary and secondary). As in the first village, public transportation is not very good. There is no bus available, although there is a direct train to the nearest town, whereas a train to the city requires a transfer in another village. The spatially segregated Roma community has much of the same character as described for the first community, albeit without the upgrade. To the contrary, since the municipality of this community

gained independence from a larger commune after a referendum in 2004, the relationship between the Roma and non-Roma has become increasingly tense. Due to financial challenges, as soon as it gained its independence the municipal authorities began making the formal requests in order to demolish the houses built illegally. Currently, the issue is pending, as the municipality has paused its undertaking, but the quality of the relations between the Roma and non-Roma citizens of the community has not noticeably improved.

### **Exploring Roma Employability from Below**

There are a number of reasons why the Roma living in rural segregated communities have difficulty getting into the formal labour market, many of which involve some kind of direct, indirect or structural discrimination. Still, even if discrimination provides an important perspective on the living situation and employability of the Roma, and we write extensively about it elsewhere (Lazăr et al., 2015), discrimination is an abstraction that does not tell much about what is actually taking place. Consequently, in this article we concentrate on the accounts given by the Roma living in rural segregated communities themselves. Our aim is to explore the Roma individuals' own embodied experiences and ways of knowing (Smith, 2005). Inspired by institutional ethnography, we have paid particular attention to features and processes that they themselves define as problematic in relation to gaining employment, for in turn to attempt to trace them back to the institutions that produce them. The interviewees themselves hardly speak about discrimination. Instead, they talk quite a lot about mistreatment and rejection in relation to employment, but mostly they talk about a difficult and labourious life, in addition to all the liabilities and dependencies that prevent them from obtaining or even seeking formal employment.

Three problems are particularly dominant in interviewees' accounts with regard to employment. These are the lack of available jobs, their own lack of education and the experience of being rejected on the grounds of being Roma. While embarking on each of these problems separately through our interviewees' way of knowing them, our aim is to bring into view the institutional fields in which they are embedded.

## **The lack of available jobs**

All our interviewees were asked about their work and experience of trying to find employment. As reported by our interviewees, an important factor limiting the employability of Roma living in these rural segregated communities is the lack of available jobs. As one woman says: 'Here in our village you can't find work' (32). When most of the former industry was closed after the Communist era, many Romanians lost their work and income. Many of our interviewees miss some of the firmness of the old system, as one of our male interviewees expresses it:

Just like it was during Ceausescu's time.<sup>1</sup> You were 18 and you weren't working, they put you in prison. It was better like that, I say it was better. You didn't work, they took you and made you work at the canal. They made you work at the canal for three months and then, after that, you thought that it was better to work for yourself than for the state. Where to go now, because you have nowhere to go. It doesn't matter that you want to because you have nowhere. (37)

Although the economy has improved, and a lot of new businesses and industries have been established, the segregated rural communities are located in areas where it is very unlikely for new businesses to be established, as it is usually areas with a poor infrastructure, far from profitable markets and appropriate transportation systems. The opportunity to move to an area with better prospects is usually unthinkable without first obtaining work. As one woman puts it: 'If some owners would come to set up some companies here closer, there would be workplaces and it would be better' (27).

One option is of course to commute, but the cities are far away and dependent on feasible transportation. As seen from the short descriptions, the communities in question are located far from industrial and commercial centres, on the outskirts of the villages to which they belong, with some distance to the village centres. A woman from one of the communities says: 'We have a railway station in the village, not in the community. The railway station is five km away from the community' (34). Being dependent on public transportation on a regular basis would thus require a lot of effort, but even that would not be enough. A man from the same community reveals why:

And it's also difficult with this commuting, because if you don't get there on time, they dismiss you. And you can't get there on time from here (...). It's not possible for us. It starts at 7 o'clock everywhere in (the city), and you have a train only at a quarter past 7. So you can't... you can't get there (37).

Hence, finding and keeping regular employment is very difficult for most people living in these communities. Very few jobs are available locally, very few have private means of transportation and the public transportation is more or less inadequate, all of which gear into extended translocal systems, such as the transportation network, the area planning and the economy at large. To a large extent, the opportunities for formal employment of the Roma living in these two communities are limited to the city. Moreover, due to a low education level, most Roma are referred to manual work, meaning they would need to reach the city quite early in the morning. The fact that this is not reflected in either the housing policy or transport planning indicates that increased employment among the Roma living in these communities has a low priority, despite the political rhetoric.

### **Lack of education**

Another major obstacle to employment among the Roma is a lack of education. A man says, 'They all ask about your education and when you say "none" they look at you like that.... It's difficult' (42). When asked if she was actively looking for employment, one woman says: 'I am uneducated and I don't have..., I can't manage without education, where could I go?' (34).

Among our 14 interviewees living in the rural communities, five had no schooling at all, and only three had more than primary school; two had reached the 6th grade, while one had passed the 8th grade. This is a general feature of the situation for the Roma. In 2011, 20% of Roma children in Romania (6–16 years old) were not enrolled in school. Illiteracy affects 25% of the Roma aged 16 and older, being higher in rural areas, in Roma segregated communities and among women (Precupetu, 2013; Lazar et al., 2015). The lack of education is so common that it is often considered as a property of being Roma. A woman tells about some men who went to the Labour Office to collect an unemployment certificate in order to apply for social benefits. Instead of receiving the certificate, they were sent to a nearby town where someone had asked for labourers. When they came there, the female Italian employer returned them to the Labour Office with a note saying they were not needed. When our interviewee explained why they were returned, she said, 'She probably looked at them that they are a lower nationality. That we are Roma. That we have no schooling'

(36). What this reflects is that all this perceived information is attained just by a glance. We will return to this below.

Our interviewees' way of knowing this feature of low school attainment is more complex, as it is embedded in the conditions and activities of everyday life in the communities in which they live. One element is poverty, as one woman explains it: 'A child in school needs a lot of things' (40). A younger woman says: 'When I was in school, my mother had no shoes or clean clothes to give me' (24). When asked why she dropped out early, she says, 'I was ill at school, and the teacher told me not to come to school any longer because the children got scared' (24). Many of our interviewees tell about exclusionary practices. One of them is a woman who passed the 8th grade, who experienced harsh harassment from teachers. But she managed, and she wished she could have continued with a further education. She explains:

I attended high school for two – three months and afterwards my parents could no longer keep me in school because they could no longer pay the subscription; it had to be paid for boarding school, and it was no longer possible for me to go. (34)

Another woman tells: 'My grandmother sent me to school the longest she could, after that she began falling sick, ... and...I couldn't go to school anymore' (25). This points toward another important reason given by the majority of our interviewees for having little or no schooling. That is the work of taking care of a younger sibling, and sometimes even other family members. One woman says, 'I had a four-year-old brother and they stopped me from school to stay at home with my brother' (27). Another woman tells: 'I had to raise my brothers and my mother would go to work, and there was nobody to look after my brothers and so I did' (34). It is not only about siblings. One woman tells: 'When I had to go to school in (a nearby village), in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade, my mother was pregnant and I had to help my mother' (36). There are also men who had the same experience, with one of them testifying that: 'I didn't go to school anymore because my mother said I had to help her, and that I couldn't go to school anymore' (42).

Moreover, the woman who had to quit high school says: 'From here, from the community, no child has ever attended high school yet, ever' (34). She also says she has never experienced any affirmative 'initiative to take the children to school, to guide them to go to school'. This reflects the precariousness of these communities

and the lack of public attention to something as important as children's schooling. The gravity of this is reinforced by the fact that employers normally require a minimum of eight years of schooling for someone to be employed. Also, the regulations of the Romanian National Agency for Qualifications require that any of the professional qualification course participants have at least 10 years of education. This makes a high percentage of the Roma population non-eligible. Even if the professional qualifications of the Roma and their labour market integration process had a lot of opportunities for financing (from EU funds and other financing lines), many of the NGOs and Social Services institutions found themselves in difficult situations in attempting to recruit the Roma population into qualification courses. In many of the cases, they made exemptions, accepting people with less than the mandatory required education if those participants at least knew how to read and write. Even so, many Roma people willing to become qualified were not eligible due to a lack of education.

These regulations are part of what Smith (1987) calls the *extralocal 'mode of ruling'*, which transcribes 'the local and particular actualities' of people's lives into abstracted and generalized forms (p. 3). We are ruled, she claims: 'by forms of organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents, and constituted externally to particular individuals and their personal and familial relationships' (ibid.). The problem, however, is that the everyday world of people, and the people on the margins in particular, are organized in ways that often do not coincide with generalized transcripts. The people living in the Roma communities experience some of the same rupture or *line of fault* that women, according to Smith (1987: 49), experience in a world organized and controlled by men. They feel a 'disjuncture between experience and the forms in which experience is socially expressed' (ibid: 50).

### **Rejected for being Roma**

Another highly embodied experience narrated by our interviewees is about the more direct implications of belonging to a degraded ethnic minority, also in relation to the labour market. In not keeping discrimination completely out of the picture when describing their meetings with employers in their search for work, many interviewees

give examples of rejection on the 'simple' grounds of being Roma. That is at least how many interviewees themselves interpret the reported incidents. When asked about why she was rejected at a workplace, a young woman says: 'Because I'm a gypsy, that's why' (27). Nonetheless, there is nothing simple about rejection on the basis of ethnicity. Instead, rejection on grounds of ethnicity is based on prejudiced attitudes and beliefs that, when being comprehensive and systematic as in the case of Roma, reflect ruling institutional discourses of race. This is even better illustrated in an account from another woman describing her experiences of being rejected: 'They didn't employ me because ... they probably saw that I am not a Romanian, that I am of a lower nationality' (36). This reflects an exclusion from the definition of 'Romanian', in much the same way as Sharma (2001: 428) shows for immigrant workers in relation to 'Canadian', although in this case for a national group who has been part of the Romanian society for centuries. Referring to a hierarchy of nationalities among Romanian citizens reflects what Smith (2005:227) calls *ruling relations*, as it reflects 'objectified forms of consciousness and organization'.

Making oneself employable requires not only showing oneself to be available, but to also present oneself in a certain manner, in the case of Roma, preferably in a way that does not reveal their ethnic identity. When people reveal themselves as belonging to the Roma minority, it is not necessarily because of the colour of their skin, which does not always differ from that of a typical Romanian. The identification happens just as often on the basis of clothing and physical appearance (Badescu et al., 2007). One of our young female interviewees states: 'If one from the community goes now to get employed at a workplace, they would look at his face, at his clothing... at... his attitude' (24). As with the lack of education discussed above that was perceived *just by a glance*, to 'look at his attitude' probably implies a line of reasoning, in which his attitude is assumed from his ethnicity, which again is derived from his appearance. A man from the same community says: 'People would look at you when they'd see that you're a gypsy, and that you're dressed in some way' (42). It is about signs of the body, though social more than physiological signs, which serve as codes that are read and evaluated in relation to textually mediated norms, and reveal the carrier's membership of a socially devaluated category.

We are not arguing that people should conceal their ethnic identity, although some interviewees try to, and wish that they were able to, because the Roma identity sometimes has detrimental consequences. In order to prevent the hetero-identification as Roma (being identified as Roma by a non-Roma), or at least to show that they are not like the other Roma, some inhabitants of the community work on their bodies. One of our female interviewees reports, 'I have noticed that here in our community, when it's about employment, already they get dressed, they shave, they wash more, they spruce more' (38).

It is challenging and emotionally difficult work to constantly present oneself to the glance of prejudiced employers, and just as often be rejected. When asked if it is difficult for people in the Roma community to gain employment, one woman says:

Yes, it is difficult, it is very difficult, especially when he has to go to, how should I say, to a factory. He is permanently scared that they will see him, or they see how he talks, or they see his clothing, and maybe they will talk badly about him, or maybe they will not take him (34).

Many of the experiences shared by our interviewees testify to a high degree of contempt towards the Roma from the majority population. The signs of the body not only betray their ethnic origin, but are also read as the confirmation of a number of properties projected on the Roma, such as being unkempt, unreliable and lazy. A young woman testifies to this when stating:

There should be some workplaces for us to be taken in, so they stop saying we don't work. I would very much like to work. So that they stop saying that we, Roma, don't want to work. Yes, we do, we like to work, but we have nowhere to do so. I would go break rocks to have something better for my children (24).

These experiences of rejection, degradation and contempt are not only obtained through institutional encounters, they are also located in the field of institutional discourse. They are historically produced through centuries of slavery, and they are textually reproduced in all from formal regulations to the organization of individual encounters. In addition, even if opposed, as by the young girl just quoted, they are also projected on the working knowledge of Roma inhabiting the rural segregated communities and the ways in which the everyday activities are being externally coordinated. The latter is particularly evident in the work of coping with poverty.

## **Coping with poverty**

To live in these deprived communities requires a lot of work and effort just to survive. There are a number of strategies performed by our interviewees to cope with poverty, of which one is obviously to help each other. However, as a young mother says when asked if she would get help from her neighbours, 'I don't know what to say... they would support us, but they don't have for themselves' (F24).

A more radical way for neighbours to help each other, which brings the institution of public administration more readily into view, involves challenging the current legal arrangements regarding access to the various services necessary for a decent life. For example, the access to public utilities, such as electricity, is strongly connected to proving the ownership of the dwelling for which the connection to the electrical distribution network is desired. However, many of the Roma residents in these communities have no ownership documents for the land they have built their houses on, and, hence, no legal documents for the buildings themselves. That makes it impossible for them to lawfully obtain electricity. That problem is solved by putting in place a 'borrowing system' that functions in most of the rural segregated communities. 'Borrowing' is an illegal practice of connecting to the electricity network in the absence of an electricity services supply contract. The 'borrowers' get connected by means of improvised installations to the electricity network connecting the houses in the district, since the consumption is not metered. Such connections are very dangerous, and often result in fatal accidents for those practicing such 'borrowing'. Various accounts of our interviewees show the practice of 'borrowing' is- or has been used by them at some point. One of our female informants reports on the current situation of her community:

There are some (houses) that have not yet been connected (to the electrical network system)... they borrowed from the neighbours....Less than half of the houses get electricity in this way.... five-six years ago I also lent to others, I gave electricity to others (34).

A more regulated strategy, which brings into view the institutional field of public administration, is to apply for social benefits or children's allowance. Most of our interviewees are- or have been dependent on some form of social benefits, which is not always that straightforward to obtain for people living in these communities. First,

they must know their rights, which it turns out that many do not. A man says this about how he became aware of the possibility:

Nobody comes to tell us...I found out about the welfare from other people and from the Foundation. They said that if we had no income we could go submit some papers to the town hall and get welfare (42).

Furthermore, as stated by the man's story, they must personally meet up at the town hall. The town hall is located in the city some distance away, which obviously means that they need money for transportation. In addition, they must make sure to have all the necessary papers in order, so quite often they need to make the trip more than once. Another woman tells about how complicated it can be at times.

Yes, we go to Finance in (the nearby town) where we collect that kind of a certification, and we must also submit the necessary papers about what incomes we have. The children's support slip. Or if the husband is working, to bring what income he has, and submit these at the Town Hall. We also need to fill out an application (36). '

In this case, it was only about obtaining some money for wood, which is an allowance that is offered before Christmas, and it is the same when applying for social benefits or children's allowance. The interviewer asked the woman if it is difficult to obtain all these documents and submit them together with the application:

Yes, it is difficult because for those who don't know how to write, they must ask somebody to help them. (...) There's nobody (to assist you) in the Town Hall because they say they're not allowed. They are not allowed to write an application for me. They are not allowed. All that is left is to ask somebody, a colleague you are with, or to take the application home to be filled in by somebody. And then to go some other time to submit it (36).

There are also interviewees who tell about positive encounters with the Town Hall, so that much depends on the officer's attitude. Still, it is a recurring experience to feel lost and bewildered when approaching people in the Town Hall, and to be rejected due to a lack of documentation.

Obtaining social benefits requires a lot of work, a work that is formed by the institutional order of public administration. This institutional order is not primarily about people's needs, but about documentation. It is about a number of different documents from multiple sources that is being coordinated in order to vouch for a legal decision to grant social benefits. As such, the institutional requirements do not stop with the decision. First, as the woman just quoted explains: 'We must bring (documentation) from Finance, we must bring from the County Agency for Labour,

every third month.' Secondly, when asked if they had to do something in exchange for receiving this aid, the woman replied:

Yesss. Of course! It's a few hours a month. We clean the village. (...) There's a man who is, how should I put it, he's like a kind of boss. He calls. But now he no longer calls because we know that on every Tuesday at 9 o'clock we must gather up here, near the cemetery, and then we must take it from here, from the cemetery up to the railway station. He brings nylon bags, and we collect the dirt in there and put it into garbage containers (36).

Knowing their rights, collecting documentation, meeting up at the Town Hall and completing the application (or getting someone to do it for them) all represent the Roma individuals' work in the process of administering social benefits. The politics of social assistance is 'built into the institutional devices' (Smith 2005: 193), in this case the procedures gathering documentation, showing up, filling out the forms and doing mandatory work. This also 'takes ethnography further into contemporary forms of the organization we call "power"' (ibid.).

Not all our interviewees receive social benefits though, either because they have not been able to 'do the necessary work', or because some in the family have a minor income. The benefit is also so small that no family can live on it. Therefore, it is vital to find other sources of income.

Due to being excluded from formal employment, most of our interviewees are referred to casual work on a day-to-day basis in order to generate or supplement their income, primarily at nearby farms. This is virtually the only legal source of income for people living in these communities, except for social benefits, but even this source is about to dwindle. One woman explains:

I used to work here in the village for people. Harvesting corn, cutting corn cobs... Three years now, that's about when they stopped coming because now they have machinery to plant potatoes, to take out the potatoes, to harvest the corn, to cut the corn cobs. They have machinery and they no longer need people (36).

Some of the men also work in agriculture or at other odd jobs at neighbouring farms. A man tells about how he used to have a more permanent employment in the only factory nearby, but he was dismissed and now he has to take whatever is available. 'We work in people's yards as day workers but there isn't much to do... there are machines. But, well... they call us' (42).

What the interviews reveal is the existence of a primary and a secondary labour market (Reich et al., 1973). Research has shown that movements between such markets mainly go one way: Downwards! It has proved to be extremely difficult to move from a secondary to a primary labour market (Pereira et al., 2015), which is due in part to the properties of the people involved in the secondary labour market, such as low education. However, our study reveals that other mechanisms are also at play such as ethnic discrimination and spatial segregation, both of which have been shown to have a segmenting effect on the labour markets. Moreover, there seems to be a certain dynamic that tends to keep people stuck in secondary labour markets, with one being the unpredictable or 'precarious' character of the work offered (Kalleberg, 2009; Preoteasa, 2015). As the man quoted above puts it: 'If they need you, they call you and they pay, but they pay so little. And then if they don't need you, they don't call you' (42). And most likely, if they call you and you are not available, because let's say you have to take care of your children or you are in the city looking for a more steady employment, than they might not call you back.

More importantly, there are some people profiting from this 'social organization of difference between people in the labour market' (Sharma, 2001:435), who most certainly would like it to remain as is. Because the Roma constitute a large proportion of this secondary labour market, particularly in rural areas, giving the Roma permanent employment would mean a gradual draining of this market. We are therefore not suggesting that keeping the secondary labour market intact is a conscious strategy, but rather that the way in which the labour market is externally coordinated gives the Roma a 'role' that many people take for granted, and thus do not see very strong reasons to change. This 'role' may also be so strongly attached to other properties, such as ethnicity, poverty and low education, thereby making the functional use of the role difficult to see. Unable to realize the mechanisms upholding and maintaining this secondary labour market, responsibility is instead projected on the Roma by the majority population in the form of stereotypical properties, as previously accounted for. At the same time, it serves to maintain a secondary labour market profitable to that same majority.

## **The Social Organization of Rural Roma Employability**

As accounted for above, the primary obstacles to employment, as they are known and shared by our interviewees, are a lack of available jobs within reach, their own lack of education and a rejection by employers on the grounds of them being Roma. These are the actualities experienced by the Roma themselves in their active attempts to find work. The question to be raised is how these obstacles, and the individual's experiences and knowledge about them, are socially organized. This is already touched upon in the various sections. We will now attempt to connect the different elements together into a more comprehensive picture of the social organization of rural Roma employability. Here, employability includes the overall conditions that determine their opportunity to be employed.

As for the lack of available jobs, it says more about the location of the rural Roma communities than about the offer of jobs. The Roma living in these communities are not in the economic position to buy land. Having no other alternative, they are forced to confiscate land where possible to set up their small shelters. Since most sites located close to cities, industry or attractive residential areas are already seized or actively monitored, the Roma without means are referred to the places that are least attractive and the most out-of-the-way, and thus with the fewest job opportunities. Hence, the location of the rural segregated communities is coordinated through an active absence of public regulation. By neither preventing the illegal confiscation of land nor allocating space for an alternative settlement, the Government is in practice producing these places.

Regarding the low school attainment, a more complex set of relations is at play. Due to spatial segregation, even from the villages to which they belong, it is often several kilometres to the nearest school, with no available bus service. Exclusionary practices in schools are frequent, with harassment from schoolmates and teachers alike. Poverty prevents many from buying the clothes and equipment regarded as necessary to attend school. If they still decide to go, it increases the risk of bullying and harassment. All of the above, together with the need for someone to take care of younger siblings while parents are busy striving to generate a meagre income in every way possible, makes children quit school early if they even start at all. Despite compulsory school attendance, and despite the serious consequences for job

opportunities, the authorities do little or nothing to support parents' efforts so secure their children's schooling. This means that the low level of education among our interviewees is not a property of them being Roma, as it may seem from statistics. It is not even a property of the segregated communities, but rather a product of processes that extend far beyond the local. Low school attendance is imbedded in the conditions and activities of everyday life that are coordinated elsewhere, in institutions such as the school authorities, the Town Hall and the Government, by its absence more than by its presence, which is underpinned by the institutional discourses of race.

The latter comes more directly into view in the accounts of rejection from employers on the grounds of being Roma, although affecting virtually all social relations that the Roma are part of or enter into. There seems to be a deep contempt for Roma, which is apparent not only in the rejection of the Roma as such, but in the ways of knowing someone to be Roma. It is the signs of the body from which the Roma identity is assumed that cause the contempt, which again constantly confirms the historically produced discourse of the Roma.

The systematic exclusion of the Roma living in rural segregated communities from the formal labour market, by the ways in which their residential conditions, their access to potential workplaces, their school attainment, their access to public support and their direct encounters with employers are externally coordinated, helps to facilitate the maintenance of a secondary, informal labour market. For the communities under study, this consists of casual, low-paid day-to-day work, mostly for neighbouring farmers. This is a work that our interviewees are made dependent on for their survival and, which, due to its uncertainty and precariousness, acts to also coordinate most of the remaining work and activities of everyday life in these communities. It reinforces the exclusion by impeding inhabitants' search for more stable employment, by maintaining poverty and deprivation and by obstructing children's schooling due to unforeseen needs for them to stay home with younger siblings.

This is how the segregation and employability of rural Roma are coordinated institutionally. The institutional means of exclusion from education and employment

make them dependent on a secondary labour market, which works to shape necessities and doings of everyday life in ways that further reinforces their exclusion. These coordinating mechanisms will be further explored through interviews with representatives of these institutions.

## **Conclusion**

As accounted for early in this article, the employment rate among the Roma in Romania is far below the national average, especially in rural areas. This knowledge, which formed the background for our study, can easily be obtained from available statistics. What is less easy to detect is how this low work attainment is socially produced. There are admittedly 'social' explanations to the low work attainment, based on theoretical and statistical models, but they do not reveal what actually takes place. Instead, they objectify the people in question by turning them into numbers and categories. In the study reported on here, we lean on an institutional ethnography in which the social is not posited to exist over and beyond people, but rather to be located in people's actualities and in how people's activities and practices are coordinated with the doings of others (Smith 2005: 59). Our aim in this study has been to explore the employability of the Roma from the standpoint of the Roma themselves. Based on interviews with 14 Roma individuals about their everyday experiences and activities related to employment, we have attempted to trace the connections back to the institutions that have shaped and produced them.

It is our interviewees' own way of knowing the obstacles to employment that serves as the entry point for the analyses presented. These obstacles, as they were experienced by the interviewees, were the lack of available jobs in the area where they live, their own low school attendance and the often blunt rejection by employers on the grounds of being Roma. As our analyses show, these obstacles are imbedded in the actualities of people's lives, in conditions such as the poverty and deprivation of the segregated communities, and in the work and activities of everyday life, such as surviving and caring for family members. These conditions and activities are again hooked up with institutional relations extending far beyond the local, such as area planning and the planning of infra-structure, labour market regulation, transport

systems, the management of education and social assistance, etc., which again are shaped by the underlying social relations of capitalist economy and race.

The Roma inhabiting the rural segregated communities find themselves at odds with ordinary society. Many, particularly women, have very little contact whatsoever with mainstream society; yet their actualities and activities are strongly determined and shaped by the larger society in ways that are difficult to see when standing in the midst of everyday concerns. They know that the possibility of building a bridge to mainstream society and achieving better living conditions is through waged labour, but very few succeed in obtaining stable employment. They know a lot about the obstacles impeding their access to formal employment from firsthand experience, but they have neither the means nor the knowledge needed for its remedy.

We believe that the possibility of improving the inclusion of rural Roma in the formal labour market, perhaps for the Roma population as a whole, lies in understanding the institutional relations and mechanisms that produce their exclusion, starting from the ways in which they are known by the Roma themselves. An inability, or unwillingness to understand how the low employability of Roma is socially produced, risks leading to the responsibility, both for low employment and low education, of being placed on the Roma themselves in ways that maintain prevailing stereotypes.

## **End notes**

1. The Communist regime in Romania is popularly associated with the government of Nicolae Ceausescu, head of state of the Socialist Republic of Romania, between 1967-1989.

## References

- Bădescu, G., Grogoraș, V., Rughiniș, C., Voicu, M., & Voicu, O. (2007). *Roma inclusion barometer*. The Foundation for an Open Society. Retrieved from <http://www.fundatia.ro/en/roma-inclusion-barometer-0>.
- Berntson, E. (2008). *Employability perceptions: Nature, determinants, and implications for health and well-being*. Dissertation: Stockholm University.
- Boeri, T., Philipps, M. D., Patacchini, E., & Pellizzari, M. (2011). *Moving to Segregation: Evidence from 8 Italian cities*. Working Papers 390, IGER, Bocconi University.
- Cace, S., Preoteasa, A. M., Stănescu, S. M., & Tomescu, C. (2011). *Legal and Equal on the Labor Market for Roma Communities: Diagnosis of the factors influencing employment rate in Romanian Roma community*. Bucharest: Expert Ed.
- Council of Europe (2012). *Human Rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe*. Commissioner of Human Rights. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- DeVault, M., & McCoy, L. (2006). Institutional Ethnography: Using Interviews to Investigate Ruling Relations. In D. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*. Lanham, US: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Damm, A. P. (2009). Ethnic Enclaves and Immigrant Labor Market Outcomes. Quasi-Experimental Evidence. *Journal of Labour Economics*, 27(2), 281-314.
- European Commission (2014). *Report on the implementation of EU framework for National Roma Integration Strategies*.
- Forrier, A., & Sels, L. (2003). The concept employability: A complex mosaic. *International Journal of Human Resources Development and Management*, 3(2), 102-124.
- FRA – European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2014). *Roma survey – Data in focus. Poverty and employment: The situation of Roma in 11 EU member States*. Retrieved from [http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-roma-survey-employment\\_en.pdf](http://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra-2014-roma-survey-employment_en.pdf).
- Ghoshal, S., & Bartlett, C. A. (2004). *The Individualized Corporation: A Fundamentally New Approach to Management* (6. ed.). New York, N.Y.: HarperBusiness.

- Harper, K., Steger, T., & Filcak, R. (2009). *Environmental Justice and Roma Communities in Central and Eastern Europe*, Selected Publications of EFS Faculty, Students, and Alumni.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1) 1-22.
- Kligman, G. (2001). On the Social Construction of "Otherness": Identifying "the Roma" in Post-Socialist Communities, *Review of Sociology* 7(2), 61-78.
- Lebedinski, L. (2013). *Residential Segregation and Labour Market: Outcomes of Roma in Serbia*. Unpublished paper. Louvain: IRES, Université Catholique.
- Lippai, C., Strnadová, L., Toušek, L., 2011, *Housing Conditions and Spatial Segregation of the Roma in the Czech Republic and Hungary: A Case Study Comparison*. RESPECT Project Working Paper Series, No. 13/2011.
- Lazăr, T.A., Dincă, M., Ungureanu, R., Sandvin, J., Breimo Paulsen, J., Fyling, I., Bîrneanu, A. (2015). *The Compatibility Between the Current European and Romanian National Framework of Labour Market Integration of Roma*. Retrieved from: [http://www.e-qual-see.ro/?page\\_id=192](http://www.e-qual-see.ro/?page_id=192).
- McCoy, L. (2006). Keeping the Institution in View. Working with Interview Accounts. In D. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*. Lanham, US: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc.
- Milikowski, M. (2000) Exploring a Model of De-Ethnicization: The Case of Turkish Television in the Netherlands. *European Journal of Communication*, 15(4), 443-468.
- Mionel, V., & Gavris, A. (2015). Administrative Policies in Urban Segregated Spaces. The Case of the Romanian Ghettos. *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*. 45(E), 116-135.
- Moisă, F., Rostaş, I. A, Tarnovschi, D., Rădulescu, I. S. D., & Andersen, T. S. (2013). *Raportul societății civile asupra implementării Strategiei Naționale de Integrare a Romilor și a Planului de Acțiune al Deceniului în România în 2012*. [The Report of the civil society regarding the implementation of the National Strategy for Roma Integration and the Action Plan of Roma Decade in Romania in 2012] Budapest: Decade of Roma Inclusion Secretariat Foundation.
- Ng, R. (1981). Constituting Ethnic Phenomenon: An Account from the Perspective of Immigrant Women. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 13(1), 97-108.

- O'Higgins, N., & Ivanov, A. (2006). Education and Employment Opportunities for the Roma. *Comparative Economic Studies*, 48, 6-19.
- Pinet, J. (2009). *Les Roms, entre reconnaissance et exclusion: Essai de synthèse sur la situation des Roms en Belgique*, ATD Quart Monde Wallonie-Bruxelles, Retrieved from <http://www.atd-quartmonde.be/Les-Roms-entre-reconnaissance-et.html>, p. 14.
- Precupețu, I. (2013). Inequality trends in Romania. *Quality of Life*, 24(3), 249-276.
- Preoteasa, A. M., Șerban, M., & Tarnovschi, D. (2012). *Situația romilor în România, 2011. Între incluziune socială și migrație* [The Roma condition in Romania, 2011. Between Social Exclusion and Migration], Bucharest: Soros Foundation Romania.
- Preoteasa, A. M. (2015). Munca precara, solutie pentru populatia vulnerabila din mediul rural [Precarious work, a solution for the vulnerable population in rural areas] *Calitatea vietii* [Quality of Life], 26(1), 36-59.
- Radu, M. (2011). *Romania, Promoting Social Inclusion of Roma*. European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion,
- Reich, M., Gordon, D. M., & Edwards, R. C. (1973). Dual Labor Markets: A Theory of Labor Market Segmentation. *American Economic Review*, 63(2), 359-365.
- Respect (2011). Towards a Topography of Tolerance and Equal Respect. *European Policy Brief*, 2011(December). European Commission. Retrieved from [http://respect.iusspavia.it/files/policybriefs/RESPECT\\_POLICY%20BRIEF\\_regeneration\\_of\\_areas\\_inhabited\\_by\\_minorities.pdf](http://respect.iusspavia.it/files/policybriefs/RESPECT_POLICY%20BRIEF_regeneration_of_areas_inhabited_by_minorities.pdf)
- RNSI (Romanian National Statistics Institute) (2012). *Final Results of the 2011 Census of Population and Households*. Retrieved from [www.recensamantromania.ro](http://www.recensamantromania.ro).
- Smith, D. (1987). *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Smith, D. (2005). *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. The Gender Lens Series. Oxford: AltaMira Press.
- Strati, F. (2011). *Promoting Social Inclusion of Roma: A Study of National Policies*. European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion.
- Sykora, L. (2009). New Socio-Spatial Formations: Places of Residential Segregation and Separation in Czechia. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, 100(4), 417-435.

Sharma, N. (2001). On Being *Not* Canadian: The Social Organization of “Migrant Workers” in Canada. *Canadian Review of Sociology*, 38(4), 415–439.

The World Bank Group (2014). *Diagnostics and Policy Advice for Supporting Roma Inclusion in Romania. Report prepared by the Human Development and Sustainable Development Teams Europe and Central Asia.*

Voicu, M. (2007). *Nevoi și resurse în comunitățile de romi.* [Needs and resources in Roma communities] Bucharest: Soros Foundation Romania.